unboxed

A JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Issue 28
Spring 2025

Graduate School of EDUCATION

unboxed
ISSUE 28 SPRING 2025

Above: Students woodworking in Pat Holder's twelfth grade humanities class.

Welcome

In my forties, I have taken up two possibly ill-advised pursuits: skateboarding and indoor rock climbing.

Both have made my life better, and I recommend that you try them. But that's not why I'm writing about them. I'm writing because I want you to approach school improvement like rock climbing, not skateboarding.

Indoor, top-rope climbing is optimized to facilitate improvement. When I climb, I'm attached to a rope looped over a bar at the top of the wall (hence "top rope"). My climbing partner runs the other end through an automatic braking device. We check each other before a climb to make sure everything's secure, and as a result, I know that if I fall, I won't drop more than a few feet before the rope catches me. This means I can try a much harder climb than I've ever done before, and while I could certainly injure myself (climbing walls are covered in hard objects!) I'm generally as safe climbing a more advanced route as I am climbing one I can do more easily.

Skateboarding is totally different. Falling off a skateboard hurts a lot, and if I suddenly decide that the path I've chosen is too hard, there is no way to stop once I'm rolling down something. So while I would be willing to try every route at my climbing gym with a top rope, I approach an even slightly more difficult skateboard obstacle with trepidation. In other words, failure

on a skateboard has a decent chance of being catastrophic. But failure on a climbing wall typically just means hanging at the end of the rope while I catch my breath and ready myself to give it another try.

What does any of this have to do with improvement? Starting a school improvement project often feels like skateboarding: You won't know what it feels like until it's already happening, you might not be able to respond quickly enough if things don't go as planned, and you're doing it all above an unforgiving floor of concrete. If you feel this way about an improvement project, pause and see how you could make it more like top-rope climbing. For example, improvement expert Juliette Price recently suggested on the *Unboxed* podcast that administrators limit an initial intervention to the number of students they could take out for lunch if it all goes wrong. That is to say, make it so that if you fall, you know the rope will catch you.

This is on my mind because this issue is full of stories of improvement and tools for improvers. You can read about how Parkway Academy in La Mesa, California created time for students to get targeted support without disrupting the school day, how in New York City, Outward Bound schools tackled disengagement in advisory, and the Teaching Matters Network for School Improvement are using identity questions to improve literacy.

You can also check out a tool for turning a school system's existing processes into an improvement project, developed by Baltimore City Public Schools. University of Chicago's Middle Grades Network shares a pair of protocols for looking at data first as a staff, and then with students. And RISE Network has two things for you: a strategy for measuring student absences and a version of the seven love languages designed specifically for improvement in education.

And there's still more! Loni Berqvist explains how she determines whether or not to say yes to student ideas for changing the direction of a project, Aneesa Jamal tackles the challenge of getting students excited about reading, Peter Jana breaks down the false dichotomy between "hard" and "soft" skills, and Sara Sadek challenges us to approach educational experiences in ways that center and respect children and childhood.

Now go out and scale that wall. And try skateboarding too—just don't use it as a model for your improvement work.

Alec Patton
Editor-in-chief

Above: Words of affirmation in a professional learning event.

The Improver's Love Languages

Linzi Golding and Erin Asselin
RISE

Perhaps you've heard about the *New York Times* best seller *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* by Dr. Gary Chapman—the popular book that helps people improve their relationships by learning how their partner understands and welcomes love. You may have even used these ideas for your own relationships. But have you used them to build highly functional teams, improve intra-team dynamics, and strengthen collegial relationships?

The idea behind The 5 Love Languages is that people express and receive love in different ways. By learning to recognize the preferred ways in which people in your life understand love, you can better connect with people, and this can have profound impacts on all of your relationships, even at work and school.

According to Chapman, the love languages are:

Acts of service: Actions speak louder than words.
Receiving gifts: Receiving a heartfelt gift makes some people feel loved.
Quality Time: Giving the other person your undivided attention.
Words of Affirmation: Using language to support other people.
Physical Touch: Feeling connected through physical closeness.

In my personal life, I fell into a common love language trap. I love my partner, and logically, I knew that his love language was quality time, while mine was words of affirmation. Even though I understood this consciously, acting in my love language came naturally to me, but learning to speak his was a challenge. During dinner, I would check my phone for messages and emails while expressing how delicious the meal he spent hours cooking tasted—one of many ways that I delivered love through my language instead of his. My attention was divided, and although we were sitting at the same table together, I was doing a terrible job of giving him quality time.

At work and on a team, this happens often. We may think we are meeting everyone's needs, but more often we are missing the mark. Understanding and addressing the nature of these relationship dynamics in professional contexts are the soft skills that great leaders use to build more integrated and highly functional teams that differentiate their approach to tap into what makes their team tick.

Continuous improvement in education requires adults to work together. To truly collaborate, they need to learn how to communicate effectively and offer meaningful support. Using the model of the five love languages helped us uncover different ways educators can develop more highly functioning teams and deeply engage in continuous improvement work.

We often think of love languages as static—set in stone like our zodiac sign or our refusal to read the terms and conditions. But in reality, love languages are dynamic, evolving with time, experience, and—let's be honest—how much coffee we've had that day. It is essential to remember that we are all different—everybody is tuned to have different interpretations of the behaviors of those around them. So, a highly functioning team undertaking the important work of continuous improvement will learn to offer the differentiated and personalized support that their coworkers specifically need.

Let's break down how an Improvement Coach—or any other school or systems leader—can approach educators in a way that offers support tailored to their specific love languages, improving intra-team dynamics and strengthening collegial relationships.

Acts of Service

For these educators, nothing feels as great as a little help. Some school days are full of unending, seemingly impossible challenges. For those who value acts of service, colleagues might give that educator a little time back by taking care of a task for them or surprising them with an action that helps them get through their day. An Improvement Coach might use acts of service to build relationship capital with educators by helping them pull data for their

Above: Physical touch can send a clear message of love and affirmation.

teams, taking a mundane or time-consuming task off their plate, or offering to update a spreadsheet with formulas so that it can be easily updated. Other much-appreciated acts of service might include creating a meeting scope and sequence, helping set up for student-led conferences, or simply offering to cover their class for 10 minutes so they can take a quick restroom break or refill their coffee.

Words of Affirmation

Some educators find encouragement in celebration, face-to-face shoutouts, heartfelt cards, and other positive recognition. Improvement Coaches can make these educators feel seen and heard by praising their work—and don't be afraid to do so publicly. Let them know through a quick chat, email, or text that you appreciate when they've done something great, taken a risk, or are just hanging in there. Educators who value words of affirmation are the people who need your motivational speeches and pep talks, especially when the work is challenging. To shower these educators with words of affirmation, leave sticky notes for them at their desk or on their computer, or send a quick text to keep them moving in the right direction. The ways you verbally celebrate them help remind them that they are the champions of their work. As a coach, finding even the smallest ways to lift them up through affirmative language will do wonders for team culture.

Receiving Gifts

Some educators derive motivation and inspiration from tangible things. A school-branded t-shirt or hoodie, lunch box, or water bottle are all coveted gifts from an Improvement Coach. A catered lunch or breakfast can make people feel seen and appreciated. Other gifts work too; if you are at a conference, for example, consider bringing back a book for a team member. Notice each other's quirks and hobbies—maybe they enjoy coffee or chocolate and would truly appreciate receiving a surprise token of appreciation. Communicating "I saw this and thought of you" goes miles for some educators.

Quality Time

Improvement Coaches can show love to educators who value quality time by staying longer after a coaching meeting or picking up that late-night phone call. Spending time to ensure your teammate understands how to update a spreadsheet or troubleshoot a new process is extremely valuable to them. These educators are the team members who ask questions even after the meeting has ended—they ask because they especially appreciate time with you. Sharing your ideas, curiosity, and care by answering their questions shows these educators they are valued. Even if a project is not collaborative by definition, these educators appreciate meeting to work side-by-side. They

do their best work when given the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations and spend productive time together with their team.

Physical Touch

We know what you are thinking … but all love languages are important, and there are healthy ways to support others with physical touch, even at work or school. Some people love a good high five, hip bump, or even a hug. Just as you might welcome students into your classroom with a menu of different greetings, adults also enjoy that personal connection that comes from a custom fist bump or secret handshake. As an Improvement Coach, speaking this love language is also about making your team feel physically welcome and safe in the space you are in. It can look like providing an inviting space for meetings so all people are physically comfortable, which allows them to be more open, share their ideas, and be heard as equal voices. It can also be about having a warm welcome and an open door for support.

These are the types of practices that help colleagues say things like, "I love my job" and "I love my team."

While some of these actions may seem above and beyond the scope of a coach, they are immensely effective for developing educational leaders who build highly functional teams with a great deal of shared investment in their colleagues. When we identify one educator's love language as quality time, we plan to sit and review data, discuss, and action-plan together. When another educator values words of affirmation, we send a detailed visit summary highlighting direct "glows" with a few areas to strengthen after every visit. These two distinct actions support their respective love languages, creating a meaningful connection and enhancing collaboration and partnership.

Applying the love languages to continuous improvement for educators isn't about labeling people or not letting them change—it's about using a tool to tap into what motivates people to persist through challenges with excellence. As you embrace these various strategies with your team of educators, take stock and check in from time to time, as love languages can change. Typically, people understand love dynamically, and on a spectrum; they aren't all-or-nothing. People generally fall into more than one bucket and most people value all of them to some degree—there is a big difference between a colleague who doesn't need many words of affirmation and one who doesn't need any (pro tip: it is not a good idea to assume someone is the latter!). While some people prefer specific gestures to affirming words, what really matters is to create a supportive environment where each team member feels valued, and to embrace the beautiful variety on your team. As a coach, we encourage you to become fluent speakers of the Improver's Love Language so that you can help to support and motivate your team.

Above: Connecticut educators use the RISE data hub to examine absence data.

Tackling Chronic Absenteeism
The Case for Tracking Quarterly Absences

Linzi Golding, Erin Asselin, and Melanie Gonzalez
RISE

Since 2015 the Connecticut RISE Network has been facilitating school improvement networks, helping schools use data to learn and improve together. Last year, RISE partnered with 55 schools across six states to reach more than 35,000 students. Like many schools across the country, those in our network are increasingly concerned about chronic absenteeism, one of our main areas of focus for improvement.

Chronic absenteeism is a problem whether or not a student's absences are excused or unexcused—if a child isn't in school, they are missing out on all the benefits that come from being in school. A student is classified as chronically absent if they miss10 percent of the school year. This threshold is important because a student who misses this much school is at risk of a host of other academic (and life) issues. A 2024 literature review by Dr. Ben Daley of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education found the following:

> Frequent absences in kindergarten have been found to be predictive of lower likelihood of reading proficiency by the end of third grade (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014; Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011) and lower achievement on test scores in fifth grade (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012; Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011). Chronic absenteeism has been found to predict lower National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) scores (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014), and lower rates of college persistence (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014).

We have found that while chronic absenteeism is an important measure for many reasons, it has one glaring limitation: Once a student has missed a certain number of days, there is no way to "fix" the situation until the following school year. That's acceptable (in fact, necessary) for the purposes of data collection, but it's disheartening if you work in a school and want every single one of your students to be successful, no matter how many school days they've already missed.

To understand what we mean, one must understand how chronic absenteeism is measured. In Connecticut, where the school year is typically 180 days, approximately 18 absences can mark a student as chronically absent for the year. This means that if a student misses 18 days of school in September, but the school works intensively with the student and their family to not miss a single day of school for the rest of the year, then the following summer, when the chronic absenteeism figures are published, that student will still be classified as "chronically absent."

If your goal is to decrease chronic absenteeism rates at your school, one approach is to prioritize working with students who are at risk of becoming chronically absent rather than students who are already classified as such, because there is no opportunity for these students to improve using the chronic absenteeism measure. This is an important strategy, but we have found that relying exclusively on the chronic absenteeism measure can make it seem impossible for students to experience improvement once they hit the 18 day threshold. This does not sit well with teachers or administrators, who want to help every student succeed.

At RISE, we have developed the RISE Data Hub, which schools can use to track their improvement progress. The Data Hub tracks chronic absenteeism, but we have added an important measure: quarterly number of absences. For this measure, we split the school year into four quarters and track absences for each quarter, by student.

Tracking absences quarterly allows schools to spot trends and changes faster, whether they be something to celebrate or a student who needs more support. When we track the number of absences by quarter, just a few missed days in a row can trigger early intervention or celebration.

Schools have found that tracking absences quarterly enables teams to get ahead of students who are falling into a pattern that could lead to being chronically absent. It allows us to shift from reactive to proactive practices and interventions to ensure that students are celebrated for small improvements and continue to build strong habits. One RISE improvement coach, Kristen

Negrón, shares an example of how students with improved attendance can be celebrated:

> One of the schools I coach started an attendance challenge from now until the end of the school year. The teams review the quarterly number of absences data to identify students who have not had an increase in absences over the last week. These students earn coveted lunch time outside in the courtyard (a privilege usually reserved for upper class students). Those who miss no more than two days from now, in early April, until May 19th will earn a field trip, no matter their prior attendance.

How to Measure Quarterly Number of Absences

First, divide the school year into four parts; these are your "quarters." In Connecticut, the average school year is 180 days, so each quarter is 45 days long. Then, figure out how to count the number of absences during each quarter, for each student. Your school is already collecting this data (because teachers take roll every day) so this should be fairly straightforward.

Once you have your data, determine how best to share it. Our RISE Data Hub provides educators, counselors, and administrators with access to actionable, student-level data to facilitate immediate action. The RISE Data Hub has custom charts that use data pulled from student lists to create data visualizations. These are used to pinpoint wins and opportunities for improvement.

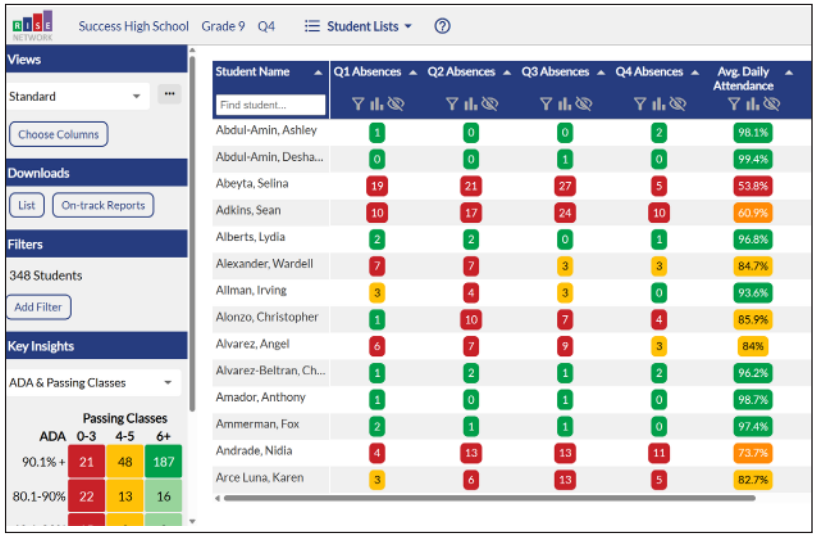
Depending on your intended purpose, you can choose from several approaches to analyzing attendance data. Each visual is designed to encourage specific educator actions. Below we have identified four ways to use attendance data to effectively celebrate and support students.

Student Lists

Student lists like that shown in Figure 1 show a student's quarterly number of absences and average daily attendance. Each student's number of absences is color-coded based on their risk level for chronic absenteeism. Green represents less than three absences, yellow equals three, and red stands for four or more and indicates students who are at risk of chronic absenteeism. This allows Data Hub users to easily identify students who are consistently in the yellow or red, and those who fluctuate throughout the year.

While the average daily attendance may fluctuate throughout the year, once a quarter ends, the number of absences freezes and can then be used as a baseline to measure improvements or declines in student absenteeism rates for the next quarter.

Figure 1: RISE Data Hub Student List with Simulated Student Demo Data



Quarter One Attendance by Band

Through the RISE Data Hub, educators can identify quarterly student absence data by attendance band. For example, they can create a simple bar chart of Q1 absences to see the count and percentage of students who were in the less than three absences, three absences, and four or more absences categories. For example, Figure 2, shows how 24 percent of Success High School students were absent 4+ times. Hub users can then click on the bar and generate a list identifying those 83 students, whom school staff can communicate with and/or deliver interventions.

The graph shows summary level data for students across Q1, categorized by number of absences. We can then click on a category, for instance, "4+ absences," to see student-specific information.

Subgroup Attendance Trends

To assess subgroup differences in the number of quarterly absences, we can create a stacked bar chart. For example, Figure 3 shows students disaggregated by race/ethnicity. Notice the variation in the percentage of student groups that were absent four or more days: students of two or more races, Black students, and Latine student groups have greater proportions of students who were absent four or more days compared to their Asian and White peers.

Figure 2: Q1 Attendance by Band with Simulated Student Demo Data

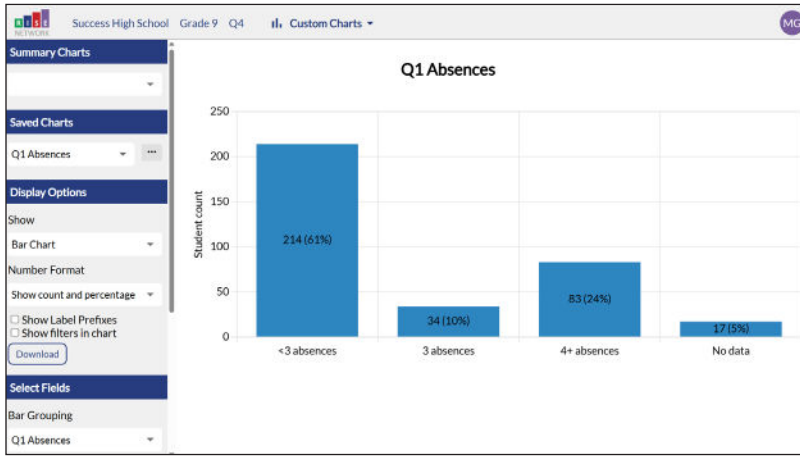
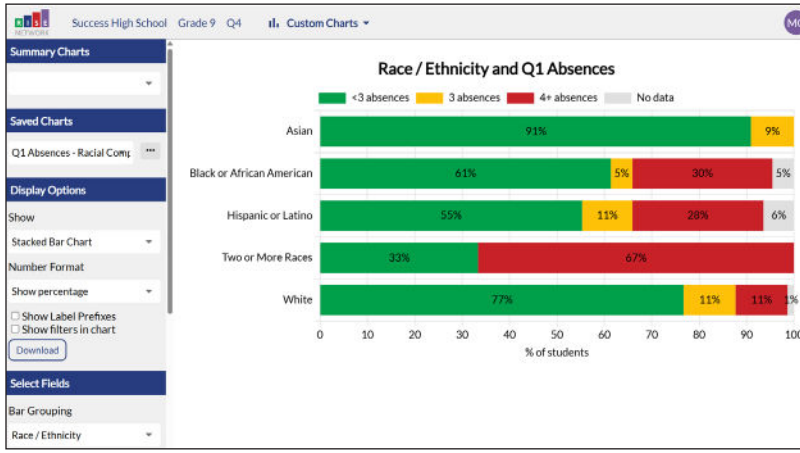


Figure 3: Race/Ethnicity and Q1 Absences with Simulated Student Demo Data



Climbers and Sliders

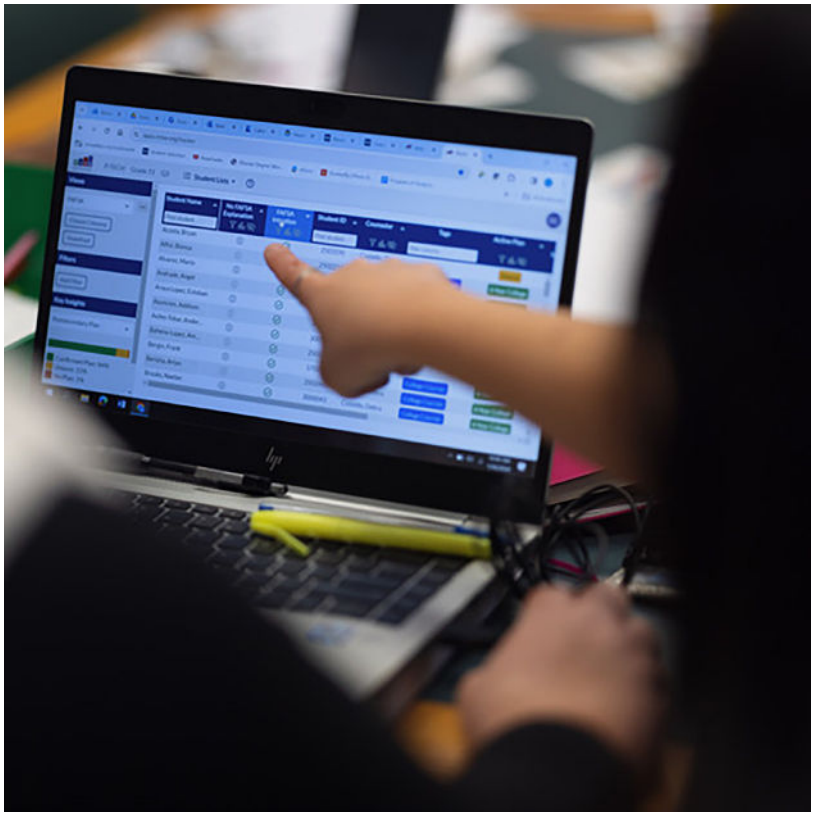
If you want to be very nuanced with your data exploration, you might want to look at changes in the number of student absences from Q1 to Q2 to understand who improved their attendance habits, maintained their status, or had worse attendance. After identifying students within these classifications, you can then think about how to support students and caregivers, either with celebrations or interventions.

At RISE, we use the Q1 to Q2 number of absences to identify the following types of students:

- **High attendance maintainers**, meaning they had 0–3 absences in both Q1 and Q2. Educators can celebrate these students.
- **Low attendance maintainers**, meaning they had 4+ absences in both Q1 and Q2. Educators can create intensive interventions for these students and their caregivers.
- **Attendance climbers**, meaning they had 4+ absences in Q1 but 0–3 absences in Q2. Educators can celebrate these students for their improvement.
- **Attendance sliders**, meaning they had 0–3 absences in Q1 but 4+ absences in Q2. Educators can deliver interventions to these students and caregivers and try to get them back on track.

The RISE Data Hub encourages us to realize that data is best used as a flashlight to illuminate a student's successes and challenges, rather than as a hammer to punitively enforce compliance. The Data Hub allows educators to take a more strategic look at student data to inform targeted interventions, supports, and celebrations.

Using data in innovative ways like looking at quarterly changes in number of absences instead of relying solely on average daily attendance allows educators to test whether the changes they implement result in meaningful improvement that impacts student success. We invite you to think outside the box and find creative ways to use data to generate transformative change with the students in your school.



Above: Teachers look at student absence data on the RISE data hub.

Above: A student reads an assigned text in class.

How Schools Are Using Identity Questions to Improve Literacy

Reshma Ramkellawan and Jacobē Bell
Teaching Matters

In January 2020, the Teaching Matters Network for School Improvement (TMNSI)—a coalition of 16 middle schools in New York City focused on improving college and career readiness for Black, Latine, and low-income students—observed that English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency scores for these groups were increasing at a significantly slower rate than their peers across the city.

After spending three months studying the problem in-depth, the TMNSI schools decided to test a change idea[1] they called "Identity Questions," in which ELA teachers ask students questions that connect their personal and cultural identity to the academic content at key junctures in their lessons. Research shows that when students see their identities reflected in texts or activities, they connect more deeply with reading and writing, leading to improved learning outcomes (Gay, 2018). In this way, culturally responsive teaching fosters confidence and critical thinking, which are essential for literacy development (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Our theory of action postulates that these changes in students' classroom experiences would be associated with changes in their ELA outcomes. Multiple findings suggest our theory of action holds up:

- A statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) higher proportion of students whose

teachers implemented the identity change idea with integrity met their annual growth goals on reading and math assessments relative to students whose teachers did not implement the change idea with integrity.

- Students whose teachers implemented the identity change idea with integrity demonstrated statistically significant ($p<.05$) increases from fall to spring on their favorable perceptions in the domains of "Cultural Awareness and Action" and "Rigorous Expectations" relative to students whose teachers did not implement the change idea with integrity.

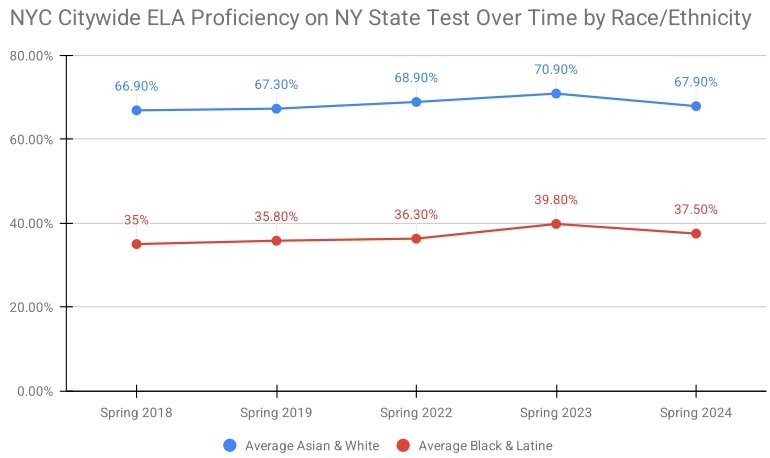
While our results are not based on randomization (and thus differences observed cannot be construed as causal), the outcomes described above add to the body of knowledge demonstrating that centering student identity can positively impact academic performance.

The Problem

In New York City, racial disparities in ELA proficiency, as measured by the annual ELA state test, have been stubbornly persistent.

As indicated in Figure 1, the gap in academic performance between Black and Latine students and their Asian and White counterparts remained largely unchanged in the years prior to COVID-19 and in the years since. In spring 2018, for example, the gap between the average of Asian and White student proficiency and the average of Black and Latine student proficiency was 31.9 percentage points; in spring 2024, the gap was only slightly lower, at 30.3 percentage points.

Figure 1: NYC ELA Proficiency on NY State Test, Over Time, by Race/Ethnicity



Understanding the Problem's Underlying Causes

When the TMNSI launched, Teaching Matters improvement coaches began by conducting empathy interviews with leaders, teachers, and students. Then, they trained teachers to conduct their own empathy interviews with students.

As the name implies, an empathy interview is one in which the interviewer seeks to understand how the interviewee experiences a problem without imposing their own judgment. It is a critical continuous improvement tool for understanding the perspectives and needs of all significant stakeholders.

Across the empathy interviews with students, one issue came up again and again: Students felt a lack of engagement in their learning and a lack of connection to their classroom.

While student disengagement is by no means a new problem, it was exacerbated by the fact that these empathy interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as classes were taking place online. Schools had also been required to adopt one of two prepackaged reading curricula as a condition for joining the TMNSI, and most students were, to put it mildly, not excited about the new curriculum.

Teachers at one of the TMNSI schools—Mott Hall V—experienced a serendipitous coincidence: While they were conducting empathy interviews, they were also reading Gholdy Muhammed's *Cultivating Genius* as a staff. Muhammed identifies five pillars for curriculum design, one of which is identity. Teachers connected their students' sense of disengagement to Muhammed's insights into the importance of identity in learning.

The Mott Hall V teachers further paired Muhammed's focus on identity with Louise Rosenblatt's "reader response theory," which identifies three types of textual connection: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. The teachers hypothesized that they could raise student engagement by helping students make text-to-self connections through strategic questioning.

Developing the Identity Questions

The new curriculum Mott Hall V had adopted when it joined the TMNSI included "Do Now" questions that teachers asked at the start of reading lessons. Do Now questions are intended to launch a lesson by getting students interested in the topic while ensuring they feel academically successful at the lesson's onset.

Teachers at Mott Hall V worked with their improvement coach to design new Do Now questions that would help students make text-to-self connections.

Consider two identity questions that teachers incorporated into their prepackaged curriculum:

> **Question 1:** In *The Lightning Thief*, Grover is being picked on and Percy, being a good friend, is willing to risk detention to protect/stand up for him. How far are you willing to go or what are you willing to risk to help out a friend?
>
> **Question 2:** The idea of noise pollution is brought up in the novel. What contributes to noise pollution in your community? Does noise pollution bother you? Why or why not?

Do Now sentence-starters that improvement coaches provided to teachers include:

> **Do Now:**
> - Describe a time in your life when…
> - How do you feel about this…
> - Think about the idea of … what connections can you make between … and your own life?
>
> **After Reading:**
> - In the text the author explains…what is your opinion on this topic?
> - What connections can you make between…(character, theme, topic, etc.) and yourself?
> - How do you feel about X's decision to do Y? How would you have responded if this were you?

Measurement Approach

From fall 2021 to early winter 2022, 35 teachers across half of the 16 TMNSI schools implemented the identity change idea.[2]

1. Prior to the intervention, students completed the following:
   - » A nationally-normed student survey developed by Panorama Education called the Panorama Student Survey that focuses on six domains related to inclusive classrooms:
   - » Classroom Belonging
   - » Classroom Engagement
   - » Cultural Awareness in Action
   - » Valuing of Subject
   - » Rigorous Expectations
   - » Teacher/StudentRelationship

2. An ELA assessment—either i-Ready or Map Growth. Each assessment set an annual growth goal for the student at the beginning of the year.

At the end of the intervention, in March 2022, students completed a mid-year administration of the Panorama Student Survey. Additionally, at the end of the school year, students took the same ELA assessment in i-Ready or MAP Growth to see if they had met their annual growth goal.

In the second year of the TMNSI, improvement coaches realized that while they were sharing the identity question structure with all the schools, teachers were not equally diligent in adopting it. In order to track the effectiveness of the strategy, the improvement coaches developed an additional metric: "integrity of implementation."

The improvement coaches measured integrity of implementation with a set of factors that they could easily rate on a scale of 1–5 during an observation, combined with data from student surveys. These factors included:

- Based on the coaches' observations, how many students who don't regularly participate shared during the observed lesson?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how well did students learn about the perspectives and identities of their peers?
- On the student survey, what percentage of students ranked a 4 or 5 for the question, "How relevant is what you're studying to your life?"

The TMNSI also created a separate set of success criteria that improvement science coaches could use in their collaboration with schools. Examples of this criteria include:

- Teachers adjust curriculum to attend to students' identities and interests.
- Teachers provide space and time for students to engage in discussions regarding identity with their peers.
- Teachers create opportunities for authentic moments in which students can meaningfully connect to content.
- Teachers facilitate student-to-student discussions about aspects of themselves connected to themes, characters, or concepts in texts.
- Teachers create space for students to engage with identity questions for at least five minutes once a week (with a goal of 10–15 minutes).

Coaches also look for the following student behaviors:

- Students are engaged in responding to the identity question (Do Now, discussion, or exit ticket)
- Students understand how different identities and lived experiences impact the way people respond to situations.
- Students make connections between their own learning and learning of peers.
- Students are able to respond to identity questions by reflecting on and including elements of their identity and how it relates to the content.

Evidence of Improvement

Using a four-point scale, improvement coaches reported back on teachers' overall integrity in terms of implementing the identity change idea in the fall semester. For example, a teacher would be given a 4 if they shared the identity question with students as written, at the point in the lesson that it was suggested, with structured opportunities for written reflection and verbal discourse. They would be given a 3 if they provided the identity question to students, but did not offer additional opportunities for more robust discussion. They would be given a 2 if the identity question was not pre-planned and offered to students on the fly, with little to no structure for in-depth reflection as well as discussion with peers. Finally, they might receive a 1 if they posed the question to students with no evidence of pre-planning and did not allow for peer-to-peer reflections/exchanges.

These ratings yielded the distribution shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Teacher Integrity Ratings when Implementing the Identity Change Idea

Rating	Quantity of teachers	Quantity of students
1	0	0
2	11	487
3	4	90
4	12	481
Total	25	1,058

For the purposes of the analysis, we treated ratings of 1 and 2 (or just 2 in this case) as having "low" integrity, and ratings of 3 or 4 as "high" integrity. As such, there were 11 teachers who implemented with low integrity and 16 teachers with high integrity.

Based on this bifurcation, we observed the following outcomes across the schools in our network implementing the identity change idea, and within Mott Hall V specifically.

Change in ELA Assessment Result

The proportion of students who attained their growth goal was 7.5 percentage points higher (at a statically significant margin of $p<0.05$) among students whose teachers implemented the identity change idea with high integrity than among students whose teachers implemented it with low integrity (see Table 2).[3]

Table 2: Differences in Students' Annual Growth Goal Attainment on End-of-Year Screener, by Teacher Integrity when Implementing the Identity Change Idea

Category	% of students attaining annual growth goal across all seven schools
Students of teachers with low integrity of implementation	59.8%
Students of teachers with high integrity of implementation	52.3%
Difference	7.5 points
Statistical significance	$p=0.014$ ($p<0.05$)

Change in Student Perception of School, According to the Panorama Student Survey

There were statistically significant results in the expected direction for two of the six Panorama domains: Cultural Awareness and Action and Rigorous Expectations. In other words, students whose teachers implemented the change idea with high integrity increased their favorable perceptions of Cultural Awareness and Action and Rigorous Expectations by larger margins than did students whose teachers implemented the change idea with low integrity. Additionally, in the domain of Classroom Belonging there was a small though not statistically significant difference in the expected positive direction (see Table 3).

Change in Student Perception of School, According to Empathy Interviews

Teachers and improvement science coaches conducted a second round of empathy interviews with students. In these, students shared that the questions allowed them to connect to the content—even in instances where they still found the curriculum to be "boring."

It turned out that using the identity questions offered an additional benefit: Some teachers were inspired to further adapt some of the learning tasks in order to connect to students' interests. For example, two teachers at Mott Hall V created a modified performance task for a portion of their English curriculum to have students analyze contemporary sung poetry (that is, song lyrics) that connected to the larger themes of the anchor text.

What We Have Learned So Far

These findings highlight the powerful impact of integrating students'

TABLE 3: Change in % Favorable Responses to Specific Panorama Domains, by Teacher Integrity when Implementing the Identity Change Idea.

Category	Count	Change in % favorability of Cultural Awareness and Action domain	Change in % favorability of Rigorous Expectations domain	Change in % favorability of Classroom Belonging domain
Students of teachers with low implementation integrity	405	0.5 % points	0.8 % points	-0.4 % points
Students of teachers with high implementation integrity	379	6.1% points	6.0% points	1.3% points
Difference		5.6% points	5.2% points	1.7% points
P-values (statistical significance)		p = 0.019 (p<0.05)	p = 0.017 (p<0.05)	p=0.496 (not statistically significant)

identities into instruction. The statistically significant improvements in literacy growth, perceptions of cultural awareness, and rigorous expectations suggest that when teachers implement identity-affirming practices with integrity, students experience greater academic success and engagement. Additionally, the empathy interviews reveal that even when students find the curriculum uninteresting, the identity-based questions foster deeper connections to the content, reinforcing the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in promoting student investment and learning outcomes.

We also learned that this effect doesn't just work for students—teachers who were frustrated at being required to implement a prepackaged curriculum appreciated having the autonomy to come up with their own questions for students to answer. Just as focusing on text-to-self connections increased student engagement, providing autonomy increased teacher engagement.

Our Next Steps

In the fifth year of the improvement science grant, the priority is to continue supporting each school's sustainability with continuous improvement science practices. Adopting the mantra of "low effort, high impact" has allowed schools to dabble in innovative change ideas such as launching small

group instruction, gamifying vocabulary, and of course, integrating identity questions. Schools will complete a minimum of two Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles[4] over the remaining period of support. Schools that adopted identity questions as their change idea in earlier years of the grant still reported using the process in existing practices and processes. We found that if school leaders prioritize and integrate the adoption of the change idea into larger school goals, the work becomes sustainable and teachers' efforts are validated.

Notes

1. Continuous improvement expert Amanda Meyer defines a change idea as "an idea for a specific alteration that could be made to practice in service of creating improvement" (2021).

2. The other eight schools implemented different change ideas concurrently, and because there was self-selection, comparison to these schools is excluded from the analysis).

3. It should be noted that only seven of the eight participating schools gave ELA assessments before and after the intervention.

4. Amanda Meyer defines a PDSA cycle as a "four-part mini-experiment in which a change idea is identified, and predictions are made about what will occur. Then the change idea is executed, data is collected, and predictions are compared to results. Finally, the improver decides what actions to take next" (2021).

References

Gay, G. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children. Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, A. (May 6 2021). Improvement as a journey. Unboxed. https://hthunboxed.org/improvement-as-a-journey-going-the-distance-with-improvement-science

Above: Students in Crew class at West End Secondary School.

Student-led Advisory
An Improvement Project

Hannah Read
New York City Outward Bound Schools

On a Tuesday morning in September, I walked into Crew class[1] at NYC Lab School for Collaborative Studies and something felt different. The basic structures seemed to be in place—students were circled up, the advisor was introducing an opening question, a talking piece was at the ready… all pretty standard. But then, as the talking piece began to make its way around and students answered the prompt, I realized it was a circle full of ninth grade boys with just one exception: Sharon. The lone girl in the group, she looked around with a mix of exasperation but good humor as the boys in the class filled the space with their answers (and jokes). It was just the second month of school, and while she seemed to be holding her own, I wondered how this imbalance would play out. How would she find her voice in this space?

Flash forward to the end of the school year. We have convened a focus group of students from across the ninth grade to share feedback about their Crew experience. This year, we started a new unit called Try Stuff, during which students were supported to design and lead their own Crew session. We were eager to hear how it went. Sharon spoke up almost immediately—she was excited to share about the lesson she created for the unit, an interactive presentation about websites and apps that can help students study ("not cheat," she is careful to clarify). "I was the first student to lead a lesson and I was nervous," she explains, "but my Crew advisor checked in with me

Above: Students in Crew at Kurt Hahn Expeditionary Learning School.

and helped me get set up so I felt really supported." Similarly, because it was something all students in the Crew were doing, they felt a sense of comradery and support: "We encouraged each other a lot."

While it may have been a scheduling oversight that initially landed Sharon in an almost-exclusively male Crew, the opportunities she had to lead and the readiness she felt to present her ideas were no accident. In fact, they're a prime example of the impact of a year-long, multi-cycle, continuous improvement process being tested at her school and across New York City.

It started in the fall with Katrina, her school's Crew guide (a teacher assigned to lead Crew implementation and improvement), reflecting on the relatively low engagement she was seeing in Crews. She decided to join the continuous improvement group called "Making Crew Relevant and Meaningful for Students." The was composed of about a dozen other Crew guides from public schools across NYC grappling with this same problem of practice: Students did not feel like their Crew experience was relevant to their academics or life outside of school. At monthly meetings, the Making Crew Relevant group was laser-focused on introducing systems for elevating student voice, which they believed was essential to increasing relevance and engagement. Together they brainstormed change ideas, shared learnings, and reviewed data to see what worked.

Above: Students participate in an activity in Crew.

Katrina focused her first improvement cycle on supporting Crew advisors to implement student-led opening questions. Instead of teachers opening up the Crew space and doing the check-in, students picked the question. This laid some groundwork, but didn't seem to have much impact. It still felt like Crew time was adult-driven.

So in the winter Katrina took a bigger swing. She consulted with a Crew advisor she had observed the previous year who facilitated a student-led unit they called Try Shit, which tasked each Crew student with leading an activity, teaching a game, or presenting on something they were passionate about and wanted other people to try. Katrina took the idea and developed a series of lessons, rebranded as Try Stuff, that supported students as they brainstormed an activity to lead, outlined a plan for how to lead it, and identified any materials needed. Worried that Crew advisors might run into the common refrain of "I dunno what to do," Katrina provided some categories and examples to get students thinking, including a de-stress strategy, teaching their peers a game, leading a song or dance, or presenting on a favorite animal. This also helped ensure there was variety in the activities students led. Sharon said the encouragement to make a lesson about a hobby or passion made it more exciting. Students led lessons on everything from crafts like origami and slime to informational presentations such as "How to play golf," "The influence of the Kardashians," and my personal favorite, "How to do laundry."

Above: A Crew meeting at Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School.

Try Stuff was a hit! Crew advisors were thrilled to hand over some of the facilitation, and students came up with all sorts of creative lessons to share with their Crews. It did require some advance scheduling to make sure students were prepared when it was their turn, and some Crews had to revise their activities based on space limitations or material costs—but all that proved well worth it. Student perception data showed that from the beginning of the year to the end, positive student responses to the question, "How much has your Crew helped you think what is important to you?" increased by almost 8 percentage points, while positive responses to the statement, "I find out more about my strengths in my Crew" increased by 6 percentage points. For many schools, those numbers are frustratingly hard to shift, especially as students tend to get more apathetic and disengaged by the end of the year.

When Katrina spoke to students in focus groups, they raved about Try Stuff. Ninth graders and seniors alike pointed to it as a highlight, both the experience of being able to lead Crew and participating in other students' activities. One student said, "It was nice to lead an activity about something I could relate to. Choosing my own topic helped me to talk freely." Another student reflected, "Student-led lessons helped us share what we're into outside of school. Some shared about sports and card games and slime. I got to know what people are like outside of school."

Furthermore, the experience of each Crew member sharing an activity helped bond Crews in a unique way. By spring, when the school hosted its first Crew Olympics, it was clear as they cheered each other on and worked together through challenges that they had come to really know and rely on each other throughout the year. And at the end of the day, it was Sharon and her Crew that took the gold medal!

How to Start a Try Stuff Unit at Your School

Step 1:
Develop a basic routine with your advisory/Crew class that familiarizes students with the different parts of a lesson. This will help them feel more confident leading, and provide them with a planning structure:

- Opener or heck-in question
- Main activity
- Debrief or reflection

Step 2:
Identify which sessions you will reserve for student-led lessons.

Step 3:
Introduce the Try Stuff unit to your students and have them complete page 1 of the Try Stuff Worksheet to do an initial brainstorm.
Tip: It helps to have students work in pairs, at least to start.

Step 4:
Calendar out when each student (or pair) will lead and have them complete page 2 of the Try Stuff Worksheet to map out the details of their lesson plan.

Step 5:
Hand over the reins! On student-led days, provide some basic support with classroom management but avoid playing too large a role. This allows students to have ownership over their lesson and authentically experience both the fun and challenge of teaching.

Step 6:
Reflect with students about how Try Stuff went as you wrap up the unit. Ask questions about what support they appreciated or needed more of, and how it could be improved when you do it again.

Notes

1. Crew is the advisory structure in all NYC Outward Bound schools, as well as schools in the national EL Education network (which has its roots in Outward Bound).

Above: Educators working on a continuous improvement project at a professional learning event.

Start Continuous Improvement Without Stopping Everything

Introducing the Theory & Measures Tool

Amiee Winchester and Zack Jaffe
Baltimore City Public Schools

One of the key principles of continuous improvement is that you should spend a lot of time understanding a problem before you take action on it. This has its merits, but it's not necessarily feasible in a large school district—saying, "Ok, we will definitely be taking action once we've studied the problem for a year" isn't likely to land well with teachers, families, or students.

We certainly found this to be the case when we started doing continuous improvement work in our school district, Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). Like Goldilocks, we had to figure out the sweet spot. Our district community told us we were taking too long to understand the problem, and in any case, workable solutions to the most pressing problems had already been identified and just needed to be implemented. We could understand where they were coming from—a district can't slam on the brakes just because some folks went to an interesting continuous improvement training. At the same time, we know there are good reasons why continuous improvement processes spend so much time on understanding the problem—if you implement solutions based on a faulty understanding of the problem, those solutions won't transform the system or the outcomes it produces!

Finally, we had an insight that solved this dilemma for us: an improvement journey can start anywhere, simply by applying the principles of continuous

improvement to whatever you're already doing.

The tool we developed allows practitioners to apply improvement at any point in their journey, rather than being forced to start something new. It reinforces a continuous improvement mindset about the work you're already doing, by turning whatever you were planning to try next into an experiment, and empowering you to interrogate your assumptions about what solutions will lead to improvement.

It's that simple. No secret steps or potions needed. Wherever you find yourself on the road to solving a problem, figure out what data you can collect, reflect on what is and isn't working, and voila! You're doing continuous improvement!

What is the Theory & Measures Tool?

The Theory & Measures tool is a graphic organizer that captures the following elements:

- Your big goal
- Your theory of improvement
- The steps you need to take to implement your theory
- What you will measure for each step
- How you will measure it
- The frequency of measurement

We have shared Theory & Measures tool as a single slide in a presentation (which also works well as a printed handout), a spreadsheet, and a fillable document. Refer to Table 1 for an example of a filled-in Theory & Measures spreadsheet.

The benefit of the slide is that it feels very easy to use (you can even print it out and fill it in by hand at a workshop). This version of the tool is designed to drill into a specific change idea.

The benefit of the spreadsheet is that it makes it easier to actually track what you do (see figure 1 for an example of a filled-in tool).

The Google doc is a good in-between: more robust than the single slide, less involved than the spreadsheet.

When, Why, and How to Use the Theory & Measures Tool

This tool can help with coaching an improver who has a change idea but hasn't yet fleshed out a full theory of improvement or system of measurement. The goal is to help them think clearly about the chain of causality linking the action they will take and the ultimate outcome they hope to achieve. For

Table 1: A filled-in Theory & Measures spreadsheet.

Strategy 1			
Goal	Reduction in the number of chronically absent students		
Improvement Theory	**If** the Core Attendance team completes targeted family outreach and engages families with attendance incentives, **then** students and families will establish strategies to remove attendance barriers, **resulting** in improved daily attendance and reducing the students falling within the chronically absent category.		
Theory of Improvement Step	**Measure**	**Type of Measure**	**Frequency**
Completing targeted family outreach	Outreach log	Implementation (process)	Every two weeks
Establishing strategies to remove barriers	Number of completed attendance plans	Implementation (process)	Every two weeks
Improved attendance after completing attendance plans	Infinite Campus daily attendance	Leading Outcome	Every two weeks
Reductions in the number of chronically absent students	Infinite Campus climate dashboard	Ultimate Outcome	Monthly

example, a simple change idea to improve attendance might be to conduct home visits to students who are chronically absent. But why do we think this will work? Is it the threat of disciplinary action that will bring students back to school? Or does building closer connections to families improve attendance? What are the root causes underlying why students stay home? These are all different theories of improvement and would give improvers different ideas about how to measure success.

To coach improvers through the use of this tool, ask them to first articulate both their change idea and their ultimate outcome goal. Then, ask them to connect the dots between those two things. Ask clarifying questions whenever something seems vague or disconnected.

Second, ask them to identify possible measures of success for each step in their theory. These will be the "middle measures" that allow improvers to run rapid plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles, using implementation and leading outcome data to guide adaptations, rather than waiting for ultimate outcome data, which will often not be known for many months or years. It's critical that they identify concrete sources of data (Who will collect it? How will it be collected? Where will it be housed?) and how often it will be collected.

How to Set the Tool Up for Success

We have a few tips for increasing buy-in and encouraging thoughtfulness when using this process:

- Explain how measuring for improvement is different from measuring for accountability. When we measure for accountability, we collect data in order to assess a teacher's performance. This is a familiar (and stressful) use of data for most teachers. When we measure for improvement, on the other hand, we are focusing on our shared project, rather than on an individual teacher. Measuring for improvement requires examining data that is closely aligned to people's daily work processes; it should be accessible and timely so it can be used for rapid improvement. This requires creating an atmosphere of trust and collaboration—we have found that without this, people tend to present only data that paint them in a positive light, which obscures possible avenues for improvement.

- Explain the difference between implementation and impact measures. An implementation measure allows us to analyze whether we actually did the thing we said we were going to do. In other words, it helps us learn if our change is feasible. So, if our goal was to create an attendance plan for every student who has missed five days of school, the implementation measure would be the number of plans actually completed. There could be other interesting data we would want to collect to help inform feasibility, like the number of minutes it took to create each plan or the

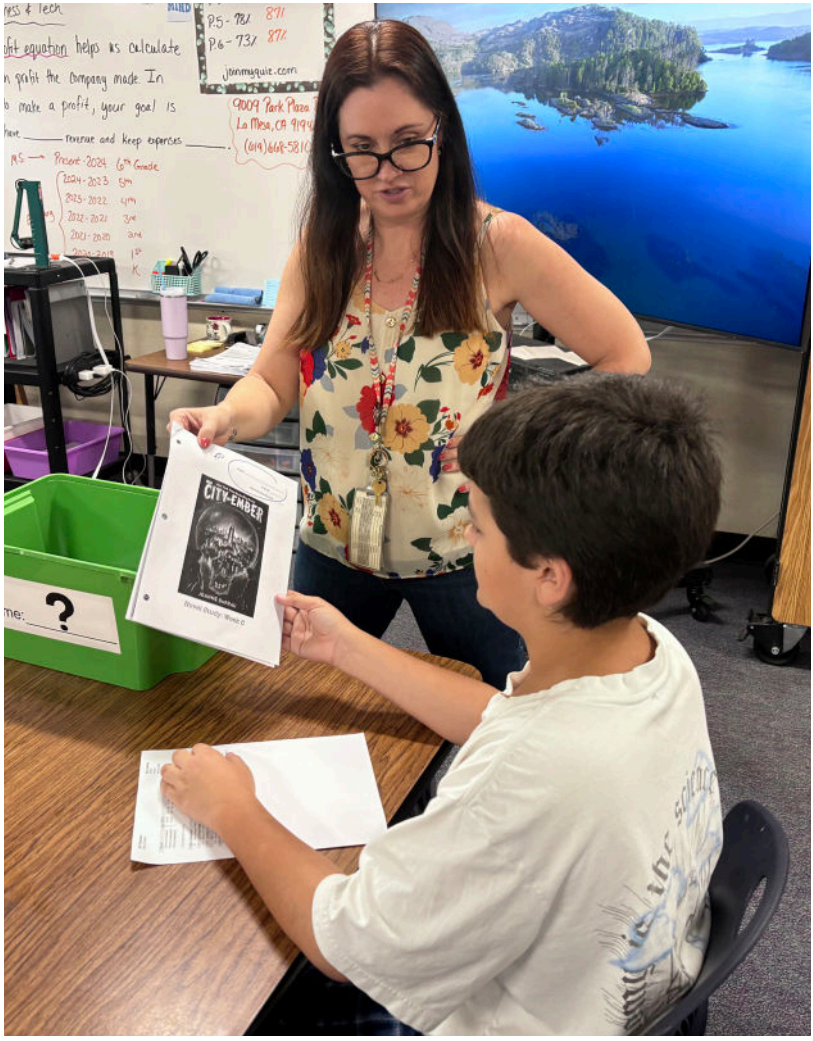
types of barriers students and families identified.

- Impact measures allow us to understand the impact the change may be having if we are able to implement it. So, with our attendance plan example, impact would be captured by seeing if those students for whom we created plans actually started coming back to school. If we see good implementation but no corresponding impact, we have to revisit our theory of improvement.

- From the beginning, make a plan for how you will follow up and reflect on the data you collect. It's relatively easy to schedule one workshop to make this document, but the tool is designed to facilitate ongoing reflection and discussion.

References

Hinnant-Crawford, B. (2020). *Improvement science in education: a primer*. Myers Education Press.



Above: A teacher meets with a student during WIN time for English Language Arts.

WIN Time at Parkway Academy

Tony Sandoval
Parkway Academy

In 2016, Parkway Sports and Health Science Academy, a public middle school in La Mesa, California, adopted a professional learning community (PLC) model. The goal was to enable staff to propose and decide on changes to their school in order to improve teaching practice and student learning.

At the heart of PLCs are four questions:

1. What do students need to know, understand, and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What will we do if a student has difficulty learning it?
4. What will we do if a student already knows it?

The intervention described in this piece was inspired by the third question, "What will we do if a student has difficulty learning it?" At Parkway, teachers were using formative assessments to identify students who were struggling to meet learning standards. But they were having trouble acting on this data, because the only time they could dedicate to helping students was their regular class period, which wasn't long enough to offer targeted support.

As a school, the Parkway faculty decided to carve out time from their daily schedule to pull specific groups of students to work on a particular skill or

Above: Students work during WIN Time.

intervention. This led them to develop a version of What I Need (WIN) Time, a structure popularized by Stephanie McConnell that enables students to receive targeted support during the school day.

WIN Time 1.0

WIN Time at Parkway started with a few teachers experimenting. They dedicated a specific day to WIN Time with the idea that students who were identified as falling behind in specific areas would receive targeted support from teachers, and the rest of the student body could choose from a menu of enrichment activities such as art or sports, taking place at different locations around the school. Teachers would split up a class of kids, with one teacher providing interventions to a select group of students and the other teacher providing enrichments to the rest.

This was not successful, for several reasons. First, there were a lot of students who were not scheduled to receive interventions, which resulted in students having nothing to do during the middle of the school day—a situation best avoided in middle school! Teachers also had to do a lot of extra work to create one-off enrichment activities, and it was a further challenge to align their classes, curriculum, and schedules. Despite their efforts, WIN Time was not very organized or productive for the students not receiving interventions.

Parkway faculty wanted something that was more defined, where all students got time to work on "What I Need," and receive support from staff. There was also the idea that students who were all caught up and doing well could have the gift of time to spend on something of their choice, read quietly, or just take a break. Staff began brainstorming what they could change and how they could implement WIN Time school-wide, with more advance planning.

WIN Time 2.0

For the second, more successful iteration of WIN Time, each class period was shortened by five minutes on Wednesdays and Thursdays, freeing up an extra 30 minutes on those days. This half hour became the WIN Time block. It took place twice per week after lunch, between periods 4 and 5.

For WIN Time 2.0, the school built on an already established element of their schedule: the fact that each subject shared a common prep period. That is, all Parkway science teachers had prep at the same time, as did all math teachers, Language Arts teachers, etc.

The shared preps would be used for WIN Time, which rotated through the subject areas week after week like so:

Week 1: Math WIN Time, Wednesday and Thursday

Week 2: Language Arts WIN Time, Wednesday and Thursday

Week 3: History WIN Time, Wednesday; Science WIN Time, Thursday

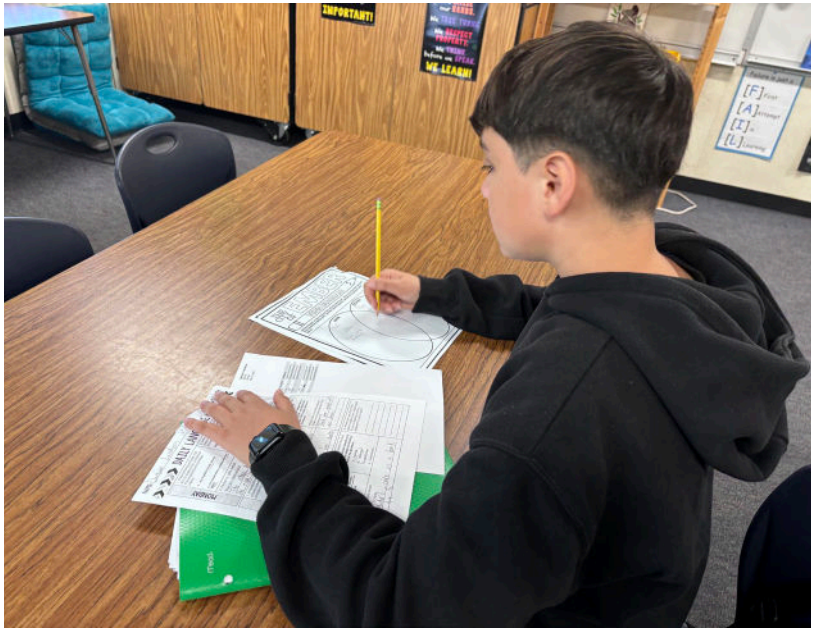
Week 4: Math WIN Time, Wednesday and Thursday

And so on…

WIN Time during a Language Arts week took place during second period (when Language Arts teachers have their prep) and looked something like this:

- During WIN Time block after lunch, students go to their second period teacher.
- In advance, Language Arts teachers notify students who need extra support (and share this list with all teachers). Selected students go to their Language Arts teachers instead of their second period teacher.
- Students who are not identified for extra Language Arts support may use this time to catch up on work, read, or do whatever (non-disruptive) activity was of interest to them with their usual second period teacher.

In addition to the list of students who needed particular types of WIN Time, all teachers contributed to a separate document detailing the work



Above: A student works during WIN Time.

that students had due for each class, so that teachers could help students figure out what to spend WIN Time on if they weren't sure.

WIN Time turned out to offer an additional benefit: if a teacher wanted to meet with a student who hadn't been selected to receive official WIN Time support, they could give that student a note asking them to come see them during WIN Time, thereby being able to offer more targeted support to students.

Using WIN Time, Parkway Middle School eliminated differences across student racial and socioeconomic groups in the number of students achieving As and Bs in core academic classes. In fact, it proved so successful that when Parkway Academy joined the CARE Network, a school network focused on increasing the number of eighth graders on track for high school success, the network adopted it as a signature practice. It is already improving outcomes at schools across southern California. Maybe your school can be next!

What Teachers and Students Say about WIN Time at Parkway

WIN Time has provided teachers time to pull a small group of students. Students who need extra support can be pulled for the teacher to reteach a topic, give students more time to complete an assignment, or give guidance on how to revise an assignment. Teachers can also pull a small group who is excelling to provide extensions to what they are learning.

—Melissa Hedgecock, eighth grade science teacher

WIN Time has helped me rethink many of my classroom procedures and activities based on the changing needs of our diverse group of students. Collected data from WIN Time lists also help inform me about what individuals may need further small group reteaching or reinforcement, or even just more frequent check-ins during class time.

—Patrick Martin, eighth grade science teacher

The mindset about WIN has changed from students thinking about it as a punishment to thinking about it as a positive experience. I have students ask if they can attend my WIN time. Even if it's not a specified math WIN day, students will ask me if they can come to my class to get extra help with their math. I used to think of WIN as being only beneficial for me when it was specified for math, but I've evolved my thinking to understand that every WIN time, no matter the specified subject, is an opportunity to help as many students as possible with math.

—Jean Zelt, eighth grade math teacher

WIN Time gives teachers and students the "gift of time." It's not a study hall, because during my WIN Time week I get to select specific students for targeted, specific interventions based on data I am collecting in class: common formative assessments, test scores, or any other assessments we've done recently. Often, students self-advocate and ask to come to my WIN time because they want extra support. Another way I use WIN time is to preteach a concept or topic. Students that may be struggling can get a head start on a new unit, and I can get a sense of their background knowledge and build some basic understanding of what we will be learning.

—Tony Sandoval, seventh grade science teacher

Above: A student shares feedback from a data circle with educators.

We Have All This Data, Now What?

Naomi Wilfred and Jennifer Ciok
University of Chicago

Too often when teachers get data, they don't know what to do with it. At the University of Chicago Middle Grades Network, we use two protocols in succession (the first with staff members, the second with students) to transform data into effective action. The staff meeting protocol is called "What? So what? Now what?" and based on what we learn from that, we organize a "data circle" with students. Here's what that looks like in detail.

Part 1: What? So What? Now What?

It's 9:30 on a Tuesday morning in October. At a Chicago Public School in the University of Chicago's Middle Grades Network, a group of ten staff members gather to look at their first round of student experience data for the year. Present are two math teachers, two English teachers, one social studies teacher, a science teacher, two special education teachers, the assistant principal, and a counselor. The information is drawn from a survey that was given to every student in the school two weeks ago. The anticipation is palpable as the team waits to see how students responded in two areas they have been focusing on: teacher caring and classroom community.

The social studies teacher pulls up the schoolwide data to look at trends, and the team engages in a "What? So what? Now what?" protocol to analyze it.

Above: A group of students in a data circle.

Step 1: What?
The first step in the protocol is for individuals to look at the data and report what they notice. These should be factual observations that stand out from their analysis. The team is happy to see that 80 percent of students believe that their teachers treat them with respect, but are surprised that only 40 percent of students think teachers care about their lives outside of school. They also notice that 75 percent of students find their classrooms to be welcoming places, but only 30 percent of students say that they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.

Step 2: So what?
In the "So what" step, team members discuss possible causes for these responses. Some argue that it might be developmentally appropriate for middle schoolers to be reticent about sharing their opinions. Even so, it is something the team wants to dig deeper into.

Step 3: Now what?
The team concludes with the "Now what" portion of the protocol, in which they agree on action steps based on what they have seen in the data.

They decide the next step is for the classroom teachers in the group to organize a data circle with their individual classes to learn more from the

students. In this protocol, students and their teachers analyze classroom and schoolwide behavior, attendance, learning conditions, or other data together in order to come up with the next steps. Based on the data they looked at and observations made in their own classrooms, each teacher determines which area to focus on and when the circle will take place. Before leaving, each teacher creates a plan for their data circle, focusing on two pieces of data from the student survey. The team discusses some of the barriers to completing the data circle with fidelity. As a team, they decide that each teacher can determine which portions of the data circle are needed and which are optional. After finalizing the logistics (date, time, duration, area of focus), they plan to share their feedback at the next team meeting.

Part 2: The Data Circle

A week later, the social studies teacher facilitates her data circle. Before the class comes in, she sets up chairs in a circle. This format ensures that every person feels they are on equal footing.

Once students have come in and chosen seats, the teacher shares the agenda for the circle, setting out the following itinerary:

Welcome | 2 minutes
Norm setting | 3 minutes
Opening question | 5 minutes
Data conversation | 20–25 minutes
Closing + next steps | 5 minutes

Sharing the agenda at the start of the circle can help ensure students are not overwhelmed, especially if this is not a common practice for the class.

Next, the teacher establishes norms for the circle. These are the same as classroom norms, but include some extra points around confidentiality and when and how to share using a talking piece, which can be any item—a stick, a whiteboard eraser, an action figure—anything that serves as a visual reminder that only the person holding the talking piece has the floor. It's important to make sure that everyone feels safe and heard when students are sharing their personal thoughts about their teacher or class.

Once the norms and expectations are set, the circle begins with an icebreaker question. This question should be low-stakes but interesting. It could be totally unrelated to the data the students will be examining; for example, "Is a hotdog a sandwich?" It could also be connected to the data; for example, in this data circle the social studies teacher began with the question, "What is your favorite thing about school?"

Using the talking piece, students go around the circle answering the

icebreaker one by once. Once every student answers the question, it's time to dig into the first area of focus.

This teacher is particularly concerned that only 40 percent of students think their teachers care about their lives outside of school. The teacher starts the first round of the circle by sharing that data point and asking if students think it is important to feel like teachers care about their lives outside of school. Most students share that it is important, because it makes them feel like their teachers understand them and that they can share information with them. A few say that they don't want to share details about their lives with anyone. With that in mind, the teacher turns to the discussion question. She asks what would make students feel like she cared about their lives outside of school. Some mention that they just want to be asked how they are feeling, while others want time to share about their weekends or accomplishments. Others feel like teachers don't care because they give them so much homework that they don't have time to do anything else over the weekend.

The teacher then starts the last round of the circle by asking what is the biggest stressor for middle school students. Students give lots of answers, including time management, prioritizing, peer pressure, and family struggles. The teacher takes in all of this information. At the end of the circle, she lets students know that she will take all the thoughts they shared and come up with a few action steps. She thanks them for their input and for sharing in such an honest way. She ensures students that she will come to them with next steps and to get additional input. She tells them that if they have any additional thoughts or questions, her door is always open.

Three weeks later, the teachers come together to share feedback from their data circles. Most had positive experiences and learned a lot about their students (among those who had a less positive experience, the biggest issues included running out of time and having difficulty persuading students to speak). The social studies teacher shared about a student who said, "Checking in with me every day is an important way to show you care about my life outside of school." Another teacher said that his students let him know that "they are afraid of being judged when sharing their thoughts and opinions." Additionally, teachers shared that some students said they did not feel connected to any adult in the building, while others said they wanted more opportunities to share about topics outside of content or academics.

Taking all of this feedback together, the teachers discussed possible action items and decided to implement two ideas. The first is a strategy called Relationship Mapping, in which teachers identify students who do not feel a strong connection to a staff member, and intentionally check in with them throughout the week to build stronger teacher-student relationships and make sure that every student has someone they can connect with in the

building. They also decide to start asking a question of the day that students discuss at the beginning of each class to help build a stronger community around shared topics of interest.

The team is excited about these ideas, but is concerned about finding the time to implement them. They also understand that a student survey is a valuable but limited tool for collecting data, so they decide to implement informal check-ins with students to set up their next data circle.

Reflections on these Protocols

Often when teachers get data, they don't know what to do with it. The combination of the What? So what? Now what? protocol and the data circle is designed to help teachers go from collecting data to coming up with a course of action. After going through this process, one teacher reported that, in the words of a Middle Grades Network improvement coach, "They developed a deeper understanding of what their students need, and students started to trust their voice more. They are using the tools because they understand that care is there."

Additionally, students shared the following as a result of being a part of the data conversation: "We all have powerful voices; my peers have a lot of thoughts and great ideas. It's important to remember that teachers aren't against us, they just need help to understand us."

The teachers in the network recognize that undertaking this work takes time and does not come without challenges, but they are excited to embed these protocols in their practice. Now it's time to figure out what data they will collect next!

Above: Tenth-grade students at High Tech High collect sediment samples for testing.

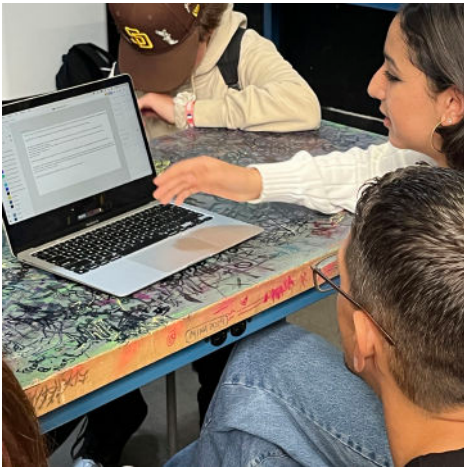
Project Cards

Teachers and Students
High Tech High Schools
and other Innovative Schools

Project Cards provide quick glimpses of inspiring projects designed by teachers and realized in collaboration with students.

Our full collection of Project Cards is available to download for free on our website, ***hthgse.edu/unboxed***


LINE
COLOR



Healing through Movement
Carl Landegger
Eighth Grade
High Tech Middle

Raid Skateboards (Raid SB) is a veteran-owned brand that goes beyond skate culture—it's a movement dedicated to promoting positive mental health through the transformative power of "skateboard therapy." Founded with a mission to improve the lives of individuals impacted by PTSD, Raid SB harnesses the unique benefits of skateboarding and other board sports to build resilience, mental strength, and emotional well-being.

With this project, we aimed to dive into the powerful intersection of skateboarding and mental health, connecting both veterans and teens through a shared journey of self-discovery and support. Skateboarding has long been a healthy outlet for youth, teaching invaluable life skills like discipline, motivation, resilience, and self-care. Through this collaboration with Raid SB, students explored how skateboarding can serve as a coping mechanism for people of all ages, creating a ripple effect of positivity, connection, and mental wellness. Through the collaboration with Raid, students designed deck graphics that were for sale on the organization's site.

Teacher Reflection

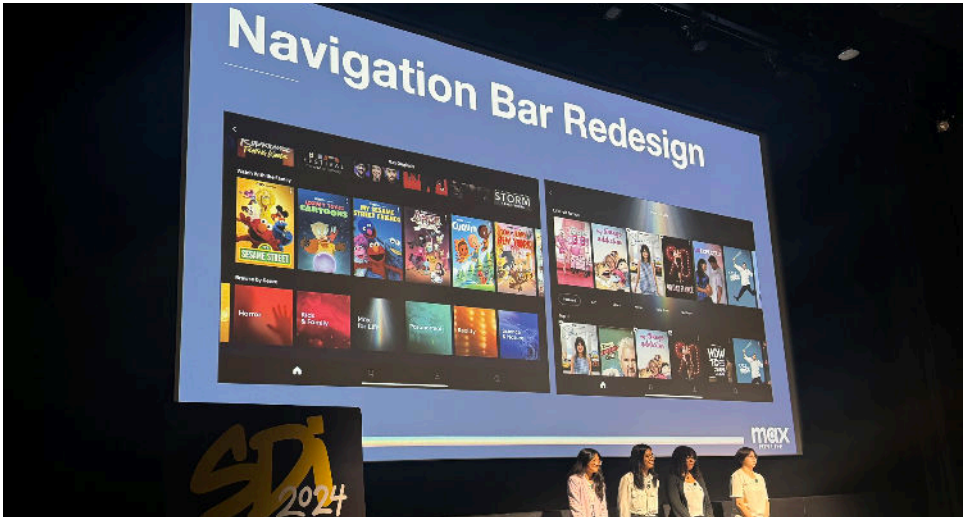
Taking this leap in my teaching career was a huge risk, but I couldn't be happier that I did. Our young professionals at High Tech Middle tackled the challenging task of designing for two vastly different audiences—veterans and teens. While these groups may seem worlds apart, our talented designers have skillfully found the intersections between them through the shared lens of mental health. Next up, I'm aiming to showcase this powerful work in an exhibition at a local San Diego skatepark, bringing these ideas to the heart of the community.

—Carl Landegger

Student Reflection

Thank you for letting me tell my story about my grandfather. This skateboard represents his service and courage through difficult times in life.

—MJ G.


Navigation Bar Redesign
SDI 2024


BEHIND THE SCENES!
STRATEGY
CREATIVE


WARNER BROS.
DISCOVERY
SDI 2024

Summer Design Institute: A Journey in Multicultural Marketing

Carl Landegger
Eighth Grade
High Tech Middle

Our Summer Design Institute young professionals learned about a multi-channel approach, leveraging various multicultural marketing tactics to reach and authentically engage with a target audience. They created an advertising campaign that focused on digital platforms, social media, and emerging technologies to maximize learning and visibility. The purpose of this multicultural marketing campaign was to create awareness and generate excitement for an unreleased project on the MAX streaming service in collaboration with WarnerBros/ Discovery, Department of Education of New York City and High Tech High. The campaign targeted young adults, industry professionals, and general audiences worldwide. The primary objectives were to build anticipation, drive engagement, and ultimately increase viewership on the MAX platform through an empathetic lens.

Teacher Reflection

I've seen firsthand that true design magic happens when people from diverse cultural backgrounds and skill sets come together. My goal as a teacher has always been to take students from any discipline and challenge them to become marketing geniuses within just five weeks. The real success of this program lies in the collaborative spirit that drives everyone—our industry partners, staff, teachers, and young professionals. This unique dynamic sparks deep discussions, insightful critiques, and ultimately guides each team toward producing standout advertising campaigns. Looking forward, I'm eager to scale this program to our High Tech High schools, giving even more students access to this transformative experience.

—Carl Landegger

Student Reflection

I don't want to delve into the whole story of my life, but in middle school I was afraid to speak in class. This project helped me immensely with presenting skills which has transcended my confidence in my personal life and with my artwork.

—Estella G.

Tempered
Armando Carrero
Seventh Grade
High Tech Middle Mesa

In the "Tempered" project, students crafted a unique musical ensemble using everyday objects such as bottles, glasses, and glass containers. This hands-on initiative blended creativity with learning, allowing students to explore a wide range of educational concepts. They discovered how music influences emotional awareness, enhanced their motor coordination, and fostered teamwork and collaboration. In addition to developing foundational music skills, the project introduced students to the basics of engineering as they designed and built wooden bases for the containers. Along the way, they reinforced key principles of music, including foundation, focus, rhythm, synchronization, and balance. The project offered students a chance to experience the organic, raw side of music-making, providing a refreshing contrast to today's tech-driven world, where digital tools often dominate artistic expression.

Teacher Reflection

Seizing the unique opportunity to work with middle school students—who are navigating a pivotal and often challenging stage in their development—I designed a project that addressed both their growth and their need to care for their surroundings. With the fragility of the containers involved, the project required their full attention and caution, as safety was a key concern. I believe the project created a supportive and nurturing educational environment, encouraging both responsibility and focus.

In the daily development of the project, our students experienced a number of key benefits that enriched their learning and growth. First, they were offered a detailed presentation of the processes and instructions, allowing them to clearly understand the steps required to carry out each task. In addition, they had the opportunity to become familiar with the proper use and handling of tools, promoting both technical skills and responsibility.

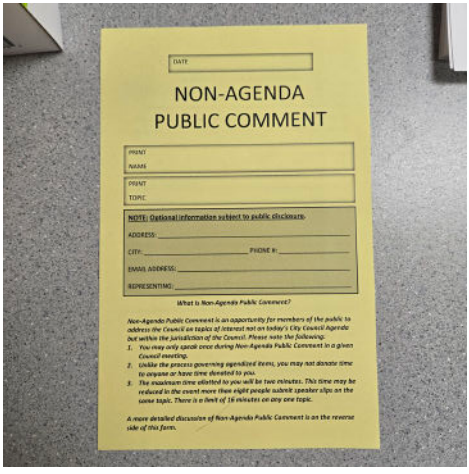
The project also fostered a healthy space for practice and reflection, providing moments for students to connect with their own creative process. A key aspect of the project was the formation of groups, which was not based on predetermined assignments, but was organized organically by the musical group itself, strengthening the sense of community and cooperation within the classroom.

—Armando Carrero Sanabria

Student Reflection

I liked the Tempered project a lot. I learned that we can make music almost out of any item. Playing glass items was a great experience and now I have ideas on how I can make music with friends and family.

—Delilah L.



DATE:

NON-AGENDA
PUBLIC COMMENT

PRINT
NAME:

PRINT
TOPIC:

NOTE: Optional information subject to public disclosure.

ADDRESS:

CITY: PHONE #:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

REPRESENTING:

What is Non-Agenda Public Comment?

Non-Agenda Public Comment is an opportunity for members of the public to address the Council on topics of interest not on today's City Council Agenda but within the jurisdiction of the Council. Please note the following:

1. *You may only speak once during Non-Agenda Public Comment in a given Council meeting.*
2. *Unlike the process governing agendized items, you may not donate time to anyone or have time donated to you.*
3. *The maximum time allotted to you will be two minutes. This time may be reduced in the event more than eight people submit speaker slips on the same topic. There is a limit of 16 minutes on any one topic.*

A more detailed discussion of Non-Agenda Public Comment is on the reverse side of this form.

Policy Project
Carli Stubbs, Biology
Dan Slowik, Humanities
Kelly Bisbee
Eleventh Grade
High Tech High Media Arts

Students put together persuasive speeches on real issues affecting San Diego neighborhoods. The issues included air pollution, flood prevention, homelessness, and firework pollution from SeaWorld and then concentrated them down to two minutes for a visit to City Hall. They presented their speeches during public comment to elected officials, making their voices heard in a real-world setting. Through this process, students researched local issues, brainstormed possible solutions, and refined their public speaking skills. They walked away with a better understanding of how local government works, how the public can stay engaged, and how research plays a role in making informed arguments. This project also tied into biology and Humanities/civics, showing how science and policy intersect in solving real community problems.

Teacher Reflection

This project really showed me that giving students real-world opportunities to speak up and engage with their community pushes them to step up in ways I wouldn't see in a traditional classroom setting. It was amazing to watch them take ownership, take risks, and make connections with local officials. One of the biggest wins was how open and willing community partners and government officials were to work with high schoolers, which made the experience feel real and meaningful. Next time, I'd like to have students narrow their focus to an actionable solution—something that could actually be adopted into law or practice. I think that would make the project even stronger and give them a real sense of how advocacy can lead to real change.

—Dan Slowik

Student Reflection

The city hall project to me was eye opening/ informative. I learned about issues in the community and was able to see a way to fix them. My group and I had a fun time even through it was a little scary.

—Jackson S.

To learn more, visit hthunboxed.org & hthgse.edu

Graduate School of EDUCATION


Riot Grrrl
Avery, Eleanor, Kyli
COMMON THREAD:
The two movements, the 1950s Riot Grrrl, were a direct result of historical materialization; had the events of the 1950's not taken place, Riot Grrrl would have never transpired. The initiative of Riot Grrrl rejected the conditions and values perpetuated onto women during the 1950s that would continue to plague society, inevitably giving rise to Riot Grrrl as a radicalized byproduct of feminism
1950s
The 1950s was a period of immense economic and social progress due to technological innovation. Throughout this era, conformity and modesty were perpetuated onto


1920s Flapper & 1960s Counterculture
Fashion Origins
FLAPPERS
COUNTERCULTURE
VintageDancer
COMMON THREAD

Project Runway: A Common Thread

Michelle Babick, Humanities
Adrianna Barazza, Spanish
Lexi Wiggins Education Specialist
Eleventh Grade
High Tech High Mesa

Students studied various fashion trends throughout the twentieth century as a gateway to analyzing significant cultural, social, and historical movements. They explored key movements such as First Wave Feminism, the Chicano Movement, Civil Rights and Black Power, Gay Liberation and Ballroom, Disco, and Third Wave Feminism. In Spanish class, students examined the history of clothing in the Americas and how fashion production and design shifted with European colonization. The class focused on the historical importance of traditional design and processes within indigenous communities, particularly in Oaxaca (Tehuana), Chiapas (Tsotsil), Hidalgo (Otomi), Nayarit (Wixárika), and Veracruz (Nahua). Students analyzed how these traditions preserved ancestral knowledge, cultural values, and cosmology, with special attention to the Wixárika's evolution of traditional designs into beadwork and the connection between language preservation and traditional art forms.

Students selected two fashion movements to research, exploring how these movements either disrupted or reinforced cultural norms. Examples included disco fashion emerging from soul, funk, and Motown; the role of drag in the gay rights movement; and the evolution of women's fashion influenced by second and third wave feminism. Students identified thematic and historical connections between both movements and presented their findings in a research paper. For their final exhibition, students showcased their learning through a fashion show. They created two original pieces representing their chosen fashion movements, along with a vision board, outfit sketch, in-depth artist statement, and a music video to educate the audience about the cultural significance of the movements they studied.

Teacher Reflection

Students benefited the most from small group instruction when it came to learning new skills. While we did plan a few workshops with community partners on how to modify clothing and use sewing machines, moving forward, I would amplify the amount of instruction and support students received in these skills. I would want to bring in partners more frequently to run small group instruction so they get more targeted practice with the complex skill sets required to create a beautiful piece.

—Michelle Babick

Student Reflection

This project has made me reflect on our past history and how different groups have fought for their rights. Clothing helped with that—this was something I never knew before.

—Chiara M.

Play it By Ear Project
David Garcia, Math & Science
Nathan Ewart, Humanities
Sixth Grade
High Tech Middle Mesa

In this interdisciplinary project, sixth grade Math/Science and Humanities classes explored the question of "How do we engineer for inclusion?" by focusing on the visually impaired community. Students explored sound, light, and inclusive design to create game adaptations for sight-impaired peers. Research occurrsed between the two classes including historical figures with disabilities which led to CAD-designed 3D prototypes of inclusive games. Students collaborated with the So Cal Beep Baseball Association and UCSD to design and engineer working beep baseballs to provide affordable equipment for this inclusive sport. Students learned to solder the equipment and shared these experiences with the community at an exhibition which included guests from the Beep baseball community.

Teacher Reflection

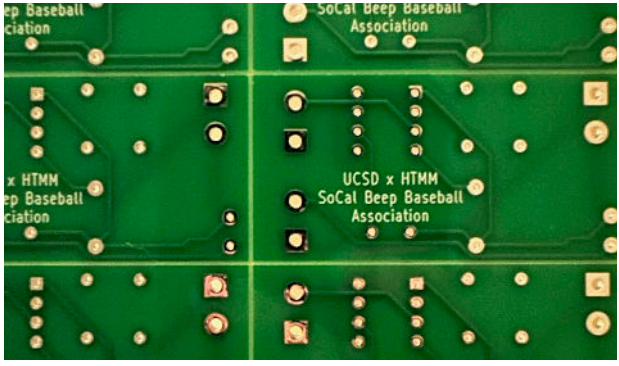
What it became was the kids actually producing something that's going to fulfill a need beyond what the School needs. It's even beyond what the visual impairment and community needs, specifically the baseball community. I was excited that an idea of a project could unfold and design into something that is actually really rad and really making an impact.

—David Garcia

Student Reflection

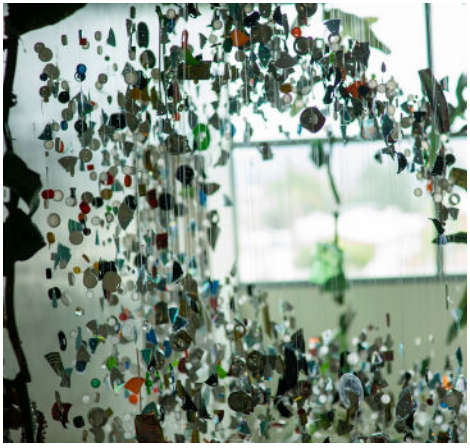
When they told us that there was an equipment shortage, and that not many new players could play I figured out that this project was so much more because we're actually helping the community out. There are not many baseballs right now because the only people manufacturing them are volunteers in their spare time so we have learned from scratch to design and make these baseballs and now we can deliver them to the people who need them most.

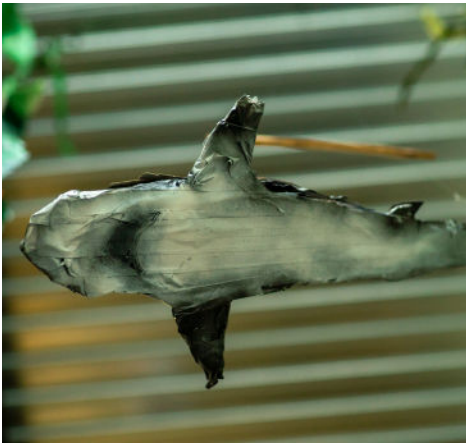
—Blake B.



To learn more, visit hthunboxed.org & hthgse.edu

Graduate School of EDUCATION





Art Saves The Whale!

Tracy French, Mitch Siefert, Joe Acker
Arts
High Tech Middle North County

Students participated in a multi-grade level design challenge to create a habitat for the High Tech Middle North County whale. The whale was created in 2017 to bring attention to the importance of keeping trash out of our oceans, and was crafted from trash collected during a beach clean up. It hangs in the entryway of the school, but was looking a little run down and lonely. Every middle school student was asked to select one of the three design options- create a reef, create water effects, or create animal friends for the whale. Students were sorted into multi-grade-level teams. They used discarded items to create their project and renew interest in keeping our oceans clean. They followed the steps of the design process to guide their work and overcame the challenges from unconventional materials as well as unfamiliar group members. In the end, every student on campus had a hand in creating our campus' largest art exhibit.

Teacher Reflection

Having a school wide design challenge bonds us as a school and allows students to work outside of their grade levels. Many of the students said working with people they didn't know well was the hardest part of the challenge. It was worth the struggle, because we saw sixth graders taking on leadership roles, eighth graders asking for seventh grade feedback, and a ton of unexpected friendships developing. Next time, we would benefit from a few more get to know you activities to push the collaboration even further.

—Tracy French

Student Reflection

Building our cuttlefish was challenging because we were working with different grade levels. In our group to help us blend our different interests we made sure everyone had a clear job to do like cutting cardboard or adding the mod podge. Seeing it hanging close to the whale made the hard work worth it. It was like finding a sandcastle on the beach and adding to it. You are part of the masterpiece.

—Sia D.

To learn more, visit hthunboxed.org & hthgse.edu

Graduate School of EDUCATION

Tidepool Protectors

Claire Deken, Lydia Callis & Ailinne Jimenez
First Grade
High Tech Elementary

In the Tidepool Protectors project, students learned the science behind how tide pools are created and how the environment changes with low and high tides. Through fieldwork and research, our first grade scientists made observations of the animals in the rocky intertidal zone and the various adaptations that these animals have developed to survive the changing tides. Students learned the dangers to tide pools and brainstormed ways to protect them. Students then created an 18 month calendar that lists ideal times to go tidepooling each month, along with their scientific artwork and facts to educate others about the beauty and importance of protecting our tidepools.

Teacher Reflection

We've done versions of this project three times, and every year I learn something new about tidepool animals! I also appreciate that this project ties in well with NGSS-aligned lessons about the moon and patterns in the sun, moon, and stars. This project is engaging for students and families, and I've been using our calendars to plan tidepool visits with my own family.

—Claire Deken

Student Reflections

Something I learned in this project is that limpets are stuck to a rock and that's how they survive. My favorite part of the project was Exhibition because I felt excited to talk to a lot of people.

—Beckham

Before the project, I thought beaches were just sand. My favorite part of the project was teaching people about tidepool animals at Exhibition because it made me feel happy.

—Mateo

In this project, I learned that tidepools are controlled by the moon and it has high tides and low tides. I thought it was just the beach before.

—Gracen


TEACHERS
Disney

HTe Imagineering: A Cultural Journey

Bailey Wallace, Jenny Merrill & Jeff Govoni
Fiftth Grade
High Tech Elementary

In the "HTe Imagineering: A Cultural Journey" project, students designed a theme park "land" based on the cultural elements of a chosen Disney movie. The project combined creative design with scientific principles, as students designed roller coasters and integrated cultural, historical, and engineering aspects into their theme park. They engaged in research about the country or culture the Disney movie represented, explored how cultural elements influenced design, and applied STEAM principles in engineering the roller coasters. The goal was to foster global awareness, creativity, and critical thinking while applying academic skills across disciplines such as reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The final products were exhibited to an authentic audience, showcasing their interdisciplinary work and knowledge in designing a fun and educational experience based on cultural exploration and engineering principles.

Teacher Reflection

This project highlighted the power of interdisciplinary learning in engaging students. By blending culture, engineering, design, and STEM, students gained a deeper understanding of both the technical aspects of theme park design and the importance of cultural representation. Group collaboration was a major success. Students brought unique strengths—research, design, presentation—that contributed to well-rounded projects. Teamwork fostered responsibility and peer learning. The final exhibition, where students presented to peers and community partners, added motivation and pride to their work. A highlight was the behind-the-scenes visit to Disneyland, where students observed how Disney Imagineers integrate storytelling and culture into park design. This real-world experience deepened their understanding and inspired their own projects with tangible examples. For future iterations, we would include more opportunities for expert feedback early in the process to help refine student ideas. Additionally, dedicating time for students to build 3D models of their roller coasters would enhance visualization and reinforce engineering concepts through hands-on learning.

—Bailey Wallace

Student Reflection

My favorite part of that project was building our theme park, thrill ride, and going to Disneyland to see behind-the-scenes work. I love how Imagineers make changes to the park to keep the guests immersed in the theme/story of each land. Some skills that were very helpful during that project were taking charge when needed, the creativity when we were making our themed rides, being able to research on helpful sites, and knowing how to pull the important information from our research.

—Christian I.

Above: An attention-getter in a professional development workshop.

Four Attention-Getters That Work from Kindergarten to Grad School

Alec Patton
High Tech High Graduate School of Education

Here is a paradox of teaching: If you want your classroom to be full of different conversations and self-directed learning, you need to be able to quickly capture everybody's focus.

As you read this you might be thinking, "Sure, Alec, maybe an uptight teacher like you needs to be able to do that, but I'm a facilitator of learning, not a 'sage on the stage.'"

In fact, the opposite is normally true: A star lecturer never needs to capture students' attention, because they never voluntarily let go of it.[1] But if the students in your classroom are getting completely absorbed in small-group discussions, scientific experiments, problem sets, or construction tasks, you will frequently need to get them to stop and listen so you can check how much more time they need, give instructions for what to do next, or simply announce it's time to clean up the space because class ends in five minutes.

So when you need everyone's attention, you have two choices: shout at them—which is bad for both morale and your larynx—or use an "attention-getter." Attention-getters are common in elementary school but rare in high school, and nearly nonexistent in higher education. This is a shame, because all learners benefit from quick and easy ways to focus their attention.

Above: Clap once if you can hear me.

I should note that attention-getters aren't for everybody: I know teachers who cultivate rich, discussion-led, project-based classrooms and never use them. But there's something I'd like you to consider: if you don't need to use an attention-getter to capture the focus of the whole class, it's likely because students are constantly aware of your presence in the classroom. As a teacher, I don't want to be taking up that much space in my students' consciousness. That is to say, when I don't need to have all of their attention, my hope is that I won't have any of it.

Attention-Getter 1: Clap Once If You Can Hear Me

How it works
The teacher quietly says, "Clap once if you can hear me." A few people nearby clap their hands.

This gets other students' attention, so when the teacher says, "Clap twice if you can hear me," more people clap. Sensing the call-and-response pattern, students typically get quiet to find out if there will be another prompt.

Then, the teacher says, "Clap three times if you can hear me," and if all has gone well, the group is—if not totally silent—at least quiet enough that the teacher can start talking, and the last couple conversations will fizzle out pretty quickly.

Above: Quiet coyote.

Why we love it
"Clap once if you can hear me" is my go-to attention getter when I facilitate workshops because it is self-explanatory, so people can participate even if they've never done it before.

I also like the fact that (when it's going well) I don't need to raise my voice, because the sound of clapping creates the volume.

The downside
If "Clap Once" isn't working, you have to just keep going, and by the time you're saying "clap seven times if you can hear me" it has become obvious that you don't have control of the room.

I find that in a classroom setting, it also gets a bit annoying to clap over and over, for both teacher and students. If this is happening, you can start adding more complex instructions, like, "Stomp twice and clap once." You know you've done it right when the whole class is doing the beat to "We Will Rock You."

Attention-Getter 2: Quiet Coyote

How it works
The teacher holds a hand up high over their head, making the "coyote" sign.

Above: Waterfall, waterfall.

As students notice, they put their hand up in the coyote sign too, getting quiet as they do so, until the room is silent.

Why we love it
"Quiet Coyote" is my favorite attention-getter, because there's no escalation, the way there is with a verbal attention-getter like "Clap Once if You Can Hear Me."

Here's what I mean by escalation: If you say, "Clap three times if you can hear me" and the room isn't quiet, you need to keep going, and/or get louder. The result is that you get frustrated, and it becomes obvious to students that you aren't in control of the situation.

But with Quiet Coyote you just calmly hold your hand up, for as long as it takes. I find as a teacher that when it takes a long time, I actually relax a bit as I wait, and I'm able to get a richer awareness of what's going on in the classroom and why it has gotten so noisy. For me, it's an attention-getter and a mindfulness practice all in one.

The downside
It can take a long time for everyone to get quiet, especially at first, which means Quiet Coyote takes a lot of commitment on the part of the teacher.

Attention-Getter 3: Waterfall, Waterfall

How it works
The teacher shouts "Waterfall, waterfall!" and the class responds by saying "Ssssshhhhhhh" while wiggling their fingers and bringing their hands down in front of them.

Why we love it
I generally don't like "teacher shouts a phrase" attention-getters, but saying "Waterfall, waterfall" just does not sound aggressive, so I find that it doesn't raise the tension in the room (which is my worry with shouty attention-getters).

Also, a bunch of people saying "Sssshhhhh" could sound deeply obnoxious, but in the context of being a waterfall it doesn't come across that way.

The downside
It doesn't work if people aren't already familiar with it. However, a lot of people are familiar with it, so it's often worth a try to just say, "Waterfall,waterfall" and see what happens—you may be surprised!

It's also closely associated with elementary school, so some students may feel offended, as if you're treating them like "little kids."

Attention-Getter 4: The "Meditation Chime"

How it works
The teacher rings a chime by tapping it with a mallet. This makes a gentle but penetrating sound that reaches the whole room.

Why we love it
The sound of the chime is both unmistakable and soothing, so it captures attention without causing stress. If used judiciously, students typically quickly learn to look at you (or the front of the room) as soon as they hear the chime.

The downside
You need to keep track of where you put the chime last time you used it! And there is inevitable temptation for students to ring the chime when you're not looking. Some teachers find this easier to manage than others.

How to Set Up Your Attention-Getter for Success

Talk to students about why you're introducing the attention-getter
The best way to set up a successful attention-getter (or any classroom

Above: Meditation chime.

structure) is to explain its purpose and ask students for input.

Challenge Success's Kim Cawkwell, a former elementary school teacher, introduced attention-getters by presenting her need to capture the class's focus as a dilemma to students. In an email to me, she said, "I LOVE creating space for students to engage in discussion and sometimes I also need to quickly capture everybody's focus… What are the different ways we can do that, and what purposes can each type of attention getter serve?" Her students discussed how the class could best solve the "dilemma" of how Kim could capture their focus quickly. This meant both that they understood the purpose of the attention-getter and felt invested in its success.

Practice, practice, practice
When you first introduce an attention-getter, do it a few times with the class so they get used to it when the stakes are low and there are no distractions.

Use a timer to see how long it takes everyone to get quiet. This adds an element of competition—even if students are just competing against themselves for personal best, the timing will make it more exciting.

Practicing an attention-getter may feel like a waste of class time, but think about it like this: If using an attention-getter ultimately saves you two minutes every period, that's forty minutes of extra instructional time each

month!

Add a backstory
When I introduced the "Quiet Coyote" to my class, I started by showing them a video I made starring a coyote named Baptiste.[2]

Adding a bit of backstory (or "lore") to your attention-getter will make it stick in students' minds, and feel a bit more fun.

Use an Attention-Getter that You Don't Mind Doing Over and Over
Whatever method you use to quiet the class is something you will need to do a lot. So it should be something you feel comfortable doing.

It is also good practice to switch attention-getters every so often. If you rely too heavily on one attention-getter, it will become less effective over time.

Play around with attention-getters, see what clicks and ask the students which work best for them. You'll find that the more confident you are about your ability to get students' attention, the less of it you will need—which means they can devote more attention to doing meaningful, interesting work in the classroom.

Notes

1. At least, this is how it works in theory. In practice, students' attention normally wanders a great deal during lectures.

2. You can see the video at https://vimeo.com/157958158. Simpsons fans may notice that Baptiste is closely modeled on the talking Coyote (voiced by Johnny Cash) that Homer Simpson hallucinated after eating exceptionally hot chili peppers.

Above: Students film a monologue as part of the Bonapartism project

Convergence: The Synergy Between Traditional Pedagogy and Project-Based Learning

Peter Jana
High Tech High Mesa

Let's start with a misperception.

It goes something like this: Progressive educators promote "soft skills" at the expense of "hard skills." They are so concerned with teaching teamwork, self-confidence, and creativity that they neglect core academic virtues. Within this camp, weepy-eyed softies hold hands with 21st-century technocrats to jettison what students should really be doing: mastering disciplinary content, reading canonical texts, and applying fundamental academic skills.

Here's another one: Traditional educators promote "hard skills" at the expense of "soft skills." They are so concerned with having students memorize facts out of stale textbooks that they take the joy and humanity out of learning. Within this camp, hard-nosed schoolmarms embrace dusty old professors to jettison what students should really be doing: developing interpersonal skills, following their passions, and solving real-world problems.

To be fair, both of these misperceptions often glean truth in their peripheral visions. Indeed, you might know an educator who fits one of the above descriptions to a T, or you might be one yourself. While there are stark and often incompatible differences between progressive pedagogues and their more traditional colleagues, these differences are not absolute. There can

be—and there often is—convergence between them.

The Synergy of Soft & Hard Skills

In my 19 years of teaching a project-based curriculum in a progressive school, some of the best projects that I've been a part of or observed demonstrate this convergence. They succeed not because anyone follows a rubric of hard skills or checks off a list of the softer ones (although both are useful); they work because teachers plan meaningfully and rigorously in ways that allow the synergy of soft and hard skills to interact.

Soft and hard skills are not distinct entities. Categorizing them as such limits the possibilities of our pedagogy and promotes misunderstanding. We should reframe soft interpersonal skills and hard academic ones not as monads (i.e., distinct elements made up of their own laws) but as a dialectical unity (i.e., interdependent elements that coexist synergistically within the same object). They are two sides of the same coin, not separate coins.

Developing the soft skill of perseverance, for example, is inherent to developing the hard skills of fact acquisition and synthesis. When students go through numerous revisions of an argument because they don't understand an author's counterclaim, or when students have to start a carpentry project from scratch because they got the math wrong, they learn something about facts and something about perseverance. Students don't need a separate perseverance lesson. They learn perseverance by doing perseverance. In other words, when a class maintains high expectations regarding content knowledge, students actively learn and apply the soft skills of perseverance.

The synergy of hard and soft skills doesn't just happen. Synergy is not a singular force unleashed into the classroom. It requires work. Teacher planning, direct instruction, indirect facilitation, student revision, and a maniacal eye on the calendar are all necessary components of creating synergistic opportunities to teach both hard content and soft skills. Fundamentally, academic synergy requires a relevant process and meaningful product.

Rigor and Synergy

Of the many ways we might promote synergy, I offer teaching and learning academic content as our starting point. Traditionalists are right but in nontraditional ways: content should guide curriculum, but not in terms of the memorization of facts or the breadth of coverage. It should provide opportunities for the exploration of rich questions that teach students to think in a new way. Viewed through this lens, content provides a playing field, or arena, within which students explore compelling problems. It is a precondition that allows for the synergy of hard and soft skills.

Above: A filming session in the Bonapartism project.

I will take it one step further. The primacy of content requires disciplinary thinking as the foundation—the kind of thinking that challenges teachers and students to think from a particular disciplinary perspective. It's more than learning the facts of history, science, or math. It's learning to think like historians, scientists, and mathematicians. Academic disciplines provide entry points into the world. They carry their own assumptions and methodologies about what is true, beautiful, and good. By doing so, they provide conceptual tools that assist us in understanding what William James called the "blooming, buzzing, confusion" of our world.

Arguing for the primacy of disciplinary content does not undermine the multidisciplinary teaching often promoted by project-based learning or other progressive pedagogies, but rather strengthens it. Without disciplinary frameworks, multidisciplinary teaching loses its power. Students and teachers risk gliding on the surface of a problem without diving in. We are left with a prefix divorced from its root. Multidisciplinary projects are some of the richest projects because students are compelled to explore a problem through multiple lenses and discern the interconnectedness of reality. The rich, deep project-based learning that I value is made possible because of disciplines, not in spite of them.

Partnerships where I, a humanities teacher, collaborated with biology teachers illustrate this point. One year I partnered with a teacher in a multidisciplinary collaboration that covered genetic engineering, and the following year I partnered with another teacher to cover the topic of health. In these projects, students explored questions like, "Should we pursue genetic technologies?" and "Is health care a right or a privilege?" While my teaching partner explored genetic technologies and the delivery of health care from a scientific point of view, I explored these topics the way philosophers do. Students developed arguments based on a variety of ethical theories, used deductive reasoning, and applied abstract concepts to concrete case studies. The two classes—what we called a "team"—often came together to practice in a series of student-led panel discussions that culminated in a final panel for our public exhibition. This type of approach is firmly rooted in disciplinary thinking and is multidisciplinary.

Multidisciplinary projects require a broad guiding question with entry points for multiple disciplinary perspectives and a series of subquestions that are discipline-specific. They are facilitated by school structures that promote collaboration and planning between teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds. Common prep periods, block schedules, and dedicated planning time are common structures that make collaboration possible. While the most robust projects are often collaborative, multidisciplinary work does not preclude teachers from incorporating different disciplines on their own. A teacher might, for example, include a study of literature in a history project, or, depending on the breadth of their academic background,

teach both the biology and sociology of junk science that has led to wrongful convictions in our criminal justice system.

Of course, not all projects—or curricula—need be multidisciplinary, and neither can they be, for a variety of reasons that grow out of local circumstances. Regardless, academic content is the starting point—but not the end. A content-rich disciplinary project provides a starting point for personal and interpersonal growth to flourish and continues to fuel that flourishing throughout the project.

Depth Versus Breadth: Examples from the Humanities

A conversation about content inevitably raises the issue of depth and breadth and what content to teach in the first place. These are often the most fundamental sticking points between progressives and traditionalists, even when they agree that content is important but disagree on what that content should be. Typically, the more traditional way of designing curriculum provides an overview of a given subject and investigates that subject through a disciplinary lens. This approach provides context and establishes a broad range of foundational content and discipline specific concepts that allow students to see the "big picture" and draw connections within. A history survey, for example, might provide greater opportunities to study change and continuity over time (a historical way of thinking) than a deep dive into a particular event. Conversely, the more progressive way relishes the deep dive. It provides a more narrow, and thus more detailed, exploration of a topic. It offers students the opportunity to become "experts" in a specific topic and avoids the pitfalls of rushing through curriculum at the expense of deep thinking, exploration, and creativity. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. In the former, students might see the forest but miss the trees. In the latter, they might see the trees but miss the forest.

Even with these significant differences, however, convergence is possible in ways that do not undermine disciplinary exploration and the synergy of skills. At the most superficial level, both approaches highlight the importance of facts. Progressives might worry about having too many of them, and traditionalists worry about having too few. Both agree they are important but disagree on which ones to teach and how (or if) students should interpret them. At a more foundational level, however, one might imagine a curriculum that does a little of both. You can have your breadth and dive into it as well.

Take, for example, a history class (or "project") in which students are asked, "Do people make history, or does history make people?" The teacher might guide students into exploring this question through the lens of race in U.S. history from the colonial period to the civil rights movement. Students could deep-dive into a small number of chronological case studies that illuminate

specific examples of successful and thwarted human agency.

This approach is sure to displease those who worry about providing a broad history survey. It leaves out other important topics and by doing so diminishes the number of connections students can make between past and present. It might even displease those who worry that each period in our history deserves a deeper dive as multiple case studies dilute the richness of one. But it does demonstrate how content knowledge can be incorporated into a progressive curriculum that avoids cramming broad swaths of facts into a short amount of time.

In this formulation, students explore thematically related case studies pertaining to topical events and interpret them through a disciplinary perspective. By doing so, they discover historical tendencies and patterns that can be applied to their own time and place.

I don't suggest that we find a formula that creates the perfect balance between depth and breadth. I propose that we plan our curriculum by asking, "Do I need to broaden my content or narrow it for students to investigate this question?" or "What case studies (and how many) best allow us to explore this problem?" With these types of questions serving as the foundation, we have taken the first steps to promote the synergy of hard and soft skills.

A tenth-grade history project that I co-taught a number of years ago with a student teacher will serve as an example. We called this project Bonapartism, after a concept used by Karl Marx. It refers to the historical tendency of revolutions to undermine themselves by resorting to dictatorship. Students explored some of the biggest questions historians can ask: "What is the relationship between the present and past?" and "Is there a pattern to history, or is each period unique?" Two specific case studies guided their exploration of these questions: the French Revolution of 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.

By choosing the guiding questions and the case studies, I created a framework for inquiry. This was intentional and served several purposes. First, the framework provided a degree of depth and breadth. The comparison of two revolutions over 200 years apart created the breadth necessary to explore the big historical questions mentioned above. It also allowed for depth. Limiting the project to two case studies afforded students the opportunity to study the rich nuances of each. Second, the Egyptian Revolution was contemporary and ongoing. It was in the news and the subject of an award-winning documentary, thus providing the content, and the discipline of history, with contemporary relevance. An approach to PBL that takes disciplinary knowledge as the starting point necessitates that teachers create a framework that facilitates student engagement with disciplinary ways of thinking.
Within this framework, students analyzed primary sources, conducted

seminars, engaged in comparative analysis, and wrote argumentative essays. They learned facts because of their significance to the inquiry and encountered historical actors with different versions of those facts. They applied what they learned to a contemporary problem that was in the news every day and developed their own interpretations. Through these ways and others, the project was deeply rooted in content and developed the hard skills necessary for its exploration. Far from dumbing down curriculum, the disciplinary exploration of content deepens it. It's what historians, mathematicians, and scientists do—and it's what students can do with thoughtful teaching.

The Importance of Public Presentations of Learning

Content, however, is a necessary but insufficient condition for promoting the synergy of hard and soft skills. The other component is a final product that is ideally presented to a broader community. A good product not only provides a vehicle for learning content and disciplinary thinking; it also promotes collaboration, problem-solving, self-knowledge, and other soft skills. What matters most is not the kind of product that's exhibited or the medium used—whether it's an artifact or a performance, tech-based or old-school. What matters is that it provides meaning and purpose for student work, reflects student thinking, and is relevant to the world outside the classroom. The public exhibition of a product, within the context of meaningful inquiry, is the north star that answers the question, "Why do we have to learn this?"

For Bonapartism, our product was composed of monologues, written by students from the perspective of historical actors, that we filmed to create a documentary. We exhibited our films at a community center and interspersed excerpts from the documentary with live narration and student-led readings from the primary sources they had studied.

What's fundamental is that Bonapartism's product and its exhibition both provided an authentic goal for students to work toward. The creation of products and their exhibition would not have been possible without soft skills being employed on many levels—from studying history as members of a group to the collaboration needed to film the monologues.

Expectations were high, and the public nature of the exhibition made them higher. Students learned to persevere and problem-solve through practical obstacles like outside noise, lighting issues, old equipment, and their teacher's lack of technical expertise. From Day 1, students learned content with the final product in mind and created products that reinforced historical thinking and demonstrated the refinement in thinking required for a public exhibition. Filming creative monologues as a group reinforced what students learned from primary and secondary sources. Writing comparative arguments reinforced what they learned from the monologues. A feedback loop of mutually reinforcing skills developed—what I call synergy.

The key point is to not fetishize the product at the expense of process. Both are essential. Without process, we lose disciplinary thinking and interpersonal skills. Without a product, disciplinary thinking and interpersonal skills become less meaningful because they are decontextualized—for some students, to the point of irrelevance. Indeed, process and product are so intertwined that we should sweep them into the dustbin of binary oppositions, along with their hard- and soft-skill brethren. We can use these terms when needed, as various parts of the project might need to focus on one or the other, but keep them in their place when they get in the way.

Quality Work

I'm suggesting nothing less than a shift in mind-set. Instead of situating ourselves along a linear spectrum—with progressive pedagogues sitting on the left and traditionalists on the right—we should think in a more dialectical way, one that harnesses the skills and strategies of different approaches to create a synergistic pedagogy that takes full advantage of the ways in which they best work together.

Thinking synergistically opens possibilities and keeps us honest. By considering how different pedagogies work together, curriculum design and implementation are enriched, if not made easier. It prevents us from hunkering into entrenched positions and promotes the exchange of ideas across pedagogical approaches and political orientations. If we lose sight of these possibilities, we run the risk of falling victim to pedagogical posturing and stale bromides. When teachers develop thoughtful, content-rich curriculum and scaffold skills, and when students are tasked with meaningful and rigorous work that explores deep questions and builds toward a common goal, the distinction between "tradition" and "progress," "hard" and "soft," "process" and "product" begins to blur. What we are left with is quality work.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (n.d.). *Deeper learning*. https://deeperlearning4all.org/

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2017, January 5). Ron Berger—The quality of student work [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/pPZqcFfLULE

Brooks, D. (2016, October 16). Schools of wisdom. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/16/opinion/schools-for-wisdom.html

Brooks, D. (2024, November 14). How the Ivy League broke America. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/12/meritocracy-college-admissions-social-economic-segregation/680392/

Fine, S. M. (2016, November 29). Why Dewey needs Freire, and vice versa: A call for critical deeper learning. Learning Deeply. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_deeply/2016/11/why_dewey_needs_freire_and_vice_versa_a_call_for_critical_deeper_learning.html

Gardner, H. (1996). *The disciplined mind*. Penguin.

Huff, G. (2016, August 3). Project-based learning needs more learning. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. https://edexcellence.net/articles/project-based-learning-needs-more-learning

Above: Students reading on the playground at Al Qamar.

The Bookworms & Mr. Reading Pot

Aneesa Jamal
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Tik Tik One, Tik Tik Two." The room reverberated with the sound of 30 children shouting in unison, but Aasiya was oblivious to the noise. Eyes gazing into the distance, a look of deep concentration on her face, her hand scrabbled inside a large brass pot, feeling each item hidden within, trying to guess if it was the prize she wanted. She had waited a long time for this moment, patiently reading a storybook in a language unfamiliar to her family. And this was the payoff! A prize from Mr. Reading Pot himself!

That reading is foundational to learning is an uncontested fact. Research demonstrates that reading aids language acquisition as readers subconsciously pick up grammatical structures, spellings, and vocabulary (Cullinan, 2000; Jouhar & Rupley, 2021; Mackenzie, 2025). Reading stimulates the imagination, as children are drawn into magical worlds, far from their own lived experience (Sumara, 2002). Reading also aids socioemotional development by fostering a sense of empathy, curiosity, and perspective taking (Parry & Taylor, 2018). More importantly, reading with guidance and scaffolding from teachers and parents builds deep understanding and higher order thinking skills (Pearson et al., 2020; Sanden, 2012).

When my husband and I started my tiny, progressive academy, Al Qamar, in Chennai, India in 2009, we were determined that our school would be a

Above: Students reading during DEAR time.

reading school. Naively, we believed that simply providing access to books would be sufficient to instill a love of reading in our students. Each classroom had its own library stacked with well-loved books, often from our personal collection. Unlike most school libraries, our students were allowed to borrow as many books as they liked. Unfortunately, I soon realized that the students were not even touching the books, let alone borrowing them.

Hmm! I wondered if children felt that the books were to be seen, not read. I asked the teachers to start displaying some at the end of each day so students might remember to take them. No go. A few kids borrowed books. The rest simply went home. Bookless.

I soon realized the magnitude of the problem. Books were not commonly found in these children's homes, where families typically watched TV for entertainment. Adding to our challenge was the fact that our books were in English, while Urdu or Tamil were the languages spoken in our students' homes.

To address these issues, we organized regular workshops for parents on the advantages of reading in any language. Over time these workshops helped convince parents that reading was the intellectual version of a superfood—loaded with goodness. We noticed that more books were being borrowed. To our disappointment, we also noticed that the books were being returned

Above: Students reading during DEAR time.

unread. When we asked students basic questions about the book, their blank looks or confusion told us what we needed to know.

We realized it was not enough to convince parents that reading was important. Parents had no idea what to do with the books, and were underestimating how difficult it is to read with a TV blaring in the background. They didn't know that reading aloud to kids has a multitude of benefits and fosters many skills (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Duursma et al., 2008). Parents also struggled to have a discussion about a book that didn't end up as a moral lecture. They had fallen into the same trap as we had—they believed that simply handing a kid a book would make them want to read it. We modified our workshops to focus on tips and techniques for building a culture of reading at home.

We made some progress, but not enough. I realized that we were expecting the magic to happen at home without creating the culture at school. So now, in addition to having libraries in the classroom, we needed to make sure students not only had access to books, but actually wanted to read them. In the younger classes, we started doing daily read-alouds, so students would see reading as something that is both exciting and part of a regular routine. For the older ones, we launched DEAR time. I had come across this concept while trawling websites for reading ideas. DEAR stands for "Drop Everything And Read." We blocked out the last hour of school for DEAR time, for all classes. Realizing the importance of adult role-modeling, I

requested the teachers to also drop everything and read—two birds with one stone. The teachers, who themselves had not been readers, got introduced to the wonder of books. DEAR time was fun. Kids were found on the playground, reading. Under the mango tree, reading. Nestled in a beanbag, reading. Even burrowed under their desks, reading.

Now that we had introduced kids to the magic of reading, I started hearing unusual complaints from middle school teachers and parents. "He's reading all the time." "She's not completing her chores at home because she's reading." "I found her reading in a corner…during class!" I took these complaints as a positive indication that the tide was turning—the bookworms were emerging.

Naturally, once students started reading enthusiastically, they next began discussing their books. I would overhear conversations at lunch, near the lockers, whispers in classrooms, about the latest book they had finished, and one their friend should read too! A brisk trade started up as students swapped books. Even the most reluctant readers started getting pulled into the discussions. To keep up with the "in" group, they had to drop their inhibitions about reading and just dive into a book.

This was the scene at our tiny middle school, with only 15–20 students. However, our elementary school was much larger, with over 50 students, and culture change takes time. Kids were reading—both at home and during DEAR time—but because they were told to. As a result, they were not challenging themselves or progressing to more complex books. We tried getting them to write book reviews, but their response was lukewarm at best. As an older kid put it, book reviews destroyed the enjoyment of reading.

We were at our wit's end.

Then I read about Read-a-Thons, book reading marathons where kids read as many books as they can in a given period of time. We brainstormed how to adopt this program at Al Qamar. Around the same time, I was reading Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. The Golden Ticket! Yes—that was it. We needed a very attractive prize at the end of the Read-a-Thon to incentivize kids to read. Pedagogical wisdom also kicked in. I knew that young children need instant—or at least reasonably swift—gratification. They were not going to wait until the end of the term to win a Golden Ticket. They needed some little prize every week to keep going.

We launched the Read-a-Thon in the last term of the year. Students could earn points for the books they read, and higher-level books were worth more points. Students submitted a weekly log of the books they finished. The points were totaled and every 10 points could be exchanged for a prize. However, just handing out the prizes seemed boring. We had to create an

Above: Mr. Reading Pot.

event! That's where Mr. Reading Pot came in.

I had a lot of my mom's antique furniture and bric-a-brac lying around at home. One item was this 1.5 foot high brass pot, the kind that families used to fill with grain in days long gone by. I used to stock Mr. Reading Pot with little prizes, the kind kids love: fancy pencils, scented erasers, whistles, crazy balls, small toys, whatever knick-knacks I could lay my hands on at the local department store. I'd cover the top with a small cloth, which would let a tiny hand in, but prying eyes were unable to discern the contents.

Every Friday, Mr. Reading Pot would make a grand entrance into the classroom and be seated in the middle of a large circle of squirrely kids. Mr. Reading Pot was a bad-tempered and curmudgeonly fellow. He would refuse to give up his hoard. He would shake and spin. Growl and yell. The children loved him! Each reader's name was said aloud with the total number of prizes they could claim. They'd come up and gently request Mr. Reading Pot to be still. Then, they would carefully insert their arm into his capacious interior while he muttered threats about their fingers getting chewed up by the snakes and dinosaurs hiding inside him. The kids knew Mr. Reading Pot's bark was way worse than his bite. Then the countdown would begin. Each winner had 10 seconds to grab a prize. Some would pick the first thing they touched. Others, like Aasiya, would stretch the time limit to the max, feeling the shape of each item, checking and double checking. When the

children finally saw their prize, they let out squeals of delight or moans of disappointment, and then added to the fun by exchanging prizes with each other.

One issue we faced was how to handle students who were less familiar with English or had learning disabilities that made reading really challenging. It seemed unfair for them to see their peers walk away with prizes while they went home empty-handed. For such readers, we differentiated the point system to ensure they could win, too. This provided the scaffolding they needed to start their book reading journey. One positive result was that our dyslexic and ESL kids were reading well above the average level in other English medium schools.[1]

Over the years, the Read-a-Thon evolved. Bigger treats awaited the readers as they earned ice cream or pizza parties at the end of the term. Kids started saving up their points to buy a book instead of the weekly prize. Bookstores made good money off us, as children placed orders for a longed-for book. Sometimes, the prized outing was a visit to Chennai's famous Anna Library rather than a pizza parlor.

As our school transformed into a reading school, we kicked off a number of other initiatives. We handed over the process of cataloguing to the students. They took responsibility for maintaining the library, cleaning it, restacking books, and managing the return process. We took them to the Chennai Book Fair and secondhand book exhibitions so they could buy books for the school libraries. We had used book sales at school during the monthly parent meetings so kids and parents could browse together. Secondhand books became the go-to end-of-year gifts instead of candy or toys.

We also organized one-off events to build real-life reading connections and excitement. Every year, Al Qamar participated in International Literacy Day. Another year, we invited Nilanjana Roy, a well-known Indian author, for a virtual meeting with the students. When Ms. Roy spoke about being a bookworm as a kid, it was relatable and created a real life connection where children saw that reading could actually lead to both fame and fortune (as an author). Other engaging events included the time I spontaneously bought boxes of books and made a grand classroom entry with them. Presenting students with an overflowing box of new books and seeing them ooh and aah over them was an utterly joyful moment.

My memories of the last Read-a-Thon before the school closed are bittersweet. The Read-a-Thon was in full swing and students were waiting to cash in their points for prizes. Overnight, the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown in response to the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus. We didn't even have time to say goodbye, let alone enjoy one last visit from Mr. Reading Pot. The next year, the class libraries at school were bereft

of little hands enthusiastically grabbing books off shelves, as teaching went online. At the end of the year, Al Qamar closed down forever.

Years later, students still contact me, reminding me they never got their prizes from Mr. Reading Pot, filling me with a deep sense of unfinished business. Other students call me up and reminisce about the Read-a-Thon. A recent call came from one of my most reluctant readers who eventually fell in love with books at Al Qamar. She is now a teacher herself, and wanted my advice on how she could initiate a reading program at her school. Another student was delighted when I sent her photographs from a PG Wodehouse exhibition at the Vanderbilt University library.

Last September, I visited the school that has emerged in place of Al Qamar. As it happens, the room I stayed in was the library, stacked with all the old books that I had personally curated over the years. Another bittersweet moment—it was as if I was spending time with children I had given up for adoption. My hands kept reaching out to stroke a book, pull it off the shelf, open and sniff the pages. The frayed labels at the back, with the catalogue information written by little hands, took me back several years as I relived the memory of bustling classrooms, animated voices, and Mr. Reading Pot.
School management and teachers who visited Al Qamar often asked how they could adopt our reading program. The question, I would ask them back, was one of priorities. Would they be willing to forgo homework or weekly tests to offer students enough time and space to read? The answer, unfortunately, was usually negative. Most schools are so hide-bound by the system that they are unable to change it, even if they know that reading offers way higher payoffs. The other issue was that most schools wanted a straightforward and easy-to-implement solution. Unfortunately, instilling the habit of reading in today's world is an uphill battle—one that requires a sustained, multi-pronged approach. Like threads in tapestry, if just one component is missing, the whole program may fail.

There are four takeaways to consider from Al Qamar's experience with implementing a reading program. First, building a culture of reading takes time…a long, long time. Culture is built, sustained, and passed down. Several cycles of students must go through it, and see their siblings go through it. The strong reading culture we developed at Al Qamar prevented Mr. Reading Pot's rewards from becoming a source of purely external motivation. It also takes time to change parent and teacher beliefs about the value of reading; they need to see concrete reading outcomes in terms that they value—that is, measurable academic achievement.

The second takeaway is about prioritization. Students only have 24 hours in a day. We can overload them with books or we can overload them with homework and test preparation. It cannot be both. As school management we have to intentionally insert reading time and space—as well as discussion

time—into busy school schedules. Small schools have more flexibility than larger schools in this regard.

Third is agency and choice. Kids should not only be able to choose what they read, but they should have greater participation in the entire library system. But field trips to secondhand bookstores are all too rare and most schools would balk at the idea of handing the library system over to kids to manage. Agency and choice also means we need to listen to student voice—if they don't like book reviews, dump them. If they hate book logs, work with them to create a system where they have a different type of record of their reading, without feeling the pressure.

Fourth—and this was a work-in-progress when the school shut down—curate book collections in local languages. This would have been an important step towards affirming the students' identities and culture.

Finally, as I would often remind myself, keep your eyes on the prize and don't ever lose hope. Kids will read for sure, even if they take some time to turn the first page.

Notes

1. In India, English medium schools teach entirely in English.

References

Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2001). Text talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children. The reading teacher, 55(1), 10–20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20205005.

Cullinan, B. E. (2000). Independent reading and school achievement. School Library Media Research, 3, 1–24.

Duursma, E., Augustyn, M., & Zuckerman, B. (2008). Reading aloud to children: The evidence. Archives of disease in childhood, 93(7), 554–557. https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2006.106336.

Jouhar, M. R., & Rupley, W. H. (2021). The reading-writing connection based on independent reading and writing: A systematic review. Reading & Writing Quarterly, 37(2), 136–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2020.1740632.

Mackenzie, N. (2025). The power of independent reading. Qualitative Research Journal. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-09-2024-0200.

Parry, B., & Taylor, L. (2018). Readers in the round: Children's holistic engagements with texts. Literacy, 52(2), 103–110. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12143.

Pearson, P. D., Palincsar, A. S., Biancarosa, G., & Berman, A. (Eds.). (2020). Reaping the rewards of the Reading for Understanding Initiative. National Academy of Education.

Sanden, S. (2012). Independent reading: Perspectives and practices of highly effective teachers. The Reading Teacher, 66(3), 222–231. https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01120.

Sumara, D. J. (2002). Why reading literature in school still matters: Imagination, interpretation, insight (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410603449.

Above: The author's daughter, "rollerskating in a celestial velvet tutu dress while flying a dragon kite."

Radical Dreaming: Reimagining Education to Honor Children and Childhood

Sara Sadek
Folkweaver

I never know what students will be up to when I visit the after-school program at Brightworks, a K–12 school in San Francisco where students drive their own learning. Sometimes, they're slacklining between two redwood trees. Other times, they are hard at work in the art studio, making graphic novels with friends. Or deep in a chemistry set with an after-school collaborator, watching things fizzle, foam, and ooze. One day, I showed up to find a seven-year-old rollerskating in a celestial velvet tutu dress while flying a dragon kite, completely unbridled and free.

Brightworks makes this environment possible because they: 1) fundamentally believe in kids' capacities to drive their own learning; 2) create a liberatory, collaborative partnership between students and teachers—who they call collaborators—and challenge the traditional power hierarchy between adults and kids; and 3) design an environment bubbling with provocations that spark wonder and curiosity amongst the learning community. It also doesn't hurt that their after-school program isn't beholden to academic standards or curriculum requirements, allowing them to let a child's interests lead without traditional school restraints.

Following unbridled curiosity is the central work of children. And, contrary to what industrialized education might demand of us, enabling the deep work of childhood to flourish is the actual central work of educators, school

leaders, caregivers, and anyone bestowed with the honor of raising and educating young people.

Kids are so capable. They are innately curious. They come to us bubbling with ideas, curiosities, questions, and passions. And it is our job to listen.

When we adults trust in children and their capacities, when we create safe, kind, unhurried environments full of interesting provocations, and when we give them support to take their curiosities as far their interest and burgeoning skills can go, we are doing right by children and childhood—we are living out the work of raising kind, free people.

That orientation fundamentally shifts the traditional role of an educator away from disseminator of information to collaborator in a child's learning journey. Disrupting the power hierarchy between adults and children—and instead letting children's curiosities lead—is the paradigm-shifting, necessary work needed to raise kind, connected, self-directed, voracious learners who become kind, connected, self-directed, voraciously curious adults.

What We Lose to the Fire Hose of Industrialized Schooling

When I taught fifth grade in West Harlem just out of college, I joined a progressive public school with strong leadership, incredible educators, and robust funding. Our school leadership had a holistic view of education, and built partnerships with local organizations to give our students access to progressive education and the arts—from Rosie's Theater Kids for theater, Teachers College for weekly literacy professional development, and a strings program partnership where Yo-Yo Ma himself came and worked with our students.

Yet for all the work of our administration and educators to build a holistic, progressive school, everything always felt on fire because of pressures imposed on us by a district entrenched in a system of industrialized schooling. We were told our students were behind before they walked through our doors—before we even knew their names. We were told we had to cram them full of social studies knowledge before their first standardized test in November, then cram them full of math and literacy content before their standardized tests in April.

Sometimes, beneath the frenetic cramming, I'd come up for air long enough to really see my students—how Jonathan loved to existentially philosophize, how Nicole could see math in a million different ways in her head, how Jeremy's worksheets were always covered with incredible comics of his own making—but most of the time, these moments of noticing were diluted as we were all forced to drink from a fire hose that neither my students or I particularly wanted to drink from. Only when testing was done in May did

it feel like we could get out from under the pressure enough to begin to connect to the things that made each child's curiosity come to life—and by then, the school year was nearly over.

Who is this fire hose serving? Why do we all feel so beholden to it? And what if we just reached over together to turn it off?

Centering Children and Childhood in School Environments

In my first years teaching, I learned that running radical, countercultural experiments within a system entrenched in rigid hierarchies and punitive responses to experimentation is an uphill battle, and I'm constantly reminded of that with examples: in San Francisco during the COVID-19 pandemic, a beloved principal at the diverse K-8 school, Rooftop, was reprimanded by the district for responding to the community's request to create equitable pandemic pods to better serve all students within the school. Even with the most countercultural, dedicated staff, the system itself penalizes innovation and demands conformity. And that is fundamentally anathema to what best serves students and their learning.

When I became a mother nearly a decade ago, I decided to run radical experiments outside of traditional systems in search of an answer to the question, "How do we approach learning in a way that truly honors and centers children and childhood?"

That question led to a decade of facilitating, organizing, and supporting countercultural parenting and education communities—from co-founding a Forest Preschool Cooperative for my eldest, leading a connection parenting playgroup (focused on relational-based, non-coercive ways of parenting young children) for my youngest, serving as an active community member of Brightworks School, and advising and collaborating with other people and teams looking to challenge the fundamental constructs around children and their learning.

It's not lost on me that opting out of traditional public systems of education to radically experiment in alternative systems is a privilege. Doing so in the Bay Area, where socioeconomic disparities are so glaring, is even more so. And while some of us are opting to run these experiments outside of traditional public schools, many parents and educators are doing so within them. Both approaches feed each other. Whether we are working to change the system within public schooling or outside it, together we create an ecosystem where we can learn from and share our collective experiments in service of creating an educational paradigm that actually honors children, their curiosity, and their capacity.

So where do we go from here to collectively experiment with paradigm-shifting ways to serve kids?

I believe the answer lies in radical dreaming.

Radical dreaming—collectively visioning new possibilities that don't already exist—is our first and most important tool in designing new and more hopeful paradigms that better serve children. When we collectively come up for air to imagine alternatives to what our society has normalized—but is not normal—for our children, we better equip ourselves to forge new pathways that truly center children and their capacities. We cannot create what we cannot dream, so we have to dream audaciously and unapologetically.

Radical Dreaming Can Lead to Radical Experiments

Here's a radical dream—an experiment I wish we could collectively run. What if temporarily, say for six weeks or so, we all agreed to turn off the fire hose. What if we paused together to take out a proverbial box, and we put all the state standards in there. Then, we tucked away all the grades, assessments, and tests. We piled on top all the knowledge deemed urgent for every child to know, then put away all the punitive, reward- and punishment-based systems to get students to do what we want.

With all those things temporarily tucked away, what if we decided that our role as educators and caregivers was simply to:

1. Slow down and build deep, safe, kind, trusting relationships with our students that convey in every interaction: I see you, I'm listening, I know you're so capable, I'm here to support you, let me help you get where you want to go.
2. Introduce provocations that spark curiosity, exploration, and surface questions in need of answering.
3. Give kids plenty of unhurried time to explore what makes them light up, and deeply listen to the interests bubbling to the surface.
4. Connect and support them with the tools, resources, and skill sets they need to follow their curiosities as far as their burgeoning capacities will take them.

What might school look like if we tried this for six weeks? How might our understanding of children and childhood shift? How might our understanding of learning shift? What feels impossible about that scenario? What support might we need as educators, caregivers, and school leaders to make that sort of experiment possible?

I know firsthand that taking six weeks to shove the standards in a proverbial box can feel daunting, especially for folks working within entrenched

systems. Radical dreaming is supposed to feel a little daunting for us: it forges a pathway into the unknown. It challenges the current system's constructs, and in a system that penalizes innovation, that can feel uncomfortable, if not straight up impossible. But in the discomfort, we stretch our capacity to say "what if," and birth new possibilities together for what can be—possibilities that actually center what's best for our kids, not what's best for an ingrained system.

Maybe right now, running that particular experiment en masse feels impossible. But now that we have named it together, what smaller experiments might feel more possible in the spirit of that dream? Maybe we can't collectively run this experiment for six weeks, but we could run this experiment for two hours each day in our schools. Or maybe we run it each Friday afternoon. Or maybe we can run it in May, after testing is behind us. Or maybe we individually begin to experiment with changing the power dynamic between us as educators and our students in our daily interactions with them, and notice what happens when we do.

I wonder what we'd all learn together, carving out pockets in our days to explicitly shift the purpose of our roles as educators and caregivers like that. I wonder what we'd find absolutely necessary to pull back out of the proverbial box. I wonder how many things might just be better staying in there, if we ran the audacious experiment to let children's curiosity lead.

I don't know the answers, but I'm here with you, committed to asking the questions. Let's radically question, dream, and run some experiments together.

Above: Students ideate using a window.

The Power of YES

Loni Berqvist
Imagine If ApS

It was the week before the exhibition at High Tech Middle Chula Vista. My eighth-grade class had spent the last two months exploring the question, "What makes us resilient?" We visited the Holocaust Museum in Los Angeles, shared our own stories of overcoming challenges, researched important figures in history, and wrote spoken-word poems about people in our lives who we admired for being resilient.

Over the next week, we would transform the classroom into a café and welcome guests to experience a slam poetry event. This would take place during Festival del Sol, an annual event where every class in the school exhibits their projects for a public audience.

Our slam poetry event had a unique feature: We had invited the people we wrote about to be our honored guests for the evening. We also painted portraits of them to give them as a gift at Festival del Sol.

During the last few days of work time, some students broke into groups, while others scattered to put the final touches on their art pieces. Still others found a space alone and practiced reciting their poem.

One student, Andrea, walked up to me.

Above: Loni's classroom set up for the poetry slam.

"Can I talk to you?" She asked.

We sat down at a table. Andrea outlined a problem she foresaw regarding the exhibition next week.

"Well, we have these guests we've made the poems and portraits for. It's really important that they can sit down in the classroom and feel special."

She continued.

"But the whole-school exhibitions are crazy. There are so many people and I'm really worried that the people we want to hear our poems won't even be able to fit into the room."

She really got me thinking. Andrea was right. In the worst case situation, the room would be packed and we would risk not being able to perform for the people who mattered most in this project: the people in our own lives who we were celebrating.

I asked Andrea what she thought I should do.

"Can I take care of it?" She asked.

I thought for a moment… should I really let an eighth grader take responsibility for this? What would happen if she didn't succeed? As the teacher, wasn't it my job to fix this? I looked at my growing to-do list and took a deep breath.

"Yes. Go for it." I found myself saying. I asked if she needed anything from me. "Nope, I'm good," she replied. Andrea ran over to a few friends and got right to work.

A few days later, I received an email from a parent that said, "Can you resend the sign-up link that Andrea sent out for the exhibition?"

I had no idea what they were talking about.

I called Andrea into my office and after a short discussion, her plan became clear. She had organized the poetry slam performances into 20-minute time slots with 5-minute breaks in between. She went around to every student and had them sign up for a time. Andrea then emailed a sign-up form to all the parents and featured guests, asking that they reserve a table for the time their child would perform.

Next, Andrea drew a layout of the tables with numbers. She recruited a handful of "hosts" for the evening and gave them instructions on how to escort guests to their reserved tables. Every 20 minutes, the Master of Ceremonies would announce a small break and the guests would be escorted out, making room for the new group. The back of the room was standing room for those coming from the whole-school exhibition.

I resent the sign-up link to the parent, in utter awe of Andrea's work. All I could do was support her.

On the night of the event, the plan worked perfectly. The students built a café awning outside the classroom door with a "host podium" where guests could check in. Andrea stood at the podium for the entire night, proudly welcoming guests. It was because of Andrea that the poetry slam was such a success. Our students could share their performances with their honored guests, all of whom had a place to sit and concentrate on the heartfelt words of a poem about them.

***

When I reflect on this story, I think first about the scale of what Andrea accomplished. After years of teaching at High Tech High, I learned from many veteran teachers the importance of a key principle of project-based learning: Set the floor, open the ceiling. In other words, it's important to set a minimum standard for acceptable quality of student work, but you also

need to make sure not to limit students' ambitions. Andrea and the poetry slam continues to serve as one of my favorite examples of how projects can empower students to take ownership and action beyond what we (adults) think is possible.

Now, I need to make a confession. If I had taught Andrea in my first years of teaching, I don't think any of this would have happened. To open the ceiling for my students, I needed to learn to say a single word to them more often: YES.

***

I started my teaching career in a traditional middle school in San Diego. The emphasis on classroom management, reaching learning goals, and "being in control" taught me to fear giving my students too much freedom. The idea of a noisy and chaotic class made me feel that I might never get them back or they might no longer respect my authority. My default answer to most ideas students brought me was NO. It wasn't because I didn't value student agency or didn't want to listen to my students. I just didn't know how to be a teacher in control and simultaneously open my practice to student ideas.

So, I started small.

When a student had an idea? I practiced saying YES.

When a group wanted to do something a different way? I practiced saying YES.

When a class hated a lesson but had a better idea for how I could teach it? I practiced saying YES.

I found that these small acts of YES actually gave my students reason to trust me. Not just because I started asking for their ideas and feedback, but because I listened and used what information they gave me the very next day. Over time, my fears about losing control dissipated. Any authority I had was not built on the inherent (but inherently fragile) teacher-student power relationship, but shifted towards a firmer foundation of mutual understanding and working together towards a common goal.

As YES became my classroom culture, I found students became less afraid to bring me bigger, wilder, and more ambitious ideas. In fact, it became helpful for me to do a simple reflection before automatically saying YES, just so I could best manage whatever scenario came after.

I learned that if a suggestion was a big deviation from the original plan, I asked myself:

1. Will this idea hurt anyone?
2. Will this idea compromise the foundational learning in this lesson/project?

If the answer was "no" to both of these questions, I said YES.
Even if I was not sure the students could do it, I said YES.
Even if I was nervous that the rest of the class would want to ditch my plan and do something different, I said YES.

YES is an invitation.
It opens up for ownership.
It creates a relationship built on community, not control.
It's a simple shift that can create transformative change.
And most of the time?

My student's ideas were way better than mine anyway.

Contributors

Erin Asselin is an Engagement Specialist with the Connecticut RISE Network. In this role, she supports ninth-grade educators in guiding students through the critical transition into high school. Erin has led with passion and creativity in education in all roles, starting as a middle school teacher in Baltimore, MD, and continuing as a founding teacher and school leader in Hartford, CT.

Dr. Jacobē Bell is Network Director for Teaching Matters with expertise in English Language Arts and culturally responsive school improvement. She started the Teaching Matters NSI, driving systemic change through equity-focused strategies. With over 20 years of experience as a National Board Certified Teacher, Instructional Coach, Network Administrator, and consultant across public and charter sectors, Jacobē specializes in curriculum development, instructional excellence, and leadership coaching.

Jennifer Ciok is the Manager of Coaching & Improvement for the University of Chicago's To&Through Middle Grades Network. In this role, she supports middle schools across multiple cohorts in Chicago Public Schools to help build these systems using both qualitative and quantitative data and research to define problems of practice and implement change ideas to better support students. She has also written a book, *The Meaningful Middle School Classroom*, where she shares stories, ideas, and research to help educators create the sparks for engagement that lead to deeper learning. Prior to her work at To&Through, Jennifer was a middle school social studies and English teacher for 15 years and a Social Emotional Learning Manager at the high school level for five years.

Loni Bergqvist is a graduate of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education and a former High Tech High teacher. Since 2013, she has worked internationally to support schools with transformation using Project-Based Learning as a catalyst for pedagogical, cultural and organizational change. She is the founder of Imagine If ApS and lives in Denmark.

Linzi Golding is a Senior Grade 9 Success Coach with the Connecticut RISE Network. She has built her career of over 20 years as an urban leader, program manager, teacher and education specialist. She specializes in coaching, continuous improvement, and advocacy for under-resourced communities. As a Senior Freshman Success Coach, Linzi supports school leaders in driving student success, particularly with high school transitions and postsecondary readiness.

Melanie Gonzalez is a Senior Evaluation and Data Analytics Specialist with the Connecticut RISE Network. In this role, she evaluates strategies aimed at

improving outcomes for young people in high school and shares data stories to increase understanding and inspire change. She has worked to address community needs for over 11 years through direct service and support, partnership and coalition building, anti-racist community education and organizing, program evaluation, research, and organization development.

Zack Jaffe has served in Baltimore City Public Schools for 22 years. He is currently a manager in the Office of Continuous Improvement; in this role, he facilitates improvement initiatives, including teacher fellowships, professional development sessions, and school leadership support. Previously, he worked in the Literacy Office for five years and was a high school English teacher for 15 years.

Aneesa Jamal has been involved with innovative work in school education for the past 14 years. She is the founder of Cogitation Club and Al Qamar Academy. In 2023, she was selected as one of 30 global CEE-Change Fellows by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). An alumna of Smith College, she holds an MBA from the University of Washington and is currently pursuing her PhD in Education at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Her research work focuses on project-based learning, environmental education, and climate change education.

Peter Jana teaches 10th grade Humanities at High Tech High Mesa. He has also taught on deployed Navy warships as a community college instructor. Peter is a San Diego native who was educated at Mesa College, San Diego State University, and the Claremont Graduate School.

Alec Patton is editor-in-chief of *Unboxed*.

Dr. Reshma Ramkellawan is a Senior Educational Consultant at Teaching Matters. While the crux of her expertise is nested in secondary literacy instruction, she has also supported Math and Science teachers with their pedagogy and curriculum planning. Her interest and expertise includes digital and media literacy, curriculum development, staff and leadership coaching, and education research. Prior to joining Teaching Matters, she served as an assistant principal for a prominent New York City charter network.

Hannah Read is the Senior Manager of Program Design and a Crew Coach at NYC Outward Bound Schools. She supports NYC public schools to implement Crew, an advisory model and school-wide structure that fosters student belonging and social-emotional growth. She also develops and manages a variety of workshops and programs focused on community building and student empowerment in schools. Previously, she spent 10 years working in nonprofit fundraising and volunteer management both at NYC Outward Bound Schools and Greenwich House.

Sara Sadek is a writer, educator, and advisor. She writes weekly essays on connection at Folkweaver.substack.com, and has been published in Mutha Magazine and Motherly Magazine. Sara is the founder of Attuned Advising, a coaching and strategic advising consultancy, where she supports founders and organizational leaders to cultivate teams rooted in care. She serves on the Pedagogy Committee at Brightworks School, and loves working with people and teams to reimagine the constructs of childhood, education, motherhood, and collective care.

Tony Sandoval is in his 30th year teaching middle school science, currently at Parkway Academy of Sports and Health Sciences. He earned his BS in Biology at UCSD and an MA in instructional technology at Chapman University. Tony believes in constant reflection and improvement in his personal teaching practice and helping his school community to engage students in deeper thinking and learning.

Naomi Wilfred is is Manager of Coaching & Improvement for the University of Chicago's To&Through Project. In this role, she works closely with a cohort of schools in Chicago Public Schools to improve students' middle grades experience. In addition to her coaching responsibilities, Naomi leads the MGN Student Fellowship, a program that focuses on amplifying student voice and leadership skills. Prior to her work at To&Through, she was a Chicago Public School teacher where she taught and designed for almost every grade level and subject area. Her classroom space was dedicated to providing identity-centered, antiracist, healing, and joyful learning experiences.

Amiee Winchester began her career as a fourth grade teacher where she continually confronted a system that reliably failed to produce transformative outcomes for all students. This experience catalyzed her passion to join a community of practitioners who actively work to build more equitable education systems that center the experiences of children and families. In her current role as Director of Continuous Improvement in Baltimore City Public Schools, Amiee leads the design and scale of a sustainable district-wide improvement strategy that focuses on aligning and innovating systems, constructs processes and practices to successfully drive organizational change, and crafts learning-by-doing professional development opportunities for leaders and practitioners.

unboxed
EDITORIAL TEAM

Randy Scherer
Director of Unboxed

Alec Patton
Editor-in-Chief

Brent Spirnak
Multimedia Ethnographer

Patrick Yurick
Website Design

Luke Piedad
Website Development

Victor Flores
Website Development

Cecilia Rodriguez
Website Development

Julio Garcia-Granados
Data Scientist

unboxed A JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Unboxed is a journal of reflections on purpose, practice, and policy in education, published twice yearly by the High Tech High Graduate School of Education.

Subscriptions
Unboxed is available online for free at hthunboxed.org, an ever-changing repository of web-based resources for educators, researchers, school developers, and policymakers. Printed copies of this issue are available at hthunboxed.org and amazon.com.

Submissions
Unboxed welcomes submissions from teachers, administrators, teacher educators, policymakers, researchers, and other informed observers of education. In addition to reflections on practice, submissions may include essays on purpose and policy, accounts of teacher research, scholarly articles, project design tools, photography, art, and student work.

Send submissions to unboxed@hthgse.edu or to the HTH Graduate School of Education, Attn: *Unboxed* Submissions, 2150 Cushing Road, San Diego, CA 92106.