EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN ACTION

BRIGHT SPOTS

JULY 2023

Building Equitable Learning Environments Network

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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About the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network

The Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network is a group of education researchers, foundations, intermediaries and their district networks working with educators, policymakers, grantmakers, schools, and school support organizations to innovate and implement learning environments grounded in research and in the science of learning and development. BELE works to create an education system focused on students, one that prioritizes their learning experience and ensures that they feel valued in the classroom. To learn more, visit belenetwork.org.

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Introduction

For many, the K12 public education system is failing to achieve its most fundamental purpose: to provide all young people with rich, supportive, challenging educational experiences that prepare them to learn and to thrive. Indeed, one need not look beyond newspaper headlines,[1] social media timelines,[2] or ongoing cultural clashes[3] to see the myriad of ways in which the nation's public schools are struggling to shed the antiquated, destructive ideas about race, gender, and disability upon which they were built, to prepare students for college and their careers, to meet the needs of the diverse communities they serve, and to fortify our country's democratic institutions.

In the first full school year after the pandemic began, national enrollment in K12 public schools fell by 1.1 million students, or over 2 percent.[4] Recent scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) represented the steepest declines ever recorded in math, with Black students losing 13 points compared to five points among white students, thus further widening racial disparities.[5] Even before the pandemic, the United States had the largest academic performance gap between rich and poor students in the industrialized world, according to international PISA scores.[6] In 2022 alone, there were over 50 school shootings.[7] According to one study, nearly half of all students report feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious in the fall of 2020.[8] Forty-five percent of LGBTQ+ youth have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year; nearly 1 in 5 transgender and nonbinary youth attempted suicide.[9] Forty-four percent of public schools reported teaching vacancies in 2021, persisting particularly in rural areas and in areas serving low-income families.[10] Fifty-five percent of educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned, according to a 2022 National Education Association survey.[11]

And yet, despite what often feels like an overwhelmingly strained K12 public education system, examples of renewed energy to create safe, welcoming environments for educators and young people—in particular for those children who are Black, Latino, Indigenous, and from low-income backgrounds—are evident.

As both an example of and a leader in the effort, the BELE Network has for nearly a decade brought together education researchers, foundations, intermediaries, and other leaders to foster learning environments grounded in the science of learning and development and student experience. The BELE Network works to create equitable learning environments by promoting innovative approaches, research-based strategies, and policy advocacy to dismantle barriers that hinder educational opportunities for students of color, low-income students,

and other marginalized groups. The Network emphasizes culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, and personalized educational approaches in supporting educators, schools, and systems to advance educational equity.[12]

> **Practices that are aligned with science of learning and development** are grounded in how young people learn and develop. These practices draw on research across neuroscience, psychology, and similar such fields and apply that information to designing and implementing educational experiences for students.[13]

> **Student experience** is the way that students experience the world around them. A positive experience, shaped by relationships, interactions, practices, policies, and norms, will have students feeling academically stimulated and like valued members of and contributors to their school communities.[14]

> **Resource equity** involves allocating people, time, money, and other resources across classrooms, schools, and systems in ways that effectively serve those traditionally furthest from opportunity and that create conditions that enable young people to succeed.[15]

The BELE Network's work, combined with that of countless other individuals and organizations across the country, has had far-reaching effects in the pursuit of educational equity in this country.

What follows here are bright spots in K12 public education where teaching and learning are grounded in the science of learning and development, students' experience, and the equitable allocation of resources—with promising effect. These bright spot organizations and partnerships were identified over the course of a nine month study of the field of equitable learning environments conducted by Columbia University's Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL). The study revealed that while the field of equitable learning environments is not yet well-developed and operating at the population-level, a myriad of individuals, organizations, and systems are working in particular on the three elements featured here—the science of learning and development, students' experience, and equitable resource allocation—in ways that give reason for hope and optimism.

Of course, the bright spots featured here are far from the only examples of the science of learning and development, student experience, and resource equity in action. The science of learning and development, for instance, underpins the groundswell of interest in and support for science-based reading instruction that has taken the country by storm.[16] Mississippi, Texas, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and many other states and districts—including the nation's largest district, New York City Public Schools—are making huge shifts to science-backed literacy programs.[17] More broadly, the spread of high-quality instructional materials that use science-backed strategies for how children learn and that attend to students' full potential and individualized needs is advancing at a rapid clip.[18] Indeed, attentiveness to academic rigor and students' identity, sense of belonging, and mental health are increasing in countless schools and systems across the country. All this is evidence of the science of learning and development in action.[19]

Where this focus on the science of learning and development is happening, the results are promising.[20] For example, BARR, which is highlighted below and a BELE Network member, promotes relationship-building and addresses barriers to academic success to create positive experiences for students in school. Students participating in BARR programs in large urban schools passed their classes 40 percent more frequently than in previous years after just one year with this model.[21] Another example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a BELE Network Learning Partner, is a research and school support organization that builds knowledge around social emotional learning and drives its quality implementation by promoting supportive legislation and convening partner schools and districts.[22] CASEL's research reveals student academic performance increases by 11 percentile points when students received social-emotional interventions that addressed CASEL's five core competencies, as compared to students who did not.[23]

The science of learning and development also has ushered in measurement approaches centered on students and their experiences in school; with BELE Network members at the forefront. For example, researchers have developed validated tools for understanding student experience. Schools and systems across the country have embraced these tools as a way of measuring their success and getting better over time.[24] The Elevate professional learning program for teachers, created by the Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS)—a BELE Network Learning Partner—uses a customizable student survey to give teachers realtime, formative feedback about the quality and equity of key classroom learning conditions including classroom community, feedback for growth, meaningful work, student voice, and teacher caring. Elevate is used in more than 200 schools across 25 states as part of teacher professional development, equipping teachers with a framework, key mindsets, and rigorous data to shift their practices in ways that improve students' experiences and support better educational behaviors and outcomes.[25] Similarly, the Cultivate Survey, a student experience survey from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research—another BELE Network Learning Partner—measures reflections of middle and high schoolers across key learning conditions, asking them to rate experiences such as: "In this class, my ideas are taken seriously."[26]

Strides are also being made in the equitable allocation of resources, another cornerstone of the BELE Network's work. At the federal level, the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) fund provided school districts with more than $20 billion and included incentives for examining and addressing inequalities in school funding systems.[27] If districts continue to spend according to trends through the ARP ESSER spending deadline of September 2024, more than $27 billion will be spent on academic interventions and more than $39 billion will be spent to support educators and staff.[28] These

federal relief funds are being used to expand student success, including securing new instructional materials and supplementing mental health services.[29] States, districts, and schools alike are also uncovering and advancing opportunities to leverage resources to customize the educational experiences for all children, particularly those traditionally underserved, to meet their individualized needs.[30] For example, California's governor proposed a budget that included a $300 million annually as a new "equity multiplier" to the state's poorest schools,[31] and New York's governor proposed $2.7 billion to fund "Foundation Aid," a funding formula that allocates on factors that include socioeconomic need.[32] These efforts, when deployed effectively, hold great promise to advance stronger and more equitable systems that can effectively meet the needs of their students.[33]

Put simply, a promising array of frameworks, tools, and on-the-ground efforts from the BELE Network and others are building toward an effective, resilient, equitable institution of K12 public education.[34] While there is still much work to be done to create coordinated, coherent efforts that spark and spread the equity-forward changes in K12 public education that are deeply needed, new narratives and transformed realities are possible, and on the horizon. And despite deep societal barriers to equity that frequently manifest in classrooms, communities, and the news cycle, individuals, organizations, and systems across the country are grounding their work in the science of learning and development, attending to student experience, and equitably allocating resources, to promising effect.

Background

With the support of the Raikes Foundation and the BELE Network Learning Partners, in Fall 2022, CPRL conducted an analysis of the state of the field of equitable learning environments using Bridgespan Group's Framework, "Field Building for Population-Level Change."[35]

Bridgespan Group defines a field "as a set of individuals and organizations working to address a common social issue or problem, often developing and using a common knowledge base." A field's progression has three phases: (1) emerging—where impact is "scattered and sporadic," with only components of the problem being addressed, (2) forming—where there is more consistent impact "as infrastructure, collaboration, and coordination" advance the work, and (3) evolving and sustaining—where "impact accelerates exponentially, even as needs and conditions change."[36]

According to Bridgespan Group, to understand the level of a field's development, the strength of the field's five observable characteristics must be examined.[37] Once the phase of the field has been identified, stakeholders can strategize around the field's needs to spur growth.[38] The Bridgespan Group's five observable field characteristics are:

- **Field actors:** Those that "together help the field develop the shared identity and vision" that is necessary for the field to achieve its shared goals. In advanced fields, the actors are diverse and include individuals who are close to the work itself.

- **Field-level agenda:** The approaches that actors in the field take up to advance change, addressing barriers and evolving over time. As a field becomes more developed, the efforts become "more focused and coordinated."

- **Knowledge base:** The academic and practical research that supports those involved in understanding "the magnitude of the issues" and the barriers. As a field develops, its knowledge base "grows and incorporates an increasingly diverse set of viewpoints, [providing] the data and information needed to design, implement, and adapt effective approaches."

- **Infrastructure:** The supports that coordinate efforts and provide the "connective tissue" needed to strengthen the field. As fields develop, infrastructure tends to become more formalized—for example, taking the form of structured convenings as opposed to ad hoc gatherings.

- **Resources:** The financial and nonfinancial supports that build and sustain the effort.[39] In an advanced field, the resources are not only sufficient, but also sustainable and reach a heterogeneous group of actors across the field.[40]

CPRL's research explored the extent to which the work of building equitable learning environments had developed into a field and where its strengths and opportunities for growth existed.

For purposes of the study, equitable learning environments comprised the following attributes:[41]

- **Students and their wellbeing are the primary focus, and students are treated as partners in their education.**

- **Academic content and curriculum is empowering, rigorous, accessible, affirming, and fosters student agency, and content is reflective of an integrated approach to student wellbeing, including academic and social-emotional wellbeing.**

- **Students learn in a diverse, supportive, safe, and empowering school climate that leverages restorative discipline practices and integrated support systems.**

- **Adults in schools, including educators and school leaders, are well-supported and diverse.**

- **A close, trusting partnership exists between educators, school leaders, and families and community partners.**

- **School, district, and state policies prioritize equitable access and opportunity for students.**

- **School supports, including facilities and funding, are experienced equitably.**

To conduct the initial field study, the research team conducted qualitative interviews with BELE Learning Partners, as well as leaders from philanthropies, school systems, and professional, advocacy, school support, and other organizations working toward educational equity from across the country. It further analyzed media coverage coming out of four education outlets (Chalkbeat, EdWeek, the Hechinger Report, and the74), as well as public information about philanthropic giving, to understand where there was attention (or not) on equitable learning environments. Last, the research team conducted a scan of American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Local Education Agency (LEA) use of funds plans for the same reason.

Based on CPRL's analysis of the field of equitable learning environments, the field is still emerging.

Within the field of equitable learning environments, **field actors** consist a diverse set of actors in K12 education, including philanthropies, researchers, school support organizations, and school systems. Philanthropies, in particular, play an important role in funding research, supporting infrastructure, helping shape the field-level agenda, and securing financial and nonfinancial support for other field actors. A number of other important actors, including students, communities, families and caregivers, educators and school leaders, and others, are also within the fold of the emerging field, but have less direct influence. Importantly, there are few actors perceived by the field as its visible leaders, and even those called out by key actors as the field's most prominent leaders often do not see themselves as such. For the field to grow, additional attention must be paid to students, communities, families and caregivers, and educators and school leaders as influential key actors—both as representative organizations and as individuals leading the effort.

The research further revealed that the field of equitable learning environments is limited in its ability to develop a shared **field-level agenda**. The field does not yet have a shared agenda that would enable a coordinated, coherent effort, though several attributes of equitable learning environments (e.g., the science of learning and development) are gaining momentum. A difficult, politically-charged environment impacts the field's ability to create, sustain, and advance an agenda.

The field's **knowledge base** for certain attributes is well-developed, though some see the knowledge base as living primarily within academic canons. Research revealed a need to spread knowledge generation and codification activities, and additionally, to support the translation of knowledge through practitioner-friendly means. As part of this effort, it

is necessary to increase engagement and partnerships with those close to the work—including school leaders, educators, parents and caregivers, communities, and students..

Existing **infrastructure** for the field is fairly limited. Some believe there is potential to further draw upon existing networks in related fields or sub-fields. For the field to advance, investments in connectivity across actors, organizations, and the attributes of equitable learning environments is essential. This likely includes utilizing existing convenings and networks, and leveraging the fact that certain attributes already have robust infrastructure. The field also must build and fortify connective tissue and break down silos across actors and bodies of work.

Resources too are, of course, a critical component of the field, and at the time of the research were slightly more developed than the other observable characteristics of the field. An analysis of philanthropic funding from 2019 to 2021 reflected an increase in investments in equitable learning environments from just under $60 million in 2019 to nearly $75 million in 2021. Federal funding to advance equitable learning environments, too, was significant given ARP ESSER, though sustainable, expeditious spending presents challenges. That said, key actors voiced deep concerns about fiscal cliffs and shifting philanthropic interests over the course of the research.

Based on the Fall 2022 research into the state of the field of equitable learning environments, it is apparent that the field of equitable learning environments is still in early stages. Indeed, while transformational work clearly is happening across the attributes of equitable learning environments, the interstitial tissue that connects efforts and advances population-level change did not yet exist and many of the efforts are not yet synced upon in the ways needed to build a movement. That said, bright spots within the emerging field are plentiful and encouraging; what follows are a few such examples.

Bright Spots

A. Targeted Universalism[42] to Shape Student Experience: Kingmakers of Oakland

Originally part of the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA) in Oakland Unified Schools District (OUSD), Kingmakers of Oakland partners with students, educators, school systems, and communities across the country to support and empower students and to create a culture in which young Black males (called "Kings" by Kingmakers)—are equipped with what they need to excel in school and beyond. Kingmakers began in the context of a large public school system that, despite serving primarily Black and Latino students, saw dramatic inequity in experiences and outcomes between its white students and its Black and Latino students.

> "We start with listening to students from PK through PhD. That is the first domain around student experience. What are those experiences? During school, after school, on the weekend?"
>
> - Chris Chatmon, Kingmakers Founder and CEO

Since its founding, Kingmakers' work has grounded in the science of learning and development, or as Chris Chatmon, Kingmakers' Founder and CEO, puts it, "It's about leveraging best practices in a way that . . . impacts those furthest from opportunity." Kingmakers recognizes that outcomes are direct results of what students experience in the everyday, and thus it works to create environments that affirm and support students, particularly Black male students. "The entry point into understanding the complexity of the toxic ecosystem is centering the voices and experiences of Black boys," Chatmon explains. "Our whole [theory of action] is centering Black boys as the driver of ideation, prototyping, [and] liberatory methods that are calibrated with self-efficacy."

Making Kingmakers

Kingmakers of Oakland began as the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA) in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in 2010. Led by Chris Chatmon— now the Executive Director of Kingmakers of Oakland— AAMA aimed to serve and support Black male students from preschool to 12th grade. **For its first 10 years, AAMA supported Black male students by developing curriculum, facilitating in-person experiential learning through student conferences and field trips, and advancing policy change within OUSD; it also expanded its mission to include the hiring and retention of Black male educators.** By 2016, AAMA was a nationally-recognized model for supporting Black male students and teachers. In 2021, AAMA spun out as an independent organization and became Kingmakers of Oakland.[43]

> "The average urban superintendent stays two to three years; the average urban principal stays two to three years. When the constant is change, the power of proximity and laying roots and having the capacity to be the consistent anchor within a school ecology, within the region, that was paramount."
>
> - Chris Chatmon, Kingmakers Founder and CEO

Kingmakers uses six systems change drivers to improve educational and life outcomes for Black male students: culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum; Black male teacher recruitment, training, and retention; youth voice and leadership; community and family engagement; narrative change; and policy change. Its theory of action utilizes the metaphor of a polluted pond. As Chatmon notes, there remains "egregious disproportionality of educational disparities… Black boys tend to be at the bottom of every positive academic indicator and at the top of every negative academic indicator… [I]n that context, in order to lead, you need to listen."

Recognizing that broader ecosystem changes are necessary to improve conditions for young Black males, Kingmakers focuses on "cleaning the pond" by creating and expanding environments that have the policies, support, and people necessary to empower Black students in classrooms, schools, districts, and communities. Beyond that, Kingmakers works to build new narratives. "We want educators and administrators to see Black boys differently; to see them as brilliant, excellent, and full of potential. If we see them that way, they see them that way. [] Change the mindset, the narrative of how you see Black boys—once you do that, all things are possible," says Matin Abdel-Qawi, Kingmakers' Chief Program Officer.

Within school districts, Kingmakers typically establishes Learning Collaborative teams. These multi-generational, cross functional teams composed of senior leadership, school personnel, parents and caregivers, and students support system transformation by developing collective will and generating community-level change. They help school systems cultivate environments where students can embrace learning by, among other things, equipping schools with empowering, culturally relevant curriculum across grade levels and subject areas created by the Kingmakers team in collaboration with curriculum developers. As Abdel-Qawi explains, "The curriculum that we use talks about cultural identity [and] . . . also builds the students up." Kingmakers also works with school systems on hiring and retaining Black male teachers, work that it has been doing since its early days when it was part of OUSD and where it doubled the number of Black male teachers in the district through recruitment and retention efforts.

Kingmakers' model is proven to work. A 2021 study showed that Kingmakers (AAMA's, at the time) programs reduced high school dropout by 43 percent. The study further revealed that students who did not participate directly in the program benefited from school-wide improvements stemming from the partnership.[44]

Additionally, Kingmakers offers programs that expand and improve student experiences outside of the traditional classroom setting. For example, Kingmakers' Media Academy helps students develop technical and storytelling skills as they generate and produce their own content. The Fellowship Initiative is a college access program that provides academic advising, tutoring, financial literacy, mentorship, and career development. Kingmakers also hosts summits and provides other mechanisms for support and relationship-building for Kings.

Kingmakers recently expanded its footprint to include partnerships with San Francisco Unified School District in California, Seattle Public Schools in Washington, and Gwinnett County Public School District in Georgia. In Gwinnett County, Kingmakers began by conducting

a series of interviews with Black boys enrolled in the district about their educational experiences. Grounding their work in these student experiences, Kingmakers then ran listening sessions with administrators across the district to understand and analyze existing barriers to student wellbeing and success. After a year of these conversations, Kingmakers generated programming around improving equity and opportunity for all students and particularly for Black male students.

"When you think about the experience of students in school, obviously different people experience school differently. School is different from parts of one town to another, from one city to another. School experience is different. But for Black boys in general, there are through-lines that are common wherever you go to school. We know how Black boys are perceived and how they aren't, in general. We know that Black boys get referred to special education and get expelled more than anyone else. The experience of Black boys is debilitating; it cries for support, for help, for changing the reality for Black boys."

- Matin Abdel-Qawi, Kingmakers Chief Program Officer

Expanding Kingmakers and the Work Ahead

In 2022, Kingmakers purchased a brick-and-mortar facility in Oakland. This facility will deepen the organization's roots in the community, accelerate the work happening in Kingmakers' partner schools by increasing resources and staff capacity, enable an expansion of the organization's curriculum development, create new revenue streams for the organization, such as through the Media Academy, and more.

B. Expanding Enrollment, Belonging, and Success in Rigorous Coursework: Equal Opportunity Schools

In 2018, Amos Hough High School, in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina, one of the largest districts in the state, grappled with a stark inequity: Only 29 percent of students of color and low-income students at Amos Hough High School were participating in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. School leaders at Amos Hough High School, including Assistant Principal Colleen Grosse, began a "process [that] started with looking at [that] data point and asking ourselves, 'Why do we see only white faces in AP classes?'" Grosse explains.

That year, Amos Hough High School began its partnership with Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS), a national organization that aims to expand access, belonging, and success in rigorous coursework for students of color and students from low-income households. EOS provides a suite of real time data and insight tools, effective practices, training, and coaching for school systems and schools to more equitably allocate opportunities and center student experiences by expanding the number of students who enroll and succeed to high-quality, rigorous learning experiences. "When you looked into the AP classrooms [at Amos Hough High School], you saw majority white faces. So you see that and you wonder why [and] what can we do better in terms of processes to make sure students are getting support to believe that they belong in AP classes," Grosse recalls. In 2023, after seven years of partnership, 52 percent of students of color and low-income students at Amos Hough High School participated in AP courses, and overall, Amos Hough High School saw improved academic performance across all students in those courses.

> "Disbursement of high value, rigorous opportunities can be thought of as a resource— and one that is uniquely emblematic of the system as a whole. Having students in a class nobody thinks is preparing them for college or a career versus one that does is a [much] more efficient allocation of resources."
>
> - Sasha Rabkin, EOS Executive Director

EOS works with high schools across the United States to identify and enroll low-income students and students of color in rigorous college and career-aligned courses. A rigorous curriculum, like those offered by AP, International Baccalaureate (IB), or Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE), gives students in the class the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in college, careers, and civic life. Giving all students access to these courses with challenging and engaging content and instruction can also help address equity gaps.[45] Perhaps most importantly, access to advanced courses is often a proxy for how schools define talent and readiness.

Although there was initial hesitation from some in the school community at Amos, educators and students came to appreciate the partnership: "A lot of other organizations may [create] a lot of extra work [to collect and analyze data], but EOS actually reduces the work the schools need to do by organizing data in an efficient and effective way," Grosse remarks.

Recognizing that whether or not a student enrolls in rigorous courses is determined by factors far beyond prior academic success, EOS also supports educators in understanding students' social-emotional needs, and prioritizes conditions of belonging and relationship-building as essential to students' academic success. For example, at the beginning of the school year, each student designates a "trusted adult" in the school building, with whom they meet regularly. After administering a survey to the student body with questions to understand each student's well being, aspirations, learning orientations, the barriers they are facing, and their interest in AP, IB, or AICE courses, EOS analyzes the results and develops an "insight card" for each student, a tool that helps guide students, families, and educators in ensuring all students are well-served.

A well-designed curriculum provides teachers with tools for instruction and opportunities for professional growth and development.[46] To that end, EOS also offers professional development for educators and support for students and families to ensure that students are well-prepared for the rigorous coursework. Noting the importance of supportive school and district leaders to the success of the partnership, Assistant Principal Grosse explains, "In addition to the training, we really want to convey that this is not going away, this is about following up and providing resources so that teachers can do it. For example, if a teacher wants to meet 1:1 with their student as a trusted adult, they need coverage for their classroom. So we need to make sure to provide that."

"It's really easy to see a student's response [to the survey] and immediately go on the defensive: 'I didn't know that was happening,' 'That wasn't our intention,' etc. Students don't just make things up. Systems, identity, gender, and more, and how all these things intertwine, there's going to be students who don't feel seen. It's important that when you get that feedback, you give the student the space to have ownership of their experience."

- Colleen Grosse, Assistant Principal, Amos Hough High School

Through its partnership with EOS, Amos Hough High School also has deepened its connection with families. Parent sessions provide opportunities for families to engage with their students' coursework: "The first time I held an event I opened the floor for questions, and the parents had questions like, 'I had a really bad time with school, how can I trust my kids will get what they need?'" Assistant Principal Grosse recalls. In response to feedback, school leaders have changed parent sessions over time, including supportive programming such as childcare and free dinners. Students who express interest in advocacy work and have participated in AP courses serve as student ambassadors and talk with students and parents about their experience: "Hearing it from me is one thing, but hearing it from someone your age who may look like you, who may have similar background as you, is a lot more effective," Grosse says.

Another school in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Harding University High School, also works with EOS to expand access, belonging, and success in rigorous coursework. Glenn Starnes, Principal of Harding High, notes, "If you look at any data point across all of our schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, it'd tell you there was a disproportionately number of Black and Brown students who were not enrolling in AP or advanced-level coursework as compared to their white counterparts." In its first year working with EOS, Harding High has increased the number of students that enrolled in AP or advanced-level courses for next year by more than 50 percent. Three times during the year, Harding High administrators and educators hosted face-to-face assemblies with students and parents to present course-scheduling models, explain what AP and dual-enrollment courses are, and to describe the benefits of enrolling, using both EOS tools and their own familiarity with the community they serve. Additionally, Harding High uses the Panorama Student Success Survey, a social-emotional survey that collects data on how students feel, how they are connected to the rest of the student body, what their engagement with coursework looks like, and their overall student experience. Using that data, Harding High analyzes student experiences and uses EOS tools and resources, such as trusted adult data, "to see if there are any students who have not yet identified a trusted adult and [ ] to analyze . . . if there are any students that have over-identified trusted adults, for us to then celebrate and identify how they were able to identify 20 adults that they trust," according to Principal Glenn Starnes.

EOS expands opportunity for historically underserved students and transforms the way that resources are allocated to ensure success in college and beyond. "There are a myriad of supports and transformations required to change schools. We focus on the 'aspiration gap'—the space between what our young people aspire to be and do and the opportunities provided to them to achieve these goals. We raise the floor of the entire system by providing new inputs—insights, data, tools—to ensure more equitable outputs," EOS President Sasha Rabkin says.

C. Leveraging Growth Mindset to Accelerate Progress: Mineola Public Schools

Gold star stickers may be standard fare in many elementary schools, but in Mineola Public Schools (Mineola), small stickers in the shape of neurons are more likely to be found on students' binders and folders. "We take the science of brain development very seriously," says Jenn Maichin, an instructional leader at Mineola. Neuron stickers are emblematic of Mineola's focus on the science of learning and development. Mineola's educators, staff, and students rally around the research that has found that students' brains are muscles that can grow and strengthen with hard work and individualized, supportive learning environments that attend to students' academic needs and their social and emotional wellbeing.

> "I think it's really all in the language, and that's why we are really intentional about creating [a] learner language that everyone speaks . . . rooted in neuroscience and growth mindset language. [W]hen you're constantly using that [language], it starts to resonate."
>
> - Jenn Maichin, Instructional Leader, Mineola Public Schools

A Creative Approach to Students' Experiences

In 2019, Mineola made the decision to restructure its alternate school program, and in 2022, it launched Synergy. This new program transformed how students spend time in the school building. Each student begins and ends their day with a meeting with their assigned mentor, a teacher or staff member who checks in with the student, tracks their personalized goals, and supports their overall wellbeing. Rather than operate under an assigned schedule, students participate in seminars throughout the day, offered both synchronously and asynchronously. Every student has What I Need Now (WINN) time, where students decide the areas on which they want or need to focus. "Learners are encouraged to focus on this passion project or this content that excites or energizes them," says teacher Jessica Anderson. The results of the transformation have been overwhelmingly positive. According to Anderson, "Students [who have] dealt with school avoidance, attendance, or struggled with anxiety . . .have made Synergy a second home for themselves, and are doing better in school than they have in years."

Located in suburban Nassau County, New York, and serving nearly 3,000 students, Mineola Public Schools equips students with mindsets and tools to understand the ways their own brains function and grow. In 2019, Mineola launched a district-wide focus on understanding how students' brains have the capacity to learn and grow. In elementary schools, this focus manifests in practices grounded in growth mindset: "When a student is working on something, it is about, 'Oh, I see you're working really hard.' We're always talking about how, 'We're not there yet, but we're going to get there,' or 'This is my strategy, this is how I'm going to get better,'" says Sara Ortiz, Mineola's Director of Curriculum.

Educators in Mineola begin each school year by grounding their work in the fundamentals of growth mindset, teaching students across the district to understand how the science of learning and development fuels their learning. "We want students to say: I believe that this work has meaning and purpose for me. I believe that I can do this, which is self efficacy. I believe that my work and competency and my ability grows with my effort. I believe that I belong in this academic community," says Instructional Leader Jenn Maichin. For district leadership, it is when students are equipped with this knowledge that rich experiences begin to take shape and are defined; providing the tools and vocabulary necessary is the first step.

"The student experience is the whole reason I'm here. It's important for them to have a place where they feel like they're safe, they're comfortable, and also where they can grow."

- Kuri DiFede, Computer Science Teacher at Mineola High School

Leaders in Mineola build on this district-wide commitment to the science of learning and development by digging into student experience and resource equity. They use surveys, training, and tools provided by the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research (Cultivate), PERTS (Elevate), and SELWeb—a social-emotional competencies survey that enables elementary aged students to reflect on their development in concepts like as self awareness and situational awareness—to better understand student experience. Kuri DiFede, a computer science teacher who uses PERTS surveys, says that the data has been both helpful, and at times, surprising, "One of the things I [learned was that students wanted to better understand how my class] related to the real world. I took that data and I went and asked: 'How can I do that?' [I added] in real-world projects [to my instruction]." Mineola instructional leader Jenn Maichin says that the student experience surveys "get you reflecting on your personal practices" in ways that are meaningful and actionable. Mineola has also taken steps to expand access to rigorous coursework in subjects that position students to enter the workforce. DiFede notes, "That's a part of equity here—everyone gets an opportunity to take AP computer science… a student said yesterday that [she] never would have picked it, [she] never would have been here, and now she wants to major in computer science." DiFede says that all students, not just those who have a track record of academic success, feel and believe in their own potential: "There's a vision that it's not tracks and only certain kids can do it, but that everyone can."

"Student experience is at the core of our work. It sounds so simple, but it works so well."

- Sara Ortiz, Director of Curriculum, Mineola Public Schools

D. Scaling Relationship-Focused Change: BARR

BARR (Building Assets, Reducing Risks) partners with school systems across the country to realign existing resources in ways that are grounded in the science of learning and development by focusing on building relationships and using data to understand and strengthen students' experiences in school. BARR does this through, among other things, facilitating innovative classroom schedules and structures, providing a curriculum focused on relationship-building, coaching educators, counselors, and administrators on implementing BARR's model, and data collection and analysis using its North Star tool. On average, students enrolled in BARR schools are 35 percent more likely to pass classes after one year of their school participating in BARR.[47] A study published in 2022 found that the BARR model, implemented in a school over three years, can lead to better academic performance, fewer course failures, more courses passed, and better intra-school relationships.[48]

> "We are going in with the same students, the same teachers, and we are giving them a different system to work in."
>
> - Megan Reder-Schopp, Director of Research, BARR

The BARR model is predicated on supporting students to build healthy, meaningful relationships that enable them to learn and thrive. BARR facilitates connections within schools across three types of relationships: student-to-student, staff-to-student, and staff-to-staff. These relationships provide a conduit for change. BARR implements a data collection, analysis, and reflection structure for educators that draws on quantitative and qualitative information focused on students' experiences in school. Using BARR's structures, educators meet regularly to discuss the experiences—academic, social, and emotional—of their students and to strengthen them over time. By harnessing students' experiences as a lever for change, academic outcomes and other aspects of students' experience improve: students report greater contentment with their learning, attendance rates rise, and suspension rates fall.[49] As Hannah Furnald, a senior director at BARR, says, "You need to know who is failing and why, and you need to know their story." BARR's holistic

approach allows for educators to develop and engage with a broader understanding of each student and positions educators to better meet students' personalized needs.

BARR's model includes "U-Time" (for kindergarten through eighth graders) and "I-Time" (for secondary school students), a curriculum developed by BARR grounded in the science of learning and development and focused on strengthening relationships across students and staff within school buildings. Classroom schedules are structured to enable students and educators to meet once a week in cohorts, to discuss their school community, and to give educators an opportunity to discuss the academic and social-emotional progress of individual students. Teacher teams use weekly "small block" and "big block" meetings to review student-level data collected through North Star, a data tool developed by BARR, and identify students who are "at-risk." North Star uses attendance, test scores, grades, qualitative data from U-Time and I-Time, and other information to guide conversations.

During these weekly meetings, educators use a structured process developed by BARR that engages the teachers and other school staff in collaborative problem-solving, aimed at identifying student strengths, establishing connections to school, and developing a student-specific suite of interventions to meet each student's holistic needs. An additional team, the "community connect" team, is made up of broader school community members, including social workers, counselors, administrators, and more, and meets weekly to check on student progress, develop action plans, and connect with the students who need the most support. Additionally, in partnership with school systems, BARR provides in-person professional learning, as well as remote support, for teachers, counselors, and administrators implementing BARR's model and on topics that include substance abuse, addressing trauma, and promoting equity, among others.

> "One of the things . . . they really wanted to have [was] that common language across the building and to take . . . things they've done before and achieve some structure [ ] so that there's more accountability, in a way where we want to have a system where we can keep track of what we're doing, where we can support each other and make sure we're following through."
>
> - Rachel Steeves, BARR Coach

As an example of BARR's work in action, BARR partnered with North Sargent 3 School District in North Dakota to support North Sargent during the second year of a new superintendent's leadership. In the throes of a return to in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, North Sargent was dealing with a superintendent new to the community on top of the enormous disruption caused by the pandemic. Rachel Steeves, BARR's coach for North Sargent, explains that administrators and educators "were looking for a way to use their resources more effectively and efficiently to support the students in different ways and to address some of the needs they were seeing coming out of the pandemic."

> "[North Sargent] has really leaned into the collaboration and being super intentional about having every kid talked about in their meetings at some point so that no student was falling through the cracks, paraprofessionals and support staff appreciate being able to share their insight about students and share their voice and to collaborate with the teaching staff more intentionally."
>
> - Rachel Steeves, BARR Coach

With BARR's partnership, North Sargent committed to creating a relationship-based system of support for each student. Educators in North Sargent used BARR's structures and tools "to share and talk about students in strength-based ways" and "it brought a common understanding," Hannah Furnald, a senior director at BARR recalls. North Sargent's Superintendent, Ryan Moser, explains that educators have indicated they are a "stronger community, and don't feel so alone" because of BARR's structures, including big and small block meetings.

BARR helped North Sargent teachers talk about students across grade levels. Especially given the small, tight-knit nature of the community, Furnald explains, "it became the 'a-ha' for the K12 [school] building" when educators and other adults in the building increased their communication across grades and developed more holistic understandings of and ways to address each students' needs. Angie Mosier, who holds multiple roles at North Sargent (art teacher, 7th grade English teacher, and BARR Coordinator) explains that the culture of the school has changed: "You would see some students in the hall, high school students particularly, and they would not engage or talk; students have changed in this first year because of time and because of BARR and even the halls feel [ ]warm[er]."

Year two of the partnership with North Sargent will focus on doubling down on this year's efforts. As Rachel Olinger Steeves, a BARR program manager, points out, "[T]he next thing is where do we put [these practices] into our schedule with more consistency so that we can really maximize the processes and have more of that continuous improvement mindset in our conversations. So when we've done something for a student and we've met a goal—what comes next?"

> "School climate and culture is something [educators and students at North Sargent] really pride themselves on and they've put a lot of effort into both enhancing the student experience and making sure the staff feels supported and capable of using the resources and collaborating intentionally to support the kids."
>
> - Rachel Steeves, BARR Coach

Conclusion

A great deal of work remains to align K12 education with promising practices grounded in the science of learning and development, attuned to student experience, and aiming for resource equity, but this collection of bright spots provides a detailed look at real-world examples of where individuals, organizations, and school systems are engaged in this work. These examples—indicative of both localized and national efforts underway all across the country— give shape to what it can look like to build equitable learning environments that give students and their families the educational experiences they need and deserve.

Appendix

Examples of federal opportunities to increase investment in the science of learning and development, student experience, and resource equity

- **Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program**
  This grant program is designed to improve the effectiveness of educators by providing professional development and training opportunities. The program prioritizes projects that support personalized learning, student-centered approaches, and the development of social and emotional learning skills.[50]

- **Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program**
  This grant program supports the development of community learning centers that provide after-school and summer programs for students. The program prioritizes projects that support academic enrichment, social and emotional learning, and opportunities for students to engage in STEM and other enrichment activities.[51]

- **Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program**
  This grant program supports the development and scaling of innovative education practices that improve student outcomes. The program prioritizes projects that support personalized learning, the use of technology to improve learning outcomes, and the development of social and emotional learning skills.[52]

- **School Climate Transformation Grant Program**
  This grant program supports the development and implementation of programs that promote positive school climates and prevent bullying. The program prioritizes projects that promote social and emotional learning, address the needs of at-risk students, and provide opportunities for parent and community engagement.[53]

- **The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund**
  This initiative provides financial support to local education agencies (LEAs) to help them respond to academic and social-emotional impacts of lost in-person instructional time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ARP ESSER funding can support a range of activities including purchasing technology and instructional materials, improving ventilation systems, providing mental health services to students, and hiring additional staff to address "learning loss."[54]

- **The American Rescue Plan's Homeless Children and Youth (ARP HCY) Fund**
  This initiative is a federal grant program that provides funding to help homeless children and youth access educational opportunities. ARP HCY program provides funding to states to support a range of activities, including identifying homeless children and youth, providing transportation to school, supporting enrollment and attendance, and providing academic and social-emotional supports.[55]

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