

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS: THE FOUNDATION OF ENGAGEMENT



Center for
**Inspired
Teaching**



The Astra Center for
Innovative Education

The National Alliance for Engagement-Based Education is an initiative of
Center for Inspired Teaching and the Astra Center for Innovative Education.
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Suggested citation: National Alliance for Engagement-Based Education (2019). Radically reimagined
relationships: The foundation of engagement. Washington, DC: Center for Inspired Teaching and Astra Center
for Innovative Education.

On the cover: L - Stacy Joslin, a teacher at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, with one of
her senior Advisory students at Purgatory Chasm in Sutton, MA. R - Codman Academy Charter Public School
in Dorchester, MA, is the only high school in the U.S. located within a community health center. Here, students
from the K-8 campus across the street spend time with health center staff.

Photos courtesy of Blackstone Academy Charter School and Codman Academy Charter Public School

DEAR FRIENDS IN EDUCATION:

In 2018 our two organizations, Center for Inspired Teaching and the Astra Center for Innovative Education, began an incredible journey together.

We've been excited to learn about schools and school systems across the United States that are moving beyond conventional, standardized, compliance-based teaching to create learning experiences that are student-centered and engagement-based. We wanted to talk to the people making this happen and see these places firsthand.

So we did--through interviews with educators at 28 public, private, and public charter schools across the country, and visits to a dozen of these schools. If you are an educator, school leader, student, or parent, we hope that you'll find take-aways from our journey that can help you reimagine your school's culture, teaching, and learning.

Both of our organizations are committed to education that authentically engages students as active learners, citizens, and empathetic, critical thinkers. Based upon our own experiences and the homework we did beforehand, we expected we would see lots of student-directed and project-based learning, attention given to students' social and emotional learning, creative connections with the larger community, and schools thinking in a broader way about student assessment.

We did find all these things--but we also discovered something more fundamental. We believe that at the center of it all, and abundantly evident in the schools that felt the most transformative, is **a core commitment to radically reimagined relationships**. We say "radically reimagined" because we mean something much deeper and more powerful than the way "relationships" are typically framed in schools.

The other commitments we observed that these schools have made include safety for risk taking, authentic learning experiences, holistic and meaningful outcomes, and equity. These are important, and certainly contribute towards student engagement and school success--but **we believe they have limited power when they don't grow out of radically reimagined relationships**.

We hope each of you can undertake a journey like the one we've been on--a journey that continues, as we are still learning and answering new questions sparked by what we've seen. Until you can make your own road trip, however, we hope this report provides inspiration, a thoughtful articulation of what schools can be and do, and some practical ways to get started or continue in your growth.

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A student performs at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School's Learning Showcase in Washington, DC. Open to the community, the Learning Showcase celebrates student work at the end of each trimester.



Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

INTRODUCTION: WHY ENGAGEMENT?

Think about a moment when you were so deeply absorbed in something that you lost track of time. What was it, and where were you? What created that sense of absorption—was it a new topic that fascinated you? A breakthrough in mastering something that had really challenged you? A conversation with another person that generated exciting new ideas or collaboration?

Psychologists call this state of engagement “flow.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of its leading proponents, describes it this way:

“There’s this focus that, once it becomes intense, leads to a sense of ecstasy, a sense of clarity: you know exactly what you want to do from one moment to the other; you get immediate feedback. You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and a sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger. And once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake...you feel happy as you are working at it.”⁽¹⁾

Common sense, along with a raft of research (see “Reading the Research” at the end of this report), suggests that all of us, adults and kids, do our very best work and learn the most when we are in this state of flow, or deep engagement.

Now think about your answer to the question at the beginning of this section. Did your moment of deep engagement happen in a classroom or a school?

⁽¹⁾ Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004). Flow: The secret to happiness. [Video]. TED Conferences, LLC. Retrieved from: https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.

For too many of us, including today's students, the answer is no. One measure of this is regular Gallup polling, which reveals that less than half of US students feel actively engaged at school. Gallup Senior Editor Jennifer Robison writes with some concern that "actively disengaged students are nine times more likely to say they get poor grades at school, twice as likely to say they missed a lot of school last year, and 7.2 times more likely to feel discouraged about the future than are engaged students. Disengaged students are the least likely to say they get to do what they do best every day, feel safe, have a best friend at school, or that their teachers make them feel their schoolwork is important."⁽²⁾

The impact on individual students, particularly those who are experiencing economic hardship or other challenges, is often life-altering. Research tells us that the mental and emotional consequences of disengagement include boredom, hopelessness, frustration, and depression, often made manifest in behavior issues, truancy, academic failure, and dropping out.⁽³⁾ These consequences are particularly dire for students who lack the family and community safety nets that help them persist and complete their education.

ONE STUDENT'S STORY

Speaking at the Education Reimagined Symposium in Washington, DC, last January, Jasmine McBride shared the story of her own disengagement and its consequences. McBride is a multidisciplinary artist, radio personality, and host who recently graduated from the High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul, MN. She said of her elementary school years, "At this age my happiness depended on school – I had a lot going on at home. My mom, being a single parent who struggled with money and worked an unfulfilling job, would often come home stressed.... I was sensitive, so I'd want to run away. School was my chance to do that. Excelling in school gave me something to feel good about when I felt worthless elsewhere."

When McBride had to transfer from a Montessori school to a more conventional one, she found that "it started registering that my success in school meant little more than that I processed information quickly and could follow instructions. My drive completely disappeared in this realization. And without school to fall back on, my happiness did too." Fortunately for McBride, eventually she was able to enroll in a high school program that emphasized learner agency, creativity, and community connections. She noted, "When I started making choices through my education, I started making change in my life... I didn't feel unclear about what I wanted to do, and I felt in control of my life. I learned a lot academically, and even more about myself."

The good news is that, as a nation, there are many positive signs that we're moving in the right direction and acknowledging the real importance of engagement. Over the past few decades, many organizations and initiatives including the Coalition of Essential Schools, the school systems within the Deeper Learning

(2) Robison, J. (2018, August 9). Academic ranking may motivate some students, alienate others. [Blog post]. Gallup.com. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/education/239168/academic-ranking-may-motivate-students-alienate-others.aspx>.

(3) Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235.

Network, the Buck Institute for Education, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, Education Reimagined, and the Aspen Institute have in various ways moved to envision and implement more engaging forms of teaching and learning.

Our own two organizations have been part of this movement as well. Founded in 1995, Center for Inspired Teaching defines an excellent education as students excelling in the 4 I's: Intellect, Inquiry, Imagination, and Integrity. To achieve these outcomes, Inspired Teaching believes teaching and learning in schools should be built around five core elements: Mutual Respect; Student as Expert; Purpose, Persistence, and Action; Joy; and Wide-Ranging Evidence of Student Learning. Through Inspired Teaching's teacher preparation and professional learning programs, we help teachers embed these elements across content areas, grade levels, and hand-in-glove with rigorous standards.

The Astra Center for Innovative Education, a program of the Astra Foundation, is committed to promoting engagement-based and student-centered education and educational reforms so that all students get what is rightfully theirs: an education that prepares them to be thoughtful, joyful, critical thinkers and citizens in a complex world. We believe that all students have strengths to develop and passions to pursue, and that in order to help students thrive, we must know them well.



Third grade teacher Eli Blum talks with his students on the first day of school at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC.

Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

When our two organizations began our collaboration in 2018, we wanted to build on our existing commitment to engagement-based education, connect with other organizations doing similar work, and understand what lies at the heart of this movement to change teaching and learning. We wanted to know:

- What are the hallmarks of engagement-based education? What elements unite the different initiatives and approaches that are present today?
- Are there conditions that must be in place before a school can become an engagement-based learning community? Can anybody do this, or does it require a special set of circumstances?
- What are the challenges and rewards for the adults and youth involved?

We rolled up our sleeves and got to work to address these questions. We learned about schools we might study through an organic process that included word-of-mouth recommendations, including from leaders in the field of progressive education; social media; school profiles by Edutopia, The 74 Million, and other education media outlets; and responses to our own press release and calls for participation. Interested schools completed a screening survey; we selected 28 of them to share more information about themselves in phone interviews and ultimately visited a dozen of these schools from September - December 2018. We are deeply grateful to all these schools for sharing their time and opening their doors to us; see the Acknowledgements at the end of this report for a complete listing.

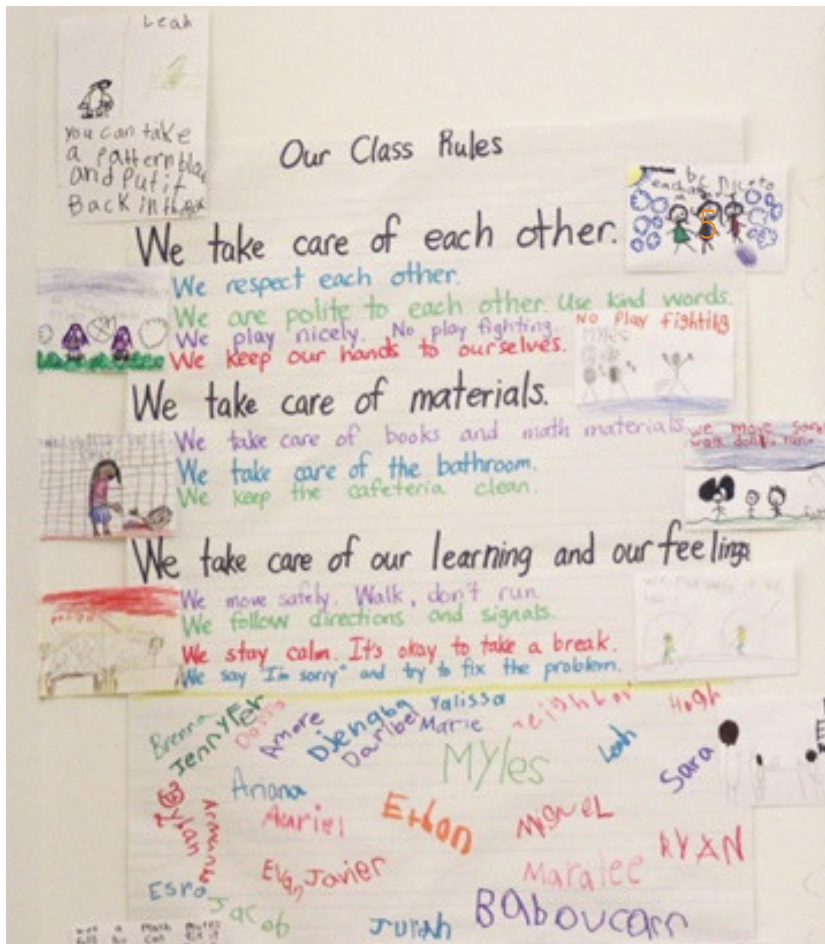
Our road trip took us to six states plus the District of Columbia. Of the 12 schools we visited, five are public, six are public charters, and one is a private independent school. All six of the public charter schools are locally-founded and managed; in all cases some number of the schools' founding educators are still serving in leadership and teaching positions. Four are high schools, one is a middle school, one serves elementary grades, three enroll students in grades PreK-8, two are combined middle and high schools, and one spans grades K-12. These schools vary in size ranging from 102 to 472 students enrolled. Seven out of 12 schools are located in mid- to large-sized cities; four are located in large suburbs; and one is located in a rural area. Five schools are majority-minority and four schools have student populations in which over 70% of students qualify for free and reduced-priced meals (FARMS).

Readers with a deeper interest in the demographics of each school, as well as our interview and site visit protocols, can find that information in the "More About Our Methods" appendix at the end of this report.

Through our interviews and site visits we generated nearly 1200 data points covering teacher roles, school climate, family involvement, curriculum, assessment, and more. When we reflected on the data and our own personal, qualitative reactions to what we'd experienced, what emerged was a distinctive set of commitments all of these schools had explicitly or implicitly made. Each school was working to bring these to life in ways that responded to the unique needs of their own communities. This set of commitments has become our definition of engagement-based education.

ENGAGEMENT-BASED EDUCATION: SCHOOL COMMITMENTS





Classroom rules created by students and their teachers at the Bronx Community Charter School in The Bronx, NY.

Credit: NAEBE

ENGAGEMENT-BASED EDUCATION: IT STARTS WITH RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

We began this journey as proponents of engagement-based education. From the outset, we have believed that engagement-based education takes place in a learning community where each child is known deeply and where each member of the community—adults and youth alike—feels agency and belonging. In our experience, engagement-based instruction is highly relevant and teaching is honored as a creative endeavor. Both educators and students find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing. Students and teachers have real responsibility, make important decisions, experiment, take risks, and return home each day knowing that they engaged in meaningful work.

In our own organizations' work, we've also seen that engagement-based schools are unafraid to question their own beliefs and practices. Additionally, because they place a premium on the engagement of every child, they are committed to dismantling local (and sometimes national) policies and practices that perpetuate inequity in education so that every learner is able to be her best self, now and in the future.

Our journey has confirmed much of what we already believed about engagement-based education. But through this experience, we've deepened our understanding in two important ways. First, we've been able to distill a set of commitments that we believe are the definitive hallmarks of engagement-based education: in schools that have embraced engagement-based education, these commitments drive everything they do. We'll share examples of how schools are living out each of these commitments in subsequent sections of this report.

Our second and more important learning is about the central and critical importance of radically reimagined relationships. In the most transformative schools we visited, we witnessed **a profoundly different and meaningful relationship among teachers, students, administrators, and families characterized by mutual respect, reciprocity, trust, and autonomy.** In these schools, great care is taken to cultivate and sustain strong relationships among all members of the school community, with an intentionality that influences everything from daily schedules to curriculum to how success is measured, and by whom.

All the other core commitments depend upon and are strengthened by these reimagined relationships at the center. Our journey has convinced us that **a school can have all of the other commitments in place--authentic learning experiences, holistic and meaningful outcomes, and more--but if it hasn't made the core commitment to relationships, it can't truly engage its students, staff, and families.**

Schools committed to engagement-based education may not look similar, because they've adopted specific strategies that are tailored to their local context and/or because they are at different points in their journey to move away from conventional, compliance-based practices.

However, when we visited many such schools across the country we found that they feel similar--and we believe this is because genuine, mutually respectful, radically reimagined relationships were immediately and abundantly evident.

Great care is taken to cultivate and sustain strong relationships among all members of the school community, with an intentionality that influences everything from daily schedules to curriculum to how success is measured, and by whom.

CORE COMMITMENT: RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

Many groups talk about the importance of relationships in teaching and learning, but too often limit that consideration to the relationship between teacher and student; for example, greeting each student individually by name at the start of the day, or knowing something about a student's hobbies so that the teacher can create projects or learning extensions that feel relevant and appealing. In other cases, organizations have focused on teacher leadership models and teacher collaboration as ways to modernize the adult relationships within a school building.

We mean something beyond adding a few tools to a teacher's or administrator's toolbox. What we experienced in our journey is something much more significant: a way of being that permeates all the relationships in the school and encompasses administrators, teachers, other staff members, students, and their families. Cultivating strong teacher-student and teacher-leader relationships is important and will yield some benefits, but not nearly as much as if all relationships are reimagined. David Bromley, executive director of Big Picture Philadelphia, put it this way: "We are a relationship-based school. Everything we do supports the development of really authentic relationships. That means students connecting with each other, with advisors, staff members, staff members connecting with each other, with leadership, and how they all connect with the world, with their community."

In the schools we talked with and visited, we observed that the building blocks of these radically reimagined relationships are:

1. Humility and curiosity
2. Deeply knowing all members of the community
3. Shared decision making
4. Shared accountability
5. Autonomy and agency

Humility and Curiosity

In the schools we visited, radically reimagined relationships grow out of a sense of genuine humility, a belief that each of us—adults and students alike—has something valuable to contribute to the school community, and a curiosity to learn what those unique contributions might be. One of the simplest and most powerful demonstrations of this came during our visit to Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, where English teacher Victor Ha had created acknowledgments for each member of his student advisory. Small posters outside the classroom door included "Anth - Thank you for teaching me

what it means to earn and show trust and respect” and “Daph - Thank you for making me laugh with your outrageous commentary.”

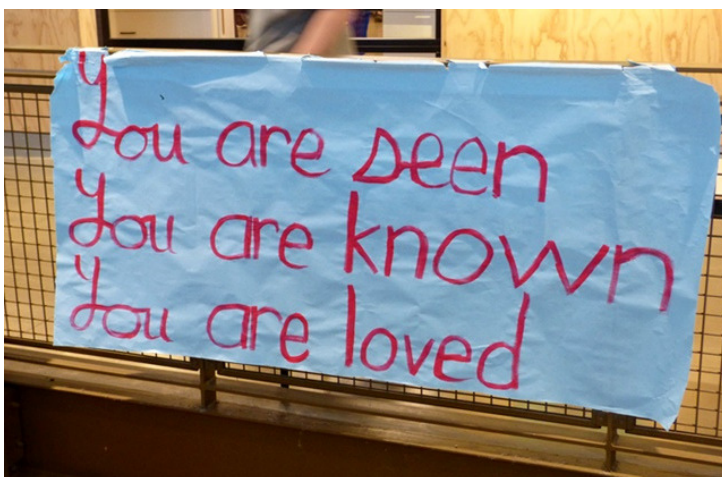
On the subject of humility and mutual respect, Mike Chalupa, director of the City Neighbors Foundation in Baltimore, MD, said, “We take a stand that children are creative, capable, powerful, worthy of the deepest respect, and then really try to determine what teaching and learning look like if you have that belief at the core.” One of City Neighbors’ founding questions is, “What would it take for every child to feel Known, Loved, and Inspired?”

Deeply Knowing All Members of the Community

Answering the City Neighbors question requires that we know each member of the school community to understand what each child needs and how other community members can use their talents and experiences to support that child. This takes time, effort, and skill. In schools that are doing this well, we found an intentional and explicit focus on this, even when it might take away from traditional instructional time.

Kemi Aiyedun, a third grade teacher at the Bronx Community Charter School in The Bronx, NY, commented, “There are times when things happen during the day and we say ‘Wait, we have to stop and we have to talk about it.’ We might be a little late on math or reading, but community is so important. We need to deal with it in order to move on and learn. It shows students you care about them as more than just readers, writers, and academic learners.”

Bronx Community’s director of student support Jeannine King added, “We work hard to know children deeply and we use all the levers we have to get to know them.” Kindergarten teacher Priscilla Otero and her co-teacher eat lunch with students in their classroom: “Just listening and talking with them in these small groups and informal times is what helps build these intimate relationships we have with them. One thing I think about a lot is how it’s easy for us to help kids calm down and understand their big feelings because we know them so well.”



A student-created sign hanging in the hallway at the Tacoma Science and Math Institute (SaMI) in Tacoma, WA.

Credit: NAEBE

Principal Shyla Rao of City Neighbors Hamilton in Baltimore, MD, said, “If you don’t have any idea what’s happening outside for a kid, you’re just responding to a facade.” Rao counseled that school size and class size are important factors in the ability to know students well; at one point City Neighbors made the decision to open an additional campus rather than increase enrollment at an existing school because school leaders understood that when it comes to each student being “known, loved, and inspired,” “known” and “loved” can be more difficult in a bigger school.

Advisories are one way that larger schools can build strong relationships among staff and students, if they are done thoughtfully and not used merely for make up assignments or administrative information and paperwork. At Big Picture Philadelphia, daily advisory runs anywhere from 90 minutes to a full day. David Bromley observed, “You get to know your students in a way different from anywhere else... Building community comes back to intentional use of time and what message you are sending to kids about how their time is used each day. Saying it’s a priority and really making it a priority is key.”

Multi-age mentor groups are another way some schools are creating the time and space for relationship-building. At the Science and Math Institute in Tacoma, WA, students are assigned to a multi-age mentor group they stay with throughout their four years of high school. Joni Hall, SaMI co-director, explained, “The mentor knows and cares about each child in the group... if there’s a problem, the teacher will contact the mentor first, before administration. Mentors also help families navigate the system. They’ll go meet with parents at homes, McDonalds, wherever they are comfortable. We spend a lot of time on culture and community and personal life. The kids call their mentor groups ‘Samilies’ (SaMI families).”

At the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC, staff pays special attention to this during the first six weeks of school. Teachers look at all students—particularly new ones—and ask: Who are their friends? Who’s isolated? “Teachers pay a lot of attention to that,” said head of school Deborah Williams. “We know that students need at least one adult in the building, so we need to figure that out, too. The best learning will happen when students are engaged and feel like they are part of the community.”

“I don’t care if you teach anything the first few weeks of school,” said Denise Funston, principal of Windsor Elementary School in Imperial, MO. “I want you to get to know your students and their families. Every successful child has at least one supportive adult, and we take that on as our goal.”

It takes skill and emotional intelligence to cultivate and sustain strong relationships, and that was top-of-mind for the school leaders we talked to and visited. These leaders let us know that educators’ skill in relationship-building is equally important, if not moreso, as their content knowledge and pedagogy. It’s a significant factor in hiring, evaluation, and professional learning. Jennifer Murray, a counselor at North Pointe Elementary in Houston, TX, shared, “We hire for character first because we can teach skill.” Jim Jensen, principal at the East Lee Campus in Wyoming, MI, observed, “My personal take—and it’s changed

through the years—is that people don’t remember what you did for them but how you affect them. My staff believes that. When I hear people’s stories, that connects me to them. I’ve worked hard on effective communication, verbal and nonverbal.” It is outside the scope of this project, but it made us wonder: what would teacher preparation look like if ‘radically reimagined relationships’ formed the core of new teachers’ coursework and clinical practice?

Shared Decision Making

We have come to understand that if we begin from a place of humility and curiosity and acknowledge that each member of the school community is a valuable contributor and has things to teach us, then it follows that schools should embrace distributed leadership and shared decision making. Deeply knowing each member of the community will help us identify the expertise she can contribute towards the greater good, and we’ll want to have structures in place that encourage her to do so.

East Lee Campus's Jim Jensen told us, “I don’t make the decision—the team makes the decision. The program needs to have sustainability beyond me pushing it.” City Neighbors Hamilton's Shyla Rao concurred: “Being teacher-powered requires forethought and thinking ahead. We can’t make as quick a decision, but they are lasting decisions. It’s not just about teachers feeling empowered. They are empowered. We actually have everyone at the table making decisions and crafting ideas and there’s ownership.” Her colleague Mike Chalupa added, “I am surrounded by colleagues, parents, and others striving to create something wonderful together. I don’t know how you have engagement-based learning for kids without engagement-based teaching for adults. I don’t think you can.”



Teachers at Grace Episcopal Day School in Kensington, MD, create art together during a faculty meeting.

Credit: Grace Episcopal Day School

We found that at these schools, educators are often learning from each other, and the school schedule is built to accommodate that. At the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, early release on Wednesdays and two periods a day of non-instructional time provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate. Teams of teachers co-develop curricula, reflect and debrief as units wrap up, and identify new courses and units they want to add in future years. Advisors also meet to co-plan advisory activities. The ability to collaborate is a significant factor in teacher hiring at Parker; teachers there noted that “while it’s sometimes challenging and cumbersome, it always delivers a better result.” Todd Sumner, Parker’s principal, added, “There’s been a long commitment to be a place where adult learning is a consistent focus not only in onboarding and inducting early career teachers, but also through faculty collaboration, creating opportunities every day for all teachers at all stages to work together.”

Students at Parker are included in collaboration and decision making as well. Students are surveyed as part of mid-year and end-of-year teacher evaluations, and a student-led Community Congress has a voice in changing school policies, providing feedback on the school’s annual budget allocations, and other administrative issues. Additionally, the student-led Justice Committee plays a key role in resolving conflicts, providing mediation, and developing restorative plans after infractions.

We saw that this phenomenon is not unique to Parker, and often occurs within individual classrooms as well: we met Randy Johnson at City Neighbors in Baltimore who asked his students to grade him, then changed what he was doing based on their feedback, communicating clearly to the students what he was changing and why. At Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City and at other schools we visited, students and their parents participate in teacher hiring committees and provide feedback on candidates’ demonstration lessons. Additionally, Harvest Collegiate has created a Visions Committee where school decisions are made; “more often than not,” noted teacher and school co-founder Steve Lazar, “you’ll have 3-5 students who come to that meeting...this is the space where democratic decision making happens.”

Shared Accountability

At the schools we visited, the corollary to shared decision making is shared responsibility and accountability: if I helped build it, I’m invested, and now I want to make sure it thrives. Parker’s Todd Sumner told us, “There’s an expectation that adults in school share a commitment to the entire school. When we orient new staff, we share that it means you can’t walk by stuff... if I walk by I can’t say ‘they’re not my problem because they’re not my students.’ You need to step toward the issue, not away from it. Because this piece is consistent over time, the longer the students are here, the more they own it. The juniors and seniors really are the ones doing most of the tone-setting. They will be as quick as any adult to say ‘this doesn’t look right.’”

At Bronx Community Charter School, shared decision making and accountability have altered staff structure in visible ways. Jeannine King explained, “We have two teachers in every classroom. Kids see

two adults collaborating all the time and that helps them see what working together looks like... Kids often ask, 'Who's the principal?' We don't have a principal. [The school has two co-directors.] We have people who work together to make the school go." The resulting level of investment is significant: "We have lots of teachers whose own kids go to our school, and that speaks volumes... We've built a place we believe in and want for our own kids, too. That says so much about who we are." Harvest Collegiate's Steve Lazar reflected, "I wanted to build the school I'll retire from--which I still plan on doing."

Trust, Autonomy, and Agency

The most engaging schools we visited operated with shared decision making and shared accountability, but also with a considerable degree of trust, autonomy, and agency within that shared structure; Harvest Collegiate High School is a noteworthy example of this. At Harvest Collegiate, teachers take on a number of hybrid roles within the school, including professional learning community leaders, health and wellness leaders, and curriculum developers. The school has built in release time and compensation structures to enable these teachers to work with their colleagues. The teacher workspace at the school accommodates this as well: all teacher desks are housed together in one big workroom so that teachers can troubleshoot issues and share ideas.

This workroom is often where individual teachers create new courses and solicit feedback on those course ideas from their colleagues; teachers at Harvest Collegiate are encouraged to develop courses that reflect their passions and expertise as well as interests voiced by their students. Steve Lazar noted, "We ask teachers, 'What's the most successful unit you've ever taught?' and then we say, 'Great, make that a course. Turn that into a semester class.' Because we're building on teacher strength and teacher's past experiences, that leads to teachers doing things that work for students." Additionally, teachers who want to pursue advanced degrees and other career development opportunities are released from school to be able to do that.

That sense of agency extends to Harvest Collegiate's students as well. There are a variety of offerings that satisfy core course requirements. Lazar told us, "There isn't a 9th grade English class. We have five different lower house English classes. And by the time you're a senior, you're picking your entire schedule." What's more, students at the school, not their teachers, determine whether they want to challenge themselves with honors courses. Each class has the opportunity for honors work, and, when students indicate that they want additional challenge, teachers respond by sharing work and opportunities that then can be appropriately scaffolded for each student. Students at Harvest Collegiate who are having trouble solving

**"I wanted to build the school
I'll retire from--which I still
plan on doing."**

- Steve Lazar, Harvest
Collegiate High School,
NY

a problem with a teacher or fellow student can bring the issue to Fairness, a panel comprised of students and teachers that is focused on restorative justice.

By now some readers may be thinking, “This sounds like a lot of work. The staff at my school already has too much to do.” That’s probably true—but if we’re after deep, authentic student engagement that will drive more meaningful and long-lasting outcomes for students, then attention to relationships has to take center stage and other tasks and commitments may need to be deprioritized.

We say this because we feel so certain that these radically reimagined relationships are the bedrock upon which everything else in the school is built, including the other commitments that follow in this report. In each of the following sections, we’ll make the connection back to the centrality of relationships.



City Neighbors staff members celebrate the tenth anniversary of the City Neighbors Foundation in Baltimore, MD. The foundation supports three public charter schools in the city.

Credit: City Neighbors Foundation

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS: KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1 A radically reimagined relationship begins with humility and curiosity. It says, “I don’t have all the answers, and I have something valuable to learn from each person in this community.” If you don’t genuinely believe this, others will know it.
- 2 A radically reimagined relationship goes beyond teachers and students; it means all members of the school community enjoy mutual respect, reciprocity, trust, and autonomy. Attention to the adult culture in the school, as well as to relationships with students’ families, is every bit as important as the teacher-student dynamic.
- 3 Deeply knowing each member of the community takes time, effort, and skill. Emotional intelligence and skill in relationship-building should be factors in hiring, induction, professional learning, evaluation, and leadership development. Relationship-building will likely involve challenging trade-offs and thus requires whole-school commitment.
- 4 Deeply knowing each member of the community is easier in small communities than in large ones. Larger schools can use advisories, multi-age mentor groups, and other methods to ensure that each member of the school community has a core, trusted group of people she can count on.
- 5 Shared decision making should include administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and their families. This process is longer and a bit messier than traditional top-down decision making, but it will deliver a greater level of investment among all stakeholders and a more sustainable result.
- 6 Shared accountability is the natural outgrowth of shared decision making and creates a more durable and responsive school culture.
- 7 Agency enables each member of the school community to leverage her unique skills and strengths for her own benefit and for the greater good. This requires a high degree of trust and respect as well as a common understanding of the school’s shared goals and norms.

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS: LEARN MORE

- Edutopia: The Power of Relationships in Schools [Video]
edutopia.org/video/power-relationships-schools
- MindShift: How Teachers Designed A School Centered On Caring Relationships [Podcast]
kqed.org/mindshift/52413/how-teachers-designed-a-school-centered-on-caring-relationships
- Phi Delta Kappan: Taking Care Of Ourselves and Others [Article]
pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/archive/pdf/PDK_98_6/25pdk_98_6.pdf
- TED: Brene Brown--The Power Of Vulnerability [Video]
ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
- Teaching Channel: Advisory--Check-In and Support [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/benefits-of-advisory-eed
- Expeditionary Learning: Building The Culture And Structure Of Crew [Guide]
eleducation.org/resources/cp-23-building-the-culture-and-structure-of-crew
- MindShift: Courage To Change: What It Takes To Shift To Restorative Discipline [Podcast]
kqed.org/mindshift/49526/courage-to-change-what-it-takes-to-shift-to-restorative-discipline
- ABC7NY: Small New York City Public High School Finds Success in Non-Traditional Classrooms [Article and videos featuring Harvest Collegiate High School]
abc7ny.com/education/nyc-school-finds-success-in-non-traditional-classrooms/4165447/
- Education Reimagined: This Is How You Empower Educators To Transform Education [Article]
education-reimagined.org/empower-educators-to-transform-education/
- American Educator: Leadership For Teaching And Learning [Article]
aft.org/ae/summer2016/berry_farris-berg
- Educational Leadership: The Trust Factor [Article]
ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may17/vol74/num08/The-Trust-Factor.aspx
- Education Dive: Lessons In Leadership [Article and Videos featuring Fall Creek School District]
educationdive.com/news/lessons-in-leadership-how-an-850-student-district-in-wisconsin-became-a-r/550621/

Students at Fall Creek Middle School in Fall Creek, WI, practice winter survival skills in a project-based learning unit.



Credit: Fall Creek Middle School

COMMITMENT TO SAFETY FOR RISK TAKING

In schools where all members of the community have some measure of agency and autonomy, we learned that the end goal can't be a foolproof system--and most of the people we talked to and visited with wouldn't want it to be. "We're trying to educate for democracy," said Matt Karlsen, director of professional development at Opal School in Portland, OR. "We're trying to educate around uncertainty. You can't learn for uncertainty if everything is neat and tidy."

To encourage risk taking, we heard that there needs to be a tolerance for failure, and it must be accepted and normalized for all members of the school community. For example, when teachers at Fall Creek Middle School in Fall Creek, WI, approached their principal and superintendent about implementing project-based learning (PBL), they had the administrators' full support--including adjustments to the school schedule to accommodate it. "I can't think of a time when I took a risk and wish I hadn't," said sixth grade teacher Toby Jacobson. "Many times I've regretted lessons where I've played it way too safe and it was boring." Jacobson and his colleague David Ross received encouragement from Brad LaPoint, their principal, to make PBL the focus of their professional learning through a district-wide system that encourages teachers' individual goal-setting to drive professional learning. Other teachers identified professional learning goals related to growth mindset, reading strategies, special education connection with families, and more; the program culminates in a "Goal Day" street fair where teachers share what they've learned. Jacobson reflected, "This culture really took off in the last three years. In the first couple years, there was more focus from the staff on getting through the process. Now it's more like people take it on themselves, asking 'How am I going to get better this year?'"

We argue that safety for risk taking grows out of radically reimagined relationships because those relationships provide a safety net. If all members of the community are known and valued, then no one

is expendable; we can embrace productive struggle, but reject the idea that anyone should be defined by or limited because of their failures alone. One student at Vancouver iTech Preparatory School in Vancouver, WA, described it this way: “Everyone here knows each other. That means no one falls through the mesh, and the mesh is held up by the teachers.” Relationships are also key because they allow us to scaffold risk taking: that is, if we deeply know each member of the community, we know how and when to push her based on her strengths, needs, and zone of comfort.

The other way we saw schools create safety was to normalize risk taking and failure. At these schools, failures and struggles are expected, publicly acknowledged, and framed as an essential part of an authentic learning process. For example, at Vancouver iTech, teachers use a grading program called Jumprope as a way to track students’ mastery of standards. Students have multiple attempts to master each standard and the school uses a ‘decaying average’ formula to determine final grades, which means that a student’s most recent efforts count more towards their final grade than their earlier attempts. As a result, students have less reason to be concerned if they struggle at first, knowing that as their mastery increases their earlier difficulties won’t weigh them down.

At Parker Charter Essential School, we saw students’ Senior Seminar proposal abstracts posted in the hallways. Other students and staff members have the chance to offer ideas, questions, and suggestions they think will strengthen the proposal or respond to specific requests for assistance from the author.

At this point, we’d be remiss not to acknowledge the very real constraints that many schools face around risk taking, experimentation, and accountability. School-, district-, and state-level accountability systems may be more nuanced and comprehensive under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act than they were under No Child Left Behind, but most still significantly emphasize student performance on standardized tests and may have a chilling effect on the necessity and acceptability of risk taking and occasional failure. The school leaders we spoke to had a range of responses to this.

Codman Academy Charter Public School
students learn about beekeeping in
Dorchester, MA.



Credit: Codman Academy

Some, like head of school Thabiti Brown at Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, MA, need to build skill development and test prep into the school day. With a majority of 9th graders entering the upper school below grade level, Brown and his colleagues must backfill needed skills. “Since we’re a public charter school, if the students don’t do well, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shuts us down, so we have to find the balance between all those things we believe in and the students’ absolute need to pass the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System],” he shared. Assistant principal Morgan Occhuizzo of Centreville Elementary in Centreville, VA, acknowledged the accountability realities as well: “You have to stay in the box to get out of the box. If you do what you have to do and follow the regulations, no one comes knocking at your door when you do more innovative things, too.”

In other cases, school leaders we spoke with had been able to secure accountability measures which they felt provided greater latitude for risk taking and experimentation. Harvest Collegiate, for example, is part of the Consortium for Performance Assessment in NY which exempts the school from the state-mandated standardized Regents exams, except in English. In lieu of this, educators at the school have developed performance assessments in all subjects.

A third group of school leaders we spoke with acknowledged the testing and accountability realities connected to their work, but report that their students have had no problem performing well on standardized tests despite their schools’ unconventional approaches to teaching and learning.

Wherever your school finds itself along this spectrum, we acknowledge that risk taking is influenced by each school’s particular accountability context. At the same time, inspired by what we saw during our school visits, we’d encourage readers of this report to normalize risk taking and failure to the fullest extent possible in your particular circumstance, and advocate for changes in policy at all levels that will catalyze more experimentation and risk taking.

SAFETY FOR RISK TAKING: KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1 Risk taking is a necessary part of educating for an uncertain future.
- 2 Risk taking can't be just for students: it has to be encouraged and modeled by administrators, teachers, and other members of the school community.
- 3 Radically reimagined relationships provide a firm foundation for risk taking. This is because we communicate to each member of the community, "You are not expendable. You may struggle, but because you are valued there are people here to catch you when you fall." Through radically reimagined relationships, we are able to find the right level of risk taking and challenge for each community member by virtue of the fact that they are deeply known.
- 4 There are a variety of ways that schools can model and normalize risk taking and failure. The degree to which each school can do this depends in some measure on how the school itself is measured by its local education agency (school district or charter network), school board, or other stakeholders.

Teacher Ash Moser jumping rope with a student at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC.



Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

SAFETY FOR RISK TAKING: LEARN MORE

- The74: Finding Success In Failure [Article]
the74million.org/article/finding-success-in-failure-stem-educators-say-student-risk-taking-is-key-to-real-world-learning
- EdSurge: Why Taking Risks In The Classroom Pays Off For Students--And Teachers [Article]
edsurge.com/news/2018-02-14-why-taking-risks-in-the-classroom-pays-off-for-students-and-teachers
- Edutopia: A Classroom Full Of Risk Takers [Article]
edutopia.org/article/classroom-full-risk-takers
- TED: Kathryn Schulz--On Being Wrong [Video]
ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_on_being_wrong
- TED: Reshma Saujani--Teach Girls Bravery, Not Perfection [Video]
ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection
- Expeditionary Learning: Promoting Courage and Adventure [Guide]
eleducation.org/resources/cp-26-promoting-courage-and-adventure
- Teaching Channel: Gaining Academic Courage [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/academic-courage-exl
- Teaching Channel: 5 Worthwhile Risks For New Teachers [Article]
teachingchannel.org/blog/2018/05/15/five-risks-for-new-teachers
- American Institutes for Research: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [Articles, Guides, Events]
safesupportivelearning.ed.gov



10th graders at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, use the federal court house in Providence to conduct a mock trial. Judges working at the court house volunteered to preside over the trial.

Credit: Blackstone Academy Charter School

COMMITMENT TO AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES

In their excellent book *Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*, Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath describe how the role of teachers has changed from the conventional purveyor of information to one of “learning strategist.” The learning strategist designs and facilitates learning experiences for students that are built around students’ interests and abilities, calibrated to achieve the right level of challenge and risk taking, and flexible enough to make needed changes in the moment. At Center for Inspired Teaching, we call teachers “the ultimate improvisers” not because there isn’t careful preparation involved in their role, but because great teachers are able to go ‘off script’ and engineer meaningful learning exchanges that respond to what a student or group of students needs on that day, with that topic.

In order to ‘read’ their students and adapt their teaching in this way, the teachers we talked with take the time to know their students and form strong relationships with them. At Harvest Collegiate, for example,

one teacher asked students to write about their previous educational experiences so that she could understand their perspectives on school and themselves as learners and tailor instruction accordingly. Inspired Teaching Demonstration School's Deborah Williams said, "It's the responsibility of the adult to help construct learning experiences that build a way for kids to investigate and create... The curriculum shifts over time because it has to be what kids are interested in."

Many other organizations have already done a lot of great work to describe the nature of authentic learning experiences. We won't reinvent the wheel here; instead, we'll explain how we believe the most powerful authentic learning grows out of radically reimagined relationships, and we'll provide brief examples from our interviews and site visits that illustrate each of the following aspects of authentic learning experiences:

1. Inquiry
2. Hands-on experiential learning
3. Project- and problem-based learning
4. Real-world community connections
5. Student voice and choice

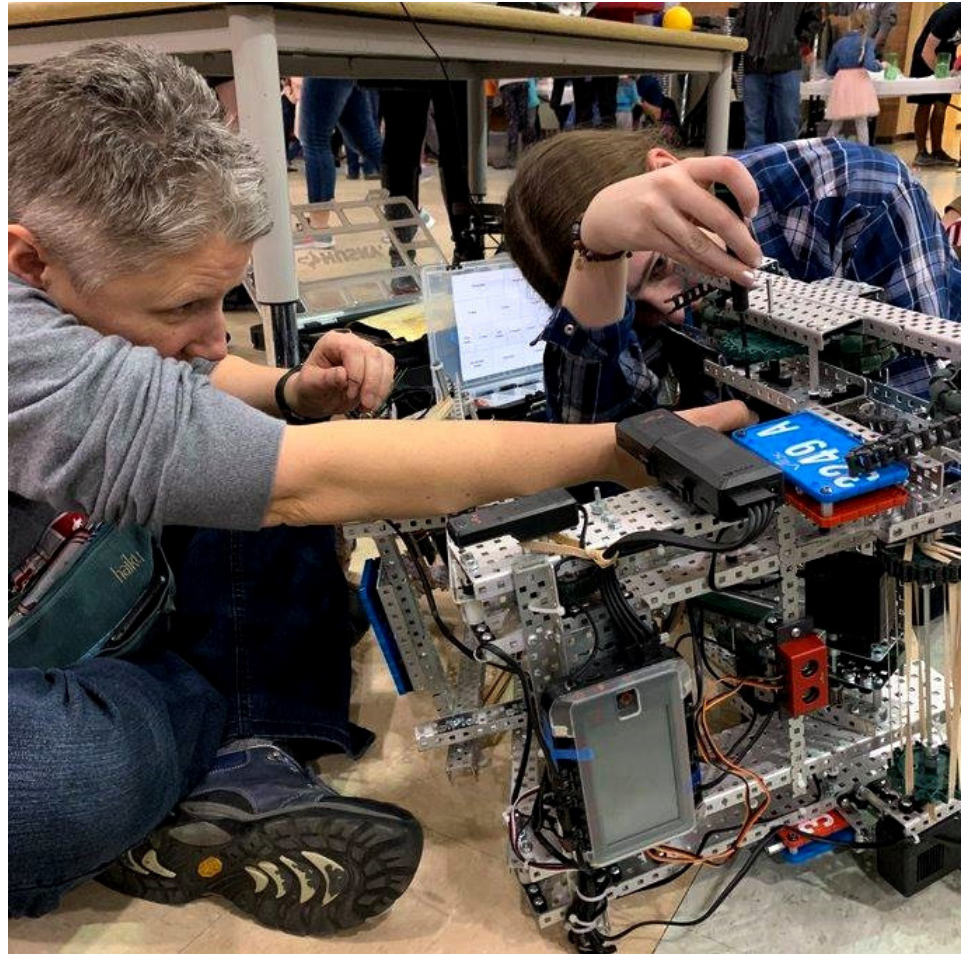
Inquiry

At the Bronx Community Charter School, we observed a fifth grade class where students were designing and testing bridges. First they learned about common types of bridges in a mini-lesson, then they created blueprints for original bridge designs. Following that, they built models from their blueprints using straws, string, and masking tape. Student teams were so engaged in this activity that when instructional assistant Anna Lugo announced it was time to pack up, her announcement was met with multiple protests.

Older students at Vancouver iTech studied *The Omnivore's Dilemma* as a collaborative biology, health, and physical education unit. Students tracked their eating and sleeping habits and interviewed their parents on the factors that influence healthy behaviors. In their media class, students then created short films about food for a festival they planned. The inspiration for each film was a nutritional improvement each student identified for themselves. Students then filled a variety of roles at the festival according to their interests.

The school's principal, Darby Meade, observed, "Our school's guiding principles are around innovation, inspiring students to create, and really imagining what it is that we can be. We don't necessarily know what is going to be there in 10 or 15 years... we believe in problem solving and teaching kids to fail. The amount of information is continuing to increase--if we just cover the curriculum, we're getting further and further behind."

Robotics teacher Cyndy Hagin works with a student at Vancouver iTech Preparatory School in Vancouver, WA.



Credit: Vancouver iTech

Hands-on Experiential Learning

Kelly Bird, lower school principal at the Friends Central School in Wynnewood, PA, described her school's investment in maker spaces. The school has created a solarium, aeroponic towers, and aquaponics to equip students' cooking and gardening activities; there are also opportunities for robotics, coding, woodworking, mural painting, and other pursuits in 'dry' and 'wet' maker spaces across two campuses. "It's not a 'special'," Bird explained. "It's fully integrated into what's happening in the classroom. There are four studios, all overseen by one director. If kids are studying something, they can decide how they want to demonstrate learning and identify a teacher they need as an advisor." Across the country in Tacoma, WA, the School of Industrial Design, Engineering, and Art turned the school's gym/auditorium into a giant makerspace with welding equipment, shop tools, and a computer design lab.

Schools without extensive maker spaces can do this, too. At City Neighbors, middle school math students learned about ratios and proportions by making music and building wooden benches. When students were studying kinetic energy, they created toys which were then tested out and critiqued by younger student 'buddies.'



A student at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, displays a gaming console he constructed for the school's Maker Faire.

Credit: Parker Charter Essential School

Project- and Problem-Based Learning

When we visited Fall Creek Middle School, students were in the thick of a project to research and document the history of their town, creating video documentaries that students produced to share with the wider community. Sixth grade teacher Stephanie McSharry noted that scrum boards (tools that help teams visualize and track tasks that need to be completed within a certain sprint, or work cycle) kept the kids accountable and “made it possible for teachers to see what was happening and exactly where students were, without making students feel a great sense of teacher imposition.”

Vancouver iTech middle school students helped Fort Vancouver, a local National Historic Site, solve a problem related to its collection. The Fort’s visitor center only has room to display a fraction of the historical artifacts in its collection, so students created digital 3D scans of many of the objects and developed a virtual reality experience. Such experiences are the bread-and-butter of Vancouver iTech’s teaching and learning, where, as principal Darby Meade explained, “The project is the meal, not the dessert.”

Real-World Community Connections

At City Neighbors, middle school math teacher Randy Johnson prepared for the school year by interviewing people of various professions and asking them when and how they used math in their work. In doing so, he was able to create projects and assignments for his students that highlighted the practical applications of the math concepts students are learning.

Two years ago at Harvest Collegiate, sophomores organized a full-day conference on human rights. Students planned the agenda, organized panels, and recruited guest speakers from NGOs and other

institutions including the United Nations. Because this was so successful, students and staff are planning to make this a biannual occurrence; the original organizers, now seniors, are coaching the current sophomores on how to do this.

Blackstone Academy has formalized a commitment to community-based service learning as part of its curriculum and graduation requirements. Head of school Kyleen Carpenter explained, “Other schools have community service, but these kinds of projects within the core curriculum are unique. We’re trying new assessment techniques. We’re getting into longer relationships with community partners, which is great, and we’re able to help students understand why this is a core part of the curriculum.” Examples include refurbishing bicycles with Recycle a Bike; photojournalism projects with Progreso Latino that have been displayed in the Rhode Island State House; creating a skate park in Pawtucket; and advocacy around the DREAM Act, affordable housing, and Rhode Island’s free in-state tuition program.

The School of Industrial Design, Engineering and Art (iDEA) found a different way to embed real-world community connections: it embedded community organizations in the school building. The Tacoma Public Schools issued an RFP for companies interested in colocating with the school and seven companies were selected. These companies don’t pay rent—they pay by working with students as adjunct faculty. Joni Hall, co-director of iDEA’s sister school SaMI, explained that many staff members at iDEA and SaMI are adjuncts who teach part-time and continue to work in their fields. For example, on the day of our school visit, one engineering teacher was at SpaceX presenting an antenna design.

Opal School’s Matt Karlsen told us, “One of the frameworks we’ve been thinking about is how learning needs to be interconnected—personal, local, global... We are much more exploring the interdependent and community basis of learning.”



Students at Tacoma Science and Math Institute (SaMI) work with staff from MaST marine biology center at Highline College and the Foss Waterway Seaport on the flensing of a humpback whale.

Credit: SaMI

Student Voice and Choice

Many of the examples we've shared above illustrate another essential aspect of authentic learning experiences, student voice and choice. The educators we talked with confirm that when learning is driven by students' interests and choices, motivation, engagement, and self-assurance all increase. Parker Charter Essential School's Colleen Meaney observed that Parker graduates feel confident about approaching their university professors with questions and establishing collegial relationships with them: "This is second nature because of their experiences at Parker. Students develop a strong sense of agency."

Opal School's Matt Karlsen shared, "We're trying to present an ecosystem for learning that allows everybody who comes here--children, educators, parents, visitors--to build on what they already know towards something they didn't even know they are interested in." He added, "We are helping children know that their ideas are a gift to the world that the world needs. People will feel more connected to any community that they are contributing to. Because these children see their ideas being seriously considered by people outside their community, they become engaged with seriously considering others' ideas as well."

"We are helping children know that their ideas are a gift to the world that the world needs... Because these children see their ideas being seriously considered by people outside their community, they become engaged with seriously considering others' ideas as well."

- Matt Karlsen, Opal School, OR

Direct Instruction and Prescribed Curriculum

Multiple times during our school visits we saw teachers providing direct instruction and incorporating packaged curriculum and instructional materials into their lessons. We wondered: does the presence of these things mean that a teacher or the school is less committed to engagement-based teaching and learning?

Based on our conversations with these teachers and our own experiences working with educators, we believe the answer is no. There are times when direct instruction is entirely appropriate to introduce a new topic or skill to a whole class and/or to provide extra support to a small group or individual student. It can provide an efficient way to take care of prerequisites so that students can focus their time and attention on the larger goals of a project or investigation. The issue is one of proportion: if we are mindful of Darby Meade's counsel that "the project is the meal, not the dessert," then we can think of direct instruction as an appetizer, or the dressing on the side.

We also believe there's a time and place for packaged curriculum and instructional materials, if they're used in skillful and targeted ways. In engagement-based classrooms, teachers and students use these

as one of many resources available to help them master a skill or complete a project, as suggested by students' individual needs and abilities, rather than moving all students lockstep through every chapter, assignment, and question. Curriculum can furnish teachers with ideas and the targeted interventions that some students may need. The key is that these are tools in the toolbox that the teacher as learning strategist can apply to help students meet learning goals, in lessons that are crafted, not scripted.

Admittedly, this is harder than just following the script, but in our experience it's well worth the effort. We now understand that teachers are best equipped to do this in schools that have made the core commitment to radically reimagined relationships. Because they know students deeply, teachers are able to design highly relevant learning experiences and choose the right resources to support individual students. Because there is trust, autonomy, and agency, school leaders trust teachers to exercise their professional judgment, take risks, and experiment to achieve the best possible student outcomes.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES: KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1 Authentic learning experiences involve inquiry, experiential learning, project-based learning, real-world community connections, and student voice and choice.
- 2 Teachers trust students to act with a greater degree of autonomy, and the teacher's role shifts to emphasize instructional design, coaching, and facilitation.
- 3 Radically reimagined relationships fuel authentic learning experiences because they enable teachers to design activities that relate directly to individual students' interests and needs, to access a supportive network of colleagues in doing so, and to share responsibility for student learning with all members of the school and local community, including students themselves.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES: LEARN MORE

- Edutopia: Playful Inquiry for Elementary Students [Article featuring Opal School]
edutopia.org/article/playful-inquiry-elementary-students
- The74: A D.C. School Meant To Inspire Teachers and Students [Article featuring Inspired Teaching Demonstration School]
the74million.org/article/a-d-c-school-meant-to-inspire-teachers-and-students/
- Teaching Channel: The Evolution of a Project [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/self-directed-student-project-edv
- Edutopia: How Can We Successfully Land a Rover on Mars? [Article featuring Science and Math Institute (SaMI)]
edutopia.org/article/how-can-we-successfully-land-rover-mars
- Tacoma Schools: IDEA–Making Learning Relevant [Video featuring School of Industrial Design, Engineering and Art (iDEA)]
youtube.com/watch?v=OKRaWKd8bt4
- Teaching Channel: Selecting Student Internships [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/matching-students-to-internships-bpl
- Edutopia: Elevating Student Voice Through Senior Talks [Video featuring Codman Academy]
edutopia.org/video/elevating-student-voice-through-senior-talks
- Cornelius Minor: *We Got This. Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* [Book]
amazon.com/We-Got-This-Equity-Students/dp/032509814X
- Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath: *Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century* [Book]
amazon.com/Deeper-Learning-Innovative-Transforming-Twenty-First/dp/1595589597/
- Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine: *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School* [Book]
amazon.com/Search-Deeper-Learning-Remake-American/dp/0674988396/



At Bronx Community Charter School in The Bronx, NY, a whole-school interdisciplinary investigation of the Bronx River culminates in an outdoor museum exhibition for the community.

Credit: Bronx River Alliance

COMMITMENT TO HOLISTIC AND MEANINGFUL OUTCOMES

As schools and other education organizations have embraced and promoted authentic learning experiences, there's been a parallel movement to develop more authentic assessments of student achievement and teacher performance. In our experience the best of these employ backwards design and ask the question, "What knowledge, skills, and dispositions will students need in their adult lives, and how successful are we in helping students develop those?"

We saw this in action at Blackstone Academy Charter School, where students' college and career success is a priority and the school supports and measures this in a variety of ways. Sixty-two percent of Blackstone's students are Hispanic, 81% qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and many will be the first person in their family to attend college; consequently, Blackstone staff members spend a great deal of time counseling students, taking them on college visits, and helping them with FAFSA and other paperwork. To gauge students' college and career readiness, the school requires portfolios each year that incorporate information about both in-school and out-of-school experiences including college visits, job shadowing, and internships.



At Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, seniors and their family members were invited to express their love and appreciation for each other in a schoolwide gathering.

Credit: Blackstone Academy Public Charter School

The affective outcomes of these activities may be harder to measure, but are no less real. Ruben, a senior at the school, told us that Blackstone has prepared him for life after high school because it's taught him personal accountability; with so many supports in place, he explains, students run out of excuses when they fail to succeed. "I've learned how to advocate and look for resources on my own, instead of finding an external reason for things that go wrong."

At the same time as they attend to students' ability to thrive in the future, schools like Blackstone are mindful that we also want students to thrive in the present. These schools understand that students are not clay that becomes fully human only at age 21, but see students as humans with needs, abilities, and potential that is manifest today. They ask, "Are students getting what they need in the moment and for their futures?"

Additionally, we found that these schools have a more holistic definition of success and thus are asking whether staff members, parents, and other members of the school community are getting their needs met as well. These holistic measures of success take on particular urgency in light of teacher strikes around the country, a crisis in teacher retention, and the majority of Americans' belief that schools in some communities offer fewer opportunities and have lower expectations. Windsor Elementary's principal Denise Funston told us that her ideal outcomes would include: "1. All of our students would answer a survey that they feel safe and loved at school. 2. All of our parents would be heavily involved at school. Also, if we could have kids reading and doing math on grade level, that would be great, too." Several of the schools we talked to and visited administer regular surveys of teachers, parents, and students and conduct focus groups.

Radically reimagined relationships are important here, because if we are operating with humility and curiosity, we'll acknowledge that we are always learning--from all members of the school community--and improving. If each member of the community is valued, then their engagement with us and their success matters.

What's more, deeply knowing each member of the school community means that we clearly see their unique set of talents, needs, and abilities, and we measure growth accordingly; as Todd Rose brilliantly sets forth in his book *The End of Average*, we can then move beyond standardized and one-dimensional views of talent and potential. Growth will be *as unique to each person as a fingerprint*.

At City Neighbors, this means focusing on the development of the whole child and understanding the complex nature of child development, as opposed to 'this is what a student their age should be doing'. The school uses a wide range of assessments including reenactments, journal entries, running records, and craft projects. Students lead parent conferences and explain their growth as learners using portfolios.

Parker Charter Essential School uses mastery-based progression to move students from Division 1 (roughly grades 7 and 8) through Division 3 (roughly grades 11-12). In Parker's performance-based promotion system, students usually take four semesters per division, but students can move at a pace that's appropriate to them, sometimes advancing more quickly in certain subjects (for example, math/science/technology) and more slowly in others. Gateway portfolios "make the case" for promotion to the next level and are featured at public exhibitions of the student's work. Portfolios typically include multiple examples of high-quality student work products, accompanying feedback and rubrics, and a reflective cover letter. Matt, a senior at the school, praised the system because "every student has control over their own learning. I can take as much time to master the curriculum as I need."

Instead of grades each quarter, students at Parker receive detailed, quarterly narrative progress reports in each class. The guiding question for these reports is, "What can the student do, and under what conditions can she do it?" At the end of the student's junior year, the staff assembles a final narrative that draws from each of these quarterly progress reports across grades 9-11. The academic dean, the student, and the student's family all have the opportunity to review the narrative and give feedback. This narrative summary, with accompanying school profile and explanatory notes, constitutes the bulk of the student transcript for post-secondary admissions.

Students at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, provide feedback about each other's work.



Credit: Parker Charter Essential School

In summary, we've learned that engagement-based schools that have committed to radically reimagined relationships are measuring success along several dimensions: How well is the school meeting its mission? How well is the school equipping students to thrive, both today and in the future? And how well is the school recognizing the needs of each individual within the school community, including staff and family members, and working to the best of its ability to see that these needs are met?

HOLISTIC AND MEANINGFUL OUTCOMES: KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1 Engagement-based schools employ a wide range of authentic assessments that measure both short- and long-term student outcomes.
- 2 Engagement-based schools include outcomes related to families, staff members, and other members of the school community in addition to more traditional measures of success.
- 3 Measures of ability, need, and growth will be highly individual. Strong relationships, where each individual is deeply known, facilitate this kind of measurement and assessment.

HOLISTIC AND MEANINGFUL OUTCOMES: LEARN MORE

- Education Reimagined: What Are We Losing By Keeping Learners On-Track? [Article]
education-reimagined.org/what-are-we-losing-by-keeping-learners-on-track/
- MindShift: Why Competency-Based Education Is Exciting And Where It May Stumble [Article]
kqed.org/mindshift/52866/why-competency-based-education-is-exciting-and-where-it-may-stumble
- Edutopia: Developing Agency With Student-Led Conferences [Video]
edutopia.org/video/developing-agency-student-led-conferences
- Education Reimagined: This Is What Learner Agency Looks Like [Article]
education-reimagined.org/this-is-what-learner-agency-looks-like/
- Getting Smart: The Pursuit Of Happiness Is A Noble Goal For 21st Century Education [Article]
gettingsmart.com/2019/04/the-pursuit-of-happiness-is-a-noble-goal-for-21st-century-education/
- Teaching Channel: Critical Friends--Looking At Student Work [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/reflection-on-student-work-ntn
- CASEL: Measuring SEL [Guide]
measuringSEL.casel.org/access-assessment-guide/



At the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC, regular Learning Showcase events invite community members to view exhibitions of student learning, like this student-constructed model of the city.

Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School



Students from Bronx Community Charter School create socially-themed stencil art in Norwood, a working-class neighborhood in The Bronx, NY.

Credit: Devin Dae Tucker / Norwood News

COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

Every one of us is a collection of unique characteristics. These include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, home language, immigration status, and religion; each of us is also unique in our family structure, family income, exposure to trauma, neurodiversity, development, abilities, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

Because each of us is unique, we don't all learn in the same way. In order to provide an education that genuinely addresses our individual characteristics, engagement-based schools make an explicit commitment to equity so that all members of the school community are able to learn and do their best work.

Equity is a term that's often defined by different people in different ways, so we want to begin by being clear about our own understanding of equity. Based upon our conversations and school visits, we believe equity is an asset-based commitment that includes Opportunity, Inclusivity, and Individual Fit.

Opportunity

Our own organizations have always understood engagement-based education to be a social justice issue, and one that transcends politics. We believe that all students, regardless of zip code and other factors, deserve to find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing.

Research suggests that low- and middle-income students may be getting the opposite. One recent study of preschool programs shows that those schools serving low- and middle-income students and students of color feature less unstructured play, less care for students' emotional, cognitive, and other needs, and less use of open-ended questions to stimulate higher order thinking.⁽⁴⁾ Across grade levels, a number of studies show that teachers are less likely to have asset-based attitudes towards and strong relationships with students of color and low- and middle-income students.⁽⁵⁾ Additionally, we've seen the proliferation of no-excuses, zero-tolerance schools and practices for urban students, driven by a belief that these practices are somehow necessary to 'get through' to students with certain demographic profiles.⁽⁶⁾

The educators we talked with reject this view. Blackstone Academy's Kyleen Carpenter remembered, "Going back in time, there weren't a ton of CES [Coalition of Essential Schools] that were urban schools. A lot of folks thought that those philosophies wouldn't fly with urban students. Urban kids need structure and 'no excuses'--but we knew that wasn't true because of the summer program we ran with CES principles. We're low income, students of color, and recent immigrants."

During our journey, we were struck by the significant and explicit social justice orientation at many of the schools we visited. Bronx Community's Jeannine King told us, "We are rooted in progressive pedagogy. And we are rooted in that pedagogy for families that are underrepresented in that world--bringing independent and private school experiences to kids who would never be able to afford them. Kids are having profound and rich experiences. Also, every adult in the building is invested in the work and helping families navigate through the system and beyond."

We found that this commitment to opportunity quite often goes hand-in-glove with a broader commitment to social justice at the schools we visited. At the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School, staff members did a book study around *Courageous Conversations* exploring race and equity; the school also organizes forums through which parents can discuss race relations. Middle school students at City Neighbors picked their own social justice topics to explore through the lens of math--for example, the gender wage gap--and this year the whole middle school is exploring the question, "Is the American Dream for everyone?"

4 Valentino, R. (2018). Will public pre-K really close achievement gaps? Gaps in prekindergarten quality between students and across states. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 79-116.

5 Muller, C. (2001). The role of caring in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students. *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(2), 241-255.

6 Zirkel, S., Bailey, F., Bathey, S., Hawley, R., Lewis, U., Long, D., Pollack, T., Roberts, Z., Stroud, R.S., & Winful, A. (2011). 'Isn't that what "those kids" need?' Urban schools and the master narrative of the 'tough, urban principal.' *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14(2), 137-158.



A student from Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City tells hundreds of students from other NY schools about her cousin, a student at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, at the time of the February 2018 school shooting there. *Credit: Harvest Collegiate High School*

Vancouver iTech’s Darby Meade observed, “When you give middle and high school students choice and freedom in their projects and learning, and when you encourage students to focus on authentic real-world problems, many tend to gravitate towards social justice and equity issues, because the most complicated real-world problems tend to be issues of social justice and equity.” Codman Academy’s Thabiti Brown added, “Let’s ensure that we are educating so that we can produce graduates who are able to use their knowledge to change the world. The world is one that isn’t just and fair for low income folks, and it isn’t one that supports black and brown students.”

Inclusivity

Inclusivity means that all students and their families feel welcome and valued at school, and that diverse viewpoints among members of the school community are respected and thoughtfully considered.

Often, we found that this begins by changing the culture among the adults in the school so that they are modeling for students the kind of inclusivity they want to see school-wide. Caroline Beasley, head of the upper division at The Park School in Brookline, MA, commented, “I very early on in the year decided that we needed to first work on adult culture. My strategy was to model and construct meaning through doing with adults so then it could be repeated with kids. We started by thinking about difficult conversations we have as adult colleagues, setting agreements and norms. Then we bridged between ‘this is the nature of relationships between adults’ and ‘it’s not that different from relationships between children and adults’... it’s about skills and where they are in their development socially and emotionally.”

At the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School, staff members worked to develop norms for the conduct of all meetings, creating a feeling of safety around school climate and agreeing how to tackle differences of opinion. Deborah Williams explained how this has changed students' relationships with each other and with the staff: "Students are encouraged to find a balance between using their voices and listening.

There's a comfort level for students; they're not worried about expressing their opinions. [The principal's office] is a meeting space for students because they know they can approach her with their concerns and feelings. Kids can ask adults to take a break to re-energize themselves."

"How would you talk to someone you loved who was disappointing you?" asked Parker's Colleen Meaney. Meaney and others we spoke to often referenced the norms of family life and the adult workplace when they described how adults and students relate to one another in their schools. "We treat students as humans, not as strictly obedient beings," she added. A student at Grace Episcopal School in Kensington, MD, put it this way: "People here hug. At my old school you lost recess if you touched someone."

We saw that this family feeling extends to students' actual families as well. At Centreville Elementary, the school staff does a "Welcome Walk" at the beginning of each school year before students return to school. Morgan Occhuizzo explained, "The teachers come in to work at 4 pm with school shirts on and school flags on their cars. Every teacher goes out with a specialist and we visit every students' home... many parents are out having block parties waiting for the teachers to arrive. This gives our teachers some perspective on where kids are coming from. After the Welcome Walk, parents are so excited because they have made that connection." In the summer, Occhuizzo and other school leaders make an effort to keep the building open, with weekly library nights and regular barbecues.

At the Bronx Community School, students created posters displayed across the school with slogans declaring "We are all immigrants / Dominicans / strong women / LGBTQ /" and so on. The school building was constructed with common areas in the building for students, staff, and family members to congregate, and on First Fridays every month family members join students in classrooms to observe and help with activities.

East Lee Campus's Jim Jensen highlighted for us the more subtle ways inclusivity can be supported or hindered: "I want to make sure we're aware of subconscious triggers that might be influencing our judgment. I try to carve out dedicated time [to work on this] every day. You really can't fool kids. It's also for their parents. You have to have compassion and empathy."

**"How would you talk to someone you loved who was disappointing you?
... We treat students as humans, not as strictly obedient beings."**

- Colleen Meaney, Parker
Charter Essential School, MA

Individual Fit

The standard notion of ‘equity of access’ or the ‘level playing field’ suggests that it’s sufficient to provide all students with identical and high-quality resources: skilled teachers, ample instructional materials, small class sizes, and so on. This is necessary, but not sufficient. If we believe that the goal of education is to help each student thrive, now and in the future, and if we accept that each student comes equipped with a unique set of needs, interests, and abilities, then we’ll need to chart different paths towards ‘success’ for different students and provision ourselves accordingly. The alternative is the familiar refrain that “school works for some kids, but not for others.”

These beliefs were confirmed by our school visits. At Grace Episcopal Day School, a learning specialist works with classroom teachers to make sure each child’s needs are being met. The school used to employ separate math and reading specialists, but found that the interventions were too narrow and content-focused; now the learning specialist can attend to the whole child, rather than focusing on just their reading or math skills. Students at the school notice the staff’s commitment to each child’s needs: Tess, a fifth grader, told us that she saw her second grade teacher consistently write out separate lesson plans to make math different for different students. Her classmate Kadin shared that the same teacher “cared about our learning. She knew there was something inside all of us and that we all had the potential to learn.”

At Harvest Collegiate, where 27% of students qualify for special education services, all students are free to opt in to honors and AP classes. Teachers work together to identify the strategies and scaffolding to make sure each student has the right system of supports to succeed across a range of subjects and academic levels.



Second grade teacher Kate Kelliher reads with a student at Grace Episcopal Day School in Kensington, MD.

Credit: Grace Episcopal Day School

Across the country from Harvest Collegiate, the Tacoma Public Schools we visited promote inclusivity and individual fit through their bridge program. During the course of every student's time in the schools, for 1-2 semesters they are expected to serve as a "bridge" for others, meaning they provide support in one way or another. A student may be a bridge for another student, a group of students, a class, or the school in general. The bridge assignments are tailored to individual students' strengths and interests, and serve to support students in need and recognize everyone's value to the school community.

When we asked about the possible stigma of being a student who has been assigned a bridge, school leaders told us they work hard to emphasize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses—everyone needs help, and everyone can give help. Jon Ketler, who founded three of Tacoma's high school programs, has a daughter with cerebral palsy; she had a bridge who helped her, and she in turn was a bridge for another student who needed help in art. "Having and being a bridge has become a very normal part of the school experience," said Liz Minks, SaMI's co-director, "so much so that many students who do not have special needs request bridges."

As other organizations have noted, and as the schools we visited demonstrated, initiatives and accommodations originally intended to benefit special education students quite often benefit other students as well. We saw this at Parker Charter Essential School in Massachusetts, where every student has a Personalized Learning Plan—a document that both highlights a student's abilities and identifies goals the student wants to work toward. Together with their parents and advisor, students share these goals and develop strategies to help them be successful. Usually, this kind of process is reserved only for those who qualify for special education services.

Several of the schools we visited have gone to great lengths to provide wrap-around services to support students and their families. At Codman Academy in Massachusetts, mental health has been a focus

The interior of Codman Academy Charter Public School's K-8 campus in Dorchester, MA, was intentionally designed to feature muted tones and less clutter.



Credit: Codman Academy

from the school's beginning, and colocation with the Codman Square Health Center has provided easy access to counselors and social workers, as well as medical, dental, and vision care. Careful study of trauma-informed practices has influenced everything from classroom design and daily schedules to family engagement and professional learning.

EQUITY: KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1 Engagement-based education is a social justice issue: all children are capable of and entitled to find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing.
- 2 Engagement-based schools work hard to make sure that all members of the school community feel a sense of belonging and value.
- 3 Engagement-based schools prize 'individual fit' and do their best to provide each student with what she needs to reach her full potential.

During the Black Lives Matter in Schools Week of Action, staff and family members meet to explore issues of race and equity at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC.



Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

EQUITY: LEARN MORE

- Education Reimagined: Education Equity: Setting The Context For A Robust Conversation [Article]
education-reimagined.org/education-equity-setting-the-context-for-a-robust-conversation/
- Expeditionary Learning: Contributing To A Better World--Courageous Conversations [Video]
eleducation.org/resources/contributing-to-a-better-world-shorts-courageous-conversations
- Education Week: Dear White Teachers--You Can't Love Your Black Students If You Don't Know Them [Article and Video] edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/20/dear-white-teachers-you-cant-love-your.html
- MindShift: Can Inviting Teachers Over To Your Home Improve How Kids Learn? [Podcast]
kqed.org/mindshift/51967/can-inviting-teachers-over-to-your-home-improve-how-kids-learn
- Getting Smart: Assume Good Intentions--Lessons For Responsive Family Engagement [Article]
gettingsmart.com/2019/03/assume-good-intentions-lessons-for-responsive-family-engagement/
- The Atlantic: How Discrimination Shapes Parent-Teacher Communication [Article]
theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/which-parents-are-teachers-most-likely-to-contact/507755/
- Teaching Channel: Deeper Learning Through Personalized Learning Plans [Video]
teachingchannel.org/video/personalized-learning-plans-edv
- Boston Globe: School-Community Health Partnerships [Article featuring Codman Academy]
bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/01/26/codman-academy-inspires-zuckerbergs/OFhDVDCGjSVIHZvnBBfA3K/story.html
- Edutopia: Getting Started With Trauma-Informed Practices [Video]
edutopia.org/video/getting-started-trauma-informed-practices

CONTEXT MATTERS: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

When we take the time to build relationships and really know each member of the school community, we quickly realize that individuals, groups, and perhaps even the entire student population (for example, in schools explicitly designed for students affected by trauma) need particular things. This means that the manifestation of the Commitments described in this report—the particular strategies supporting each, and the extent to which they can be fully implemented on any given day with any given student or group—will differ from one school to another.

Kate Burch, principal and co-founder of Harvest Collegiate in New York, observed, “Excellent schools can’t be excellent at everything.” We found this to be true in our conversations and school visits; depending on a wide variety of factors, including the needs of the student population, the school’s organizational affiliations, the school’s governance and oversight, and how long the school has been in existence, we saw that each school excelled in certain aspects and that all schools were at different points in their journey to fully realize each of the commitments described in this report.

BIG QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS

During our journey last year, we learned a lot—and of course, we’re still learning. Our experiences have raised a number of questions we want to explore, either through our own investigations or by learning from other organizations doing similar work. Those questions include:

1. What does engagement look like and how are our commitments manifested where “school” takes a very different form—for example, in homeschool or online environments?
2. Are there limits to how this might scale? How does a large school or a whole district do this?
3. What does it take for an existing, conventional school or district to pivot and reinvent itself in this way, versus organizing a brand-new school or system from the ground up for this purpose?
4. What are the primary factors that prevent schools from embracing an engagement-based approach?
5. Are there certain essential outcomes for engagement-based education tied to each of the commitments, and how are these being measured? What new methodologies should be considered?
6. How have teacher preparation and professional learning supported or hindered wide adoption of engagement-based education? What would teacher preparation look like if radically reimaged?

relationships formed the core of new teachers' coursework and clinical practice? How would professional learning be different if relationship-building played a significant part of teachers' continued development?

7. What mindsets do families bring to this kind of educational experience for their children? How does that affect the relationship between home and school, and families' support for engagement-based education in their communities?

Our two organizations, Center for Inspired Teaching and the Astra Center for Innovative Education, welcome collaboration with other individuals and organizations that are interested in engagement-based education. We want to push our own thinking, explore the questions outlined above, and identify the supports that educators need in order to help them make this shift: what policies, programs, and resources exist, and what needs to be developed?

Many of us on the team are parents, and all of us have been or are currently classroom teachers. We share the hope of every parent who sends their child to school that school will be a place of safety, belonging, intellectual challenge, and joyful discovery. As educators, we've felt the rich sense of accomplishment and excitement when we've created environments and experiences that truly engage and inspire. Like you, we look forward to the day when engagement-based education becomes the rule rather than the exception, and we acknowledge and deeply appreciate the efforts of the educators, students, and families in the schools we visited and others just like them who are leading the way.

Students from the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School explore and wonder at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC.



Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Emily Gasoi, Educator and Ward 1 Representative, DC State Board of Education
Steve Lazar, Social Studies & English Teacher, Harvest Collegiate High School
Liz Minks, Co-Director, Science and Math Institute
Ruth Whalen-Crockett, Director of the New Teachers Collaborative, Parker Charter Essential School
Laura Smith, Curriculum Coordinator for Language Arts and Fine Arts, Virtual High School
Laura Dallman, PhD Candidate in Educational Psychology, George Mason University
Julie Sweetland, Vice President for Strategy & Innovation, FrameWorks Institute
Karen O'Connor-Floman, Director of Admission, Grace Episcopal Day School

Heartfelt thanks to the staff and students at the schools we visited:

Blackstone Academy Charter School, Pawtucket, RI
Bronx Community Charter School, The Bronx, NY
City Neighbors Hamilton, Baltimore, MD
Codman Academy Charter School, Dorchester, MA
Fall Creek Middle School, Fall Creek, WI
Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, Devens, MA
Grace Episcopal Day School, Kensington, MD
Harvest Collegiate High School, New York, NY
Inspired Teaching Demonstration School, Washington, DC
School of Industrial Design, Engineering, and Art, Tacoma, WA
Science and Math Institute, Tacoma, WA
Vancouver iTech, Vancouver, WA

With gratitude to the following individuals who participated via interviews:

Caroline Beasley, Head of the Upper Division, The Park School, Brookline, MA
Kelly Bird, Lower School Principal, Friends' Central School, Wynnewood, PA
David Bromley, Executive Director and Founder, Big Picture Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA
Joe Findlay, Principal, Noble High School, North Berwick, ME
Amanda Finizio, 8th Grade Humanities Teacher and Grade Level Chair, Christa McAuliffe Charter School, Framingham, MA
Adrienne Floro, Principal, Chartiers Valley Middle School, Bridgeville, PA
Kevin Froner, Principal, Manhattan Hunter Science School, New York, NY
Denise Funston, Principal, Windsor Elementary School, Imperial, MO
Jim Jensen, Principal, East Lee Campus, Wyoming, MI
Matt Karlsen, Director of Professional Development, Opal School, Portland, OR
Tavia Mead, Principal, Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy, Brighton, MA
Jennifer Murray, Counselor, North Pointe Elementary School, Houston, TX
Santo Nicotera, Director of Professional Development, City Center for Collaborative Learning, Tucson, AZ
Morgan Occhuizzo, Assistant Principal, Centreville Elementary School, Centreville, VA
LaChe Williams, 5th Grade Teacher, Conder Arts Integrated Magnet School, Columbia, SC
Geoff Walker, Head of School, Fenway High School, Boston, MA

READING THE RESEARCH: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readers interested in the research foundation for our ideas are encouraged to explore the resources below. Preceding each reference is a short description of its relevance to the National Alliance for Engagement-Based Education project.

On the need to replace conventional, compliance-based education with engagement-based education:

The connection between engagement in learning and retention in school has been well documented. A number of studies from the 1980s onwards demonstrate the importance of student engagement and belonging. Two compelling articles are below:

Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re) conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24 (7), 1765-1776.

Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 117-142.

The articles below discuss the ways in which compliance-based education is more suited to the first industrial revolution. Engagement-based education on the other hand, is more relevant to the 21st century.

Wagner, T. (2008). Even our “best” schools are failing to prepare students for 21st-century careers and citizenship. *Educational Leadership*, 66(2), 20-25. Retrieved from sisd.net/cms/lib/tx01001452/centricity/domain/22/rigor_redefined.pdf

Leland, C. H., & Kasten, W. C. (2002). Literacy education for the 21st century: It's time to close the factory. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 18 (1), 5-15.

A number of studies show the importance of engagement in improving student performance. The study below details the ways in which engaging instruction improves student outcomes in STEM:

Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111 (23), 8410-8415.

Unfortunately, ongoing studies over the past two decades suggest that student engagement continues to be low. The studies below show evidence from the present day, and from the turn of the millennium:

Gallup. (2018). 2017 Gallup student poll: Engaged today, ready for tomorrow; US Overall Fall 2017 Scorecard. Retrieved from gallupstudentpoll.com

Marks, H. M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37 (1), 153-184.

On Relationships:

Klem and Connell's study provides insight into the general importance of student-teacher relationships:

Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health*, 74 (7), 262-273.

The two articles below demonstrate the particular importance of positive teacher-student relationships for marginalized groups:

Muller, C. (2001). The role of caring in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students. *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(2), 241-255.

Wood, J. L., Essien, I., & Blevins, D. (2017). Black males in kindergarten: The effect of social skills on close and conflictual relationships with teachers. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 8(2).

Hughes and Kwok discuss the general importance of student-teacher relationships and the particular importance for marginalized groups, as well as the importance of good parent/guardian-teacher relationships for students:

Hughes, J., & Kwok, O. M. (2007). Influence of student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships on lower achieving readers' engagement and achievement in the primary grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(1), 39. Retrieved from ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2140005/

Barth writes about how, when educators within a school building have good relationships with one another, overall professional practice improves:

Barth, R. S. (2006). Improving relationships within the schoolhouse. *Educational Leadership*, 63 (6), 8-13.

Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers' article below speaks to the importance of relationships (teacher-principal relationships specifically) and it also speaks to the benefits of distributed leadership models in schools. In particular, the authors advocate for strong working relationships between principals and teachers in order to develop strong teacher leaders.

Smylie, M. A., & Brownlee-Conyers, J. (1992). Teacher leaders and their principals: Exploring the development of new working relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, (28) 2, 150-184.

The book below champions distributed leadership models and the improved working relationships they foster. It also gives practical tips for implementing distributed leadership models:

DeFlaminis, J. A., Abdul-Jabbar, M., & Yoak, E. (2016). *Distributed Leadership in Schools: A Practical Guide for Learning and Improvement*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ferrara and Ferrar's article talks about the importance of engaging parents as partners in achieving better results for students:

Ferrara, M. M., & Ferrar, P. J. (2005). Parents as partners: Raising awareness as a teacher preparation program. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 79 (2), 77-82.

On Safety for Risk Taking

We love this quote from the book cited below: "If we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether. Yet taking the risk out of education is increasingly what teachers are being asked to do" (p.1). The book is about how the standardization movement is trying to make education predictable, formulaic, and risk free, but in doing so they are taking the life and wonder out of learning:

Biesta, G. J. (2015). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Research on the importance of cultivating a growth mindset in students is very relevant to the need to create safety for risk taking. When students understand that they have the capacity to grow and improve, they can feel safe to try, fail, and try again. The articles below describe growth mindset and its importance for learning:

Boaler, J. (2013, March). Ability and mathematics: The mindset revolution that is reshaping education. *Forum*, 55 (1), 143-152.

Dweck, C. (2008). Mindsets and Math/Science Achievement. Prepared for the Carnegie Corporation of New York-Institute for Advanced Study Commission on Mathematics and Science Education. Retrieved from growthmindsetmaths.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23776169/mindset_and_math_science_achievement_-_nov_2013.pdf

On Authentic Learning Experiences:

Zyngier's article discusses the urgency of the need to make learning relevant and meaningful to students, in particular those considered "at risk":

Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re) conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(7), 1765-1776.

The article below shows that authentic learning experiences actually result in more effective learning than do scripted or inauthentic learning experiences. This study is relevant to the core commitment of Equity as well, as positive effects were particularly pronounced for formerly "low achieving" African American students:

Mehalik, M. M., Doppelt, Y., & Schuun, C. D. (2008). Middle-school science through design-based learning versus scripted inquiry: Better overall science concept learning and equity gap reduction. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 97 (1), 71-85.

The article below discusses how science teaching/learning needs to be relevant to students' lives, particularly culturally diverse students. (This article is also relevant to the Commitment to Equity). When science projects are authentic and meaningful to students, they learn better.

Lee, O., & Buxton, C. (2011). Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Learning Science. *Theory into Practice*, 50 (4), 277-284. Retrieved from jstor.org/stable/41331055

On Holistic and Meaningful Outcomes:

The article below discusses the ways in which standardized test scores are not holistic and meaningful (and how they are also culturally biased). (As such, this article also has relevance for the Commitment to Equity):

Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (Eds.). (2011). *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

This report talks about deeper learning generally, but in doing so highlights the importance of allowing multiple ways for students to show their mastery. In particular, it cites studies showing that collaborative projects have particularly beneficial effects on low-income and urban students' learning:

Noguera, P., Darling-Hammond, L., & Friedlaender, D. (2015). Equal Opportunity for Deeper Learning. Deeper Learning Research Series. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

This article talks about how no-excuses, compliance-based charters claim to have excellent outcomes (i.e., test scores). However, the authors' interviews of Teach For America teachers at these schools suggest that these students are not being prepared for such things as civic engagement or democratic participation:

Sondel, B. (2015). Raising citizens or raising test scores? Teach for America, "no excuses" charters, and the development of the neoliberal citizen. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 43(3), 289-313.

On Equity:

Note: the articles below speak to inequity of access to engagement-based education for certain populations of students. Articles showing the benefits of engagement-based education for marginalized groups are included in the sections above.

The study below provides evidence for the idea that prekindergarten students of color and from low-income families are less likely to experience engagement-based education. In the study below, education "quality" refers to time for unstructured play, care for students' emotional, cognitive, and other needs, use of open-ended questions to stimulate higher order thinking, as well as class size and classroom

resourcing. These attributes are less prevalent in preschools serving low income and racial minority students, due to a variety of factors including the perceived need to help students “catch up” academically, the perception that, culturally, low-income parents want more rote drilling for the students, and lack of classroom resources:

Valentino, R. (2018). Will public pre-K really close achievement gaps? Gaps in prekindergarten quality between students and across states. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 79-116.

The article below finds less engaging practices in low-income schools for science specifically:

Windschitl, M., & Calabrese Barton, A. (2016). Rigor and equity by design: Locating a set of core teaching practices for the science education community. *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 1099-1158.

Additionally, as the article below details, no-excuses and similar compliance-based schools are marketed specifically to low-income and racial minority families, because there is still a prevailing belief that these practices are somehow necessary to “get through to” high needs students:

Zirkel, S., Bailey, F., Bathey, S., Hawley, R., Lewis, U., Long, D., Pollack, T., Roberts, Z., Stroud, R.S., & Winful, A. (2011). 'Isn't that what “those kids” need?' Urban schools and the master narrative of the 'tough, urban principal.' *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14(2), 137-158.

Readers might be interested in reading and reflecting on justifications from supporters of compliance-based schools. The book below is one example:

Carter, S.C. (2000). *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.

APPENDIX: MORE ABOUT OUR METHODS

This report is exploratory in nature and is aimed at identifying the hallmarks of engagement-based education across a variety of contexts. We see this as a work in progress and expect that we will learn more as we move forward. Further, findings presented in this report are based on data we collected from a relatively small sample of schools. While we do not assert that these schools were perfect demonstrations of engagement-based education in action, each school demonstrated components that ultimately informed the Commitments described in this report. Additionally, because of the qualitative nature of this study, findings cannot be generalized to all schools.

Recruiting Schools

We solicited participation through word of mouth; press releases; school profiles by Edutopia, The 74 Million, and other education media outlets; and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Individuals who had an interest in nominating a school were asked to contact NAEBE members through email. Schools that expressed interest in participating or were nominated to participate were then invited to participate in a screening survey. Survey responses were evaluated to determine general alignment with engagement-based philosophy and practices. Those schools that demonstrated alignment were scheduled for phone interviews, and a total of 28 schools were interviewed. Schools were ultimately selected for visits based on location, school and staff availability, and feasibility of travel. We were committed to visiting schools in diverse regions but also aimed to consolidate trips when possible to limit costs.

School Visits

The project team visited 12 schools across six states plus the District of Columbia. Schools varied in size ranging from 102 to 472 students enrolled. Seven out of 12 schools were located in mid- to large-sized cities; four were located in large suburbs; and one was located in a rural area. Five schools were majority-minority and four schools had student populations in which over 70% of students qualified for free and reduced-priced meals (FARMS).

Selected School Demographics

School	Enrollment	Grades Served	% Special Education	% FARMS	% Black	% Latinx	% Asian
Blackstone Academy Charter School, Pawtucket, RI	296	9-12	20%	81%	27%	62%	2%
Bronx Community Charter School, The Bronx, NY	464	K-8	21%	73%	28%	65%	3%
City Neighbors Hamilton Charter School, Baltimore, MD	233	K-8	27%	49%*	52%	4%	1%
Codman Academy Charter School, Dorchester, MA	345	K-12	20%	82%	81%	18%	0%
Fall Creek Middle School, Fall Creek, WI	178	6-8	Not Available	17%	1%	0%	1%
Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, Devens, MA	395	7-12	14%	7%	1%	3%	2%
Grace Episcopal Day School, Kensington, MD	105	PK-5	N/A	4%	37%	10%	5%
Harvest Collegiate High School, New York, NY	468	9-12	27%	73%	24%	49%	7%
Inspired Teaching Demonstration School, Washington, DC	472	PK-8	16%	24%	37%	6%	3%
School of Industrial Design, Engineering, and Art, Tacoma, WA	123	9-10	Not Available	38%	15%	12%	10%
Science and Math Institute, Tacoma, WA	466	9-12	Not Available	38%	12%	11%	8%
Vancouver iTech Preparatory School, Vancouver, WA	343	6-12	Not Available	29%	2%	14%	3%

* Maryland no longer uses FARMS rates so this is from 2016, the last year this data was collected.

Analyzing Data

The project team took a deductive approach in analyzing data collected during site visits. Observations were classified into one of four categories: Adult Attitudes and Behaviors, Student Attitudes and Behaviors, Characteristics of Instruction, and School Culture. Each of these domains had 11 to 17 associated subdomains. A total of 854 observations were made across the 12 site visits.

Interview Protocol for School Staff

Philosophy and Overall Distinctive Characteristics

1. Is this school part of a larger network?
2. If yes, how long has this school been a part of the network?
3. What do you see as the purpose of education?
4. What is the thing that sets your school apart? What is your "special sauce"?
5. What are your guiding principles?
6. How do you communicate your principles and approach to the community/public?

7. What is your approach to building a school climate and culture? Are there specific rituals (daily, weekly, yearly) that are very important to your school community?
8. What is your approach to building classroom climate and culture?
9. How do you approach and think about relationship-building in the school - between adults and students, and between students and students?
10. If you could achieve two big goals this year, what would they be?
11. If you could make significant progress on two challenges this year, which would you choose?
12. Are there any other schools you think we should be aware of?

Engagement and Pedagogy

1. How would you describe your school's pedagogy?
2. Has your school always used the methods/pedagogy it is using now?
3. If yes, what elements of the school's history/story can help clarify why it has been and remained committed to these principles?
4. If no, can you tell us about how and when the change occurred (as much as is known/remembered).
5. What were the highlights or challenges of the transition?
6. What is your school's approach to student engagement?
7. What is your school's approach to discipline? How do you differentiate between well-behaved and truly engaged?
8. How are student voice and agency elevated at your school? What does this look like at each level?
9. How are authentic relationships built and nurtured at your school?
10. Are there structures in the operational work of the school that support engagement-based pedagogy? (e.g. working with a cafeteria vendor that is responsive to student feedback.)
11. Thinking about faculty, staff and community engagement: What is your school's approach to decision-making? What stakeholders (teachers/staff, students, parents, community members) are involved in various decisions and to what degree?
12. What is your approach to community engagement?
13. Does your school have a clearly articulated plan for how different decisions get made?

Curriculum, Assessment, and Accountability

1. Describe your curriculum. How do you determine curriculum? Who is involved?
2. What are your metrics for measuring student progress? What is most important to you? How do you define rigor?
3. How are faculty and staff held accountable for student outcomes?
4. How do you use data in school?
5. How do you communicate progress to students/families/the community?
6. How are students graded and assessed, and what is the school's philosophy toward revision and mastery? Can a student who earns a "bad" grade try again?
7. Thinking about your district/authorizer, how do you manage or navigate the requirements of the system you are in?

8. How do federal accountability standards affect you?
9. What is your school improvement or feedback process?

Interview Protocol for Students

For high school students:

1. What is the thing that sets your school apart? (Your secret sauce)
2. Are there specific rituals (daily, weekly, yearly) that are very important to your school community?
3. How does your school engage students in learning and in the life of the school?
4. What is your school's approach to discipline?
5. Do you feel that student voice is respected and elevated at your school? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. How are authentic relationships built and nurtured at your school?
7. How do you feel about your school's curriculum?

For elementary and middle school students:

1. What makes your school special?
2. When do you feel excited at school?
3. Does the day go fast or slow? Why do you say that?
4. Do the adults at your school care about students? How do you know?
5. Do you feel like adults listen to what you have to say? Why do you say that?
6. What are your favorite ways to learn?
7. Do you feel like you have choices about what you experience at school?
8. What happens when kids get in trouble? What are the kinds of things you can get in trouble for?
9. Do you feel your school's rules are fair? Why or why not?
10. How do your teachers know if you're learning? (If tests: how do you feel about these tests?)

