



A Union of Professionals

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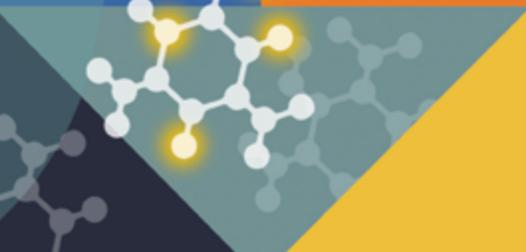
AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS



SPARKING A RECOVERY

From a Safe and Welcoming Return to
a Reimagining of Public Education



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COVID-19 VACCINATION

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COUNCIL

Reopening Schools Means Prioritizing Safety for Students and Staff



Creating Welcoming and Safe Environments Where All Students Thrive

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

OUR STUDENTS NEED to be—and stay—in their schools and on their campuses this school year. The positive effects of in-school learning are obvious. And while the delta variant is a huge challenge, it hasn't changed our resolve to keep our schools and colleges open and to ensure that they are safe and welcoming. It means, however, we must use the tools that will keep our school communities safe: vaccines, masks, ventilation, hand washing, distancing, testing, and clear protocols if an outbreak occurs.

Schools' and colleges' greatest responsibility is protecting the lives of students and staff. Vaccination is the most effective tool we have to combat COVID-19. That's why I personally have been urging everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated and why the AFT's executive council unanimously approved a resolution to work *with* our employers on their vaccination policies and requirements, ensuring those policies are implemented fairly. And, to protect those who are not able to be vaccinated, including kids under 12 and those who require medical (or religious) exemptions, we're calling for universal masking, frequent testing, and other mitigation strategies.

Today, we have the tools to emerge from this crisis, but they only work if we use them. It is unconscionable that some governors have been prohibiting mask requirements in schools. COVID-19 policies should be set by health and education officials whose first priority is keeping our students and staff safe—not by politicians.

The AFT's Back to School for All campaign has been a Get Out the Vote-type campaign in support of in-person learning—and a vehicle to make it safe with our push for masking, testing, and vaccines. By the middle of August, we had invested \$5 million to award upwards of

75 grants covering more than 1,800 AFT affiliates and engaging communities with 20 million students. Our members have talked to thousands of parents, done hundreds of walk-throughs of school buildings, stood up vaccine clinics, given away books, and yes, had some fun doing it. I know. I am crisscrossing the country: Visiting 20 states. Lifting up and supporting these Back to School efforts.

I've been met by a school band in Martinsville, Indiana, a bubble machine at the Safe Start Celebration in St. Louis, and a parrot named Olive with her high-school-student docent in Petaluma, California. I have been in countless classrooms where, even through the masks, I have witnessed the incredible work of educators who every day make real the promise and potential of public education for our students.

You—AFT union leaders and activists—are doing the hard work of engaging families, students, and communities on how to safely return to in-person learning five days a week. From kindergarten teachers to graduate school faculty, you all have been doing this work because you know that in-person learning is what's best for students, their families, and our country.

You—AFT affiliates—have been holding vaccination clinics to combat the disinformation that is fueling vaccine hesitancy and to give lifesaving vaccines to more people. And you've been reconnecting with the families of students who attended school infrequently or not at all over the last academic year.

This is what solution-driven unionism looks like!

Schools and colleges are critical for kids' and young adults' recovery—academically, emotionally, and socially. This is our moment to first safely reopen and quell the virus, then reimagine education

to create public schools and colleges where educators want to teach, families want to send their students, and all young people can learn and thrive.

In this issue of *American Educator*, a wide range of experts who care deeply about our youth—including educators,

Educators make real the promise and potential of public education.



religious leaders, and economists—share their visions for reinvesting in public education as a public good. They offer a mix of well-established research and real-world examples of how we can support whole-child development by cultivating emotionally trustworthy, academically ambitious, and culturally affirming learning environments. And they demonstrate that America can afford to fully and equitably fund schools, colleges, and other institutions that are essential for family and community well-being.

As you arrive at your school or college each day, know that I am grateful for your dedication and that your union is fighting for you and your students. □

To thrive, our youth need safe and welcoming environments that offer far more opportunities to engage in authentic, purpose-driven learning, with community-based inquiries, culturally sustaining practices, and the freedom to cultivate their passions. In short, they need us to reimagine our mission and demand changes in our systems.

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OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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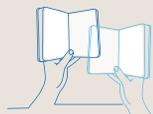
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Empowering Students as Changemakers

For decades, youth in the United States have been leaders on issues from civil rights and educational opportunities to gun control and clean air and water. Youth activism is increasing, and young voices are pivotal to creating solutions to the injustices that keep their communities from thriving.

Educators engage youth as leaders every day. To support their efforts, the AFT, Share My Lesson, First Book, and the NAACP are collaborating on a campaign, “Stamping Out Racism and Hate,” to inspire student learning and activism. Many carefully curated resources are available; among them is a special AFT edition of *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, a young adult adaptation of Boston University professor Ibram X. Kendi’s award-winning *Stamped from the Beginning*.

Below we highlight additional lessons and resources available in the Stamping Out collection to guide classroom discussions on these critical issues.

Human Rights

Beyond emphasizing the importance of dignity, equality, and fairness as foundational to a free and just society, educators can deepen students’ learning about removing barriers for vulnerable populations. Share My Lesson partner the Global Campaign for Education created “Lesson for All: Enhancing Global Competence” to inspire K–6 students to advocate for children around the world who do not have access to a quality education. For grades 6–12, Makematic’s “Take Action for No Poverty” uses video clips to explain the

United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030; in its Saving Empathy Project, students reflect on homelessness, hunger, and poverty globally and locally; they also co-create solutions for their communities.

Social Justice Issues

To advocate for human rights in their communities, students benefit from understanding how systems of social power cultivate inequity and oppression. The Anti-Defamation League created “Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate” to help K–12 students process their feelings and take action following incidents of hate- or bias-motivated violence.

For grades 6–12, Blueshift Education debunks myths about undocumented immigrants and emphasizes their diverse experiences. In “Waking Dream,” students use short video stories of six undocumented teens to explore what it means to be American, witness the indignity of family separation, and consider the need for a path to full citizenship.

Storytelling is a powerful medium for exploring social issues and creating change. The 2021 Share My Lesson Virtual Conference webinar “Empowering Teen Voices and Changemaking Through Podcasts” highlights the “Genius Generation” of teens acting on issues such as climate change and the Flint, Michigan, water crisis. It also includes a free teacher webinar on using podcasts to empower middle and high school students to be changemakers for issues they’re passionate about.

Diverse Books

Developing an appreciation for cultural differences can help combat prejudice and inspire students to act against injustice. *Seeds of Change* tells the story of Wangari Maathai, activist, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and founder of the Green Belt Movement. The teacher’s guide (from the publisher, Lee & Low Books) gives interdisciplinary strategies for grades 3–5 to increase comprehension and inspire students to get involved in environmental preservation projects.

And for grades 6–8, a teacher-created unit on Alan Gratz’s novel *Refugee* explores themes of invisibility, perseverance, and hope in the refugee experience as narrated by three fictional survivors of the Holocaust, Cuban hunger crisis, and Syrian civil war. The six-week lesson plan features dozens of instructional and supplemental resources, including rubrics and printable worksheets.

These topics can be challenging, so you may prefer to digest some of the materials in the Stamping Out collection for your personal enrichment or in your professional learning communities before adapting them for your classrooms. If you have developed materials to engage students as changemakers, share your expertise with the Share My Lesson community by uploading your lesson plans (visit sharemylesson.com and click on the link in the upper right corner). Please reach out to us with any additional ideas or requests at content@sharemylesson.com.

–THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

Recommended Resources

To access these free resources, visit aft.org/ae/fall2021/sml.

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You

Lesson for All: Enhancing Global Competence

Take Action for No Poverty

Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate

Lessons for Waking Dream: Learning About Immigrant Experiences

Empowering Teen Voices and Changemaking Through Podcasts

Seeds of Change Teacher’s Guide

Refugee Unit Template

Moral Policy = Good Economics

Lifting Up Poor and Working-Class People—and Our Whole Economy



By Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, Shailly Gupta Barnes, Josh Bivens, Krista Faries, Thea Lee, and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis

When the coronavirus pandemic arrived, the United States was already deeply unequal. Before the pandemic, 140 million Americans were poor or near poor,* living just one emergency above the poverty line. The 140 million included approximately 60 percent of Black, non-Hispanic Americans (24 million), 64 percent of Hispanic Americans (38 million), 60 percent of Indigenous Americans (2 million), 40 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (8 million), and 33 percent of white Americans (66 million).²

Indeed, the pandemic spread rapidly in the fissures that previously existed because of racism, poverty, and profound inequality—and our refusal to acknowledge the full extent of these injustices in our public discourse or public policies. Alongside

enduring inequities in the social determinants of health (including access to safe and affordable housing, clean air and water, healthful foods, quality education, and public transportation), the economic effects of the pandemic hastened even greater insecurity, especially for poor people of color. It is estimated that the 140 million grew to nearly 150 million during the pandemic,³ but most of these people remain uncounted among the poor and therefore excluded from many of our policies. At the same time, our policy responses to this widespread insecurity are constrained in part because we do not have an accurate account of it.

This inequality in the United States did not happen suddenly and cannot be explained as the consequence of individual failures; rather, decades of public policies brought us to this point, making the rich richer at the expense of everybody else. When we fail to meet basic needs for food, housing, and healthcare for everyone, when we fail to invest in education, safe communities, and fair elections, the health and well-being of our entire nation is compromised. We waste our most precious resources, yes. But more than that, we allow the potential of individuals, families, and communities—and the full potential of our nation and its ideals—to go unrealized.

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II is the president and senior lecturer of Repairers of the Breach and a co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Shailly Gupta Barnes is the policy director for the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice and the Poor People's Campaign. Josh Bivens is the director of research at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), where Krista Faries is an editor. Thea Lee is the former president of EPI. The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis is a co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign and the director of the Kairos Center.

*“Americans” refers to all US residents, regardless of citizenship status. “Poor or near poor” is defined as having household income below 200 percent of the poverty threshold, per the Supplemental Poverty Measure. It is widely recognized, though, that both the Supplemental Poverty Measure and the even more miserly Official Poverty Measure set far too low a standard for economic security.¹



This article is a collaboration between the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival—a moral movement rooted in the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that is organizing around the needs and demands of the 140 million in 45 states—and the Economic Policy Institute (EPI)—an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that uses economic research and analysis to understand and improve the economic conditions of workers and their families. In this article, we evaluate the public policies that shaped the preexisting conditions of the pandemic, policies that were by no means accidental or morally neutral, and lay out the policies that we need to counter and reverse the status quo, including the heightened suffering from the pandemic.

The Roots of the Pandemic Recession

The economic damage done by COVID-19 in the United States was amplified by the decades of policy choices leading up to it. The early months of the pandemic precipitated a historically large and damaging economic shock, far beyond the 2008–09 Great Recession and even the 1929–39 Great Depression. Because

COVID-19 spread so efficiently in face-to-face situations, economic sectors that relied on in-person interactions—including food service, retail, hospitality, education, and many health sectors, among others—were essentially closed when social distancing measures came into force. These widespread closures resulted in a stunning collapse of economic activity and employment. In March and April of 2020 alone, 22 million workers lost their jobs.⁴ Along with lost income, an estimated 12 million people also lost employer-sponsored health insurance.⁵

A Closer Look at America’s Inequality

For an even closer look at several of the most crucial problems facing working families, see the online version of this article. It has additional figures on job losses during the pandemic, astounding differences in wage growth between the lowest- and highest-paid among us over the past 40 years, and the decline in the value of the minimum wage. Visit and share: go.aft.org/pbn.

The recovery from this shock has been uneven. Although recessions always hit low- and middle-wage workers the hardest, by the end of 2020 the lowest-wage sectors were still down by nearly 8 million jobs while the highest-wage sectors actually gained about 1 million jobs.⁶ Within low-wage sectors, Black, Hispanic, and women workers have been disproportionately impacted.⁷ Recovery could be a long time coming for many of these workers.⁸

This overwhelming impact on low-wage work reflects an economy that has become dramatically more unequal over the past 40 years. As summarized in the figure on page 6, huge swaths of the US workforce have

been disempowered since the 1970s.⁹ Productivity—defined as the amount of income generated in an average hour of work in the entire US economy—has grown consistently over this time. But instead of going to typical workers, the benefits of our increasingly productive economy have gone mainly to corporate and business executives and wealth owners (e.g., stock market investors). Therefore, what this figure really shows is the stark disparity between what workers *are* paid and what they *could* be paid.

If typical workers' pay had kept up with productivity growth over this time, there would have been no increase in inequality. In a very real sense, that “wedge” between productivity and pay is the extent of inequality in the US economy.

This inequality becomes more stark as we move down the wage distribution. Wage growth has been most stunted for the lowest-wage workers. Workers at the 10th percentile saw only 3.3 percent *cumulative* growth in hourly wages between 1979 and 2019;* however, workers at the 50th percentile saw 15.1 percent growth over that period, and workers at the 90th percentile saw 44.3 percent growth.¹⁰ As stark as these disparities are, at the very top of the earnings distribution, the gaps become enormous. Analyzing annual earnings,[†] EPI finds that while wages

for the bottom 90 percent of workers grew 26 percent, workers at the 99th percentile saw 160 percent wage growth and those at the 99.99th percentile saw 345 percent wage growth.¹²

The Moral and Economic Costs of Poverty and Inequality

Rising inequality is associated with slower overall economic growth and more persistent poverty. As shown in the figure on page 7, EPI has estimated that if we had *not* experienced rising inequality since the late 1970s—if the fruits of our productivity had continued to be shared more broadly, as they were in previous decades—the poverty rate would have dropped to zero by the year 2000.¹³

This is not the trajectory we have followed. Instead, poverty and economic insecurity have been allowed to grow alongside the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands, with real consequences:

- **Families are hungry.** In 2019, more than one in 10 US households faced food insecurity at some point during the year, and households with children were even more likely to not know

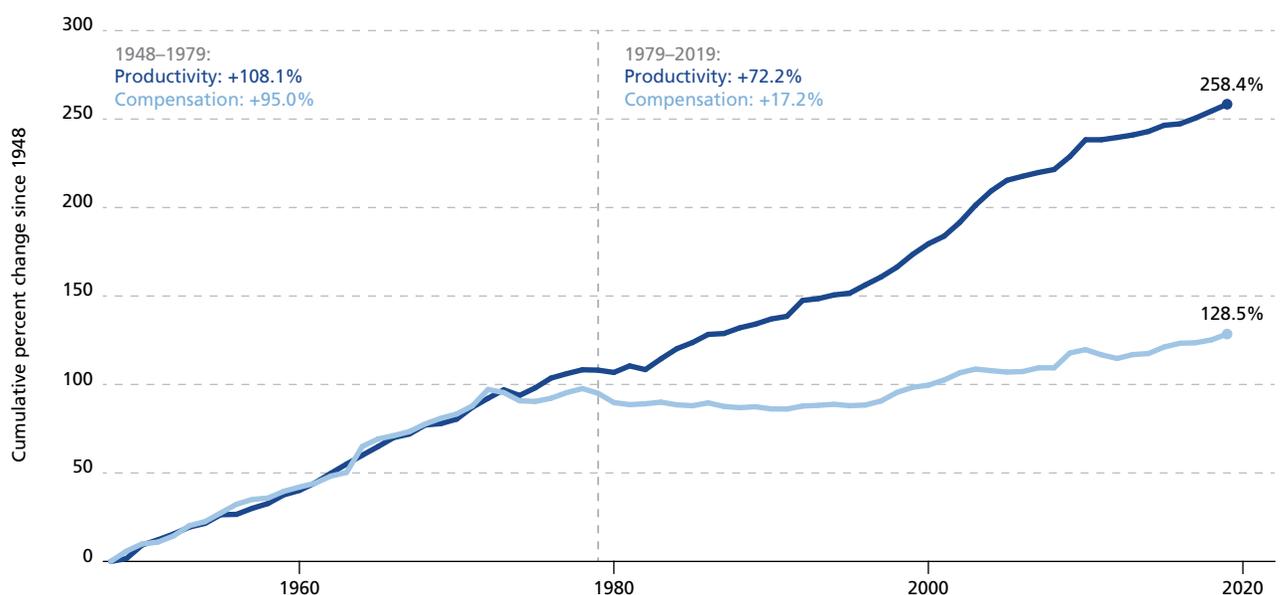
*We do not include 2020 data in this analysis because the 2020 numbers are distorted by high job loss among low-wage workers during the coronavirus pandemic.

†As income inequality grows, it is increasingly difficult to measure wages of high earners using hourly wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹¹ EPI therefore uses annual wage data from the Social Security Administration when analyzing disparities between the highest earners and the bottom 90 percent.

There is a stark disparity between what workers are paid and what they could be paid.

The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2019



where their next meal was coming from. Food insecurity affects Americans of all races and ethnicities; however, white households faced food insecurity at lower rates (7.9 percent) than Black (19.1 percent) or Hispanic (15.6 percent) households.¹⁴

- *People's health is sacrificed.* A 2018 survey¹⁵ found that 87 million Americans had inadequate health coverage—they were either uninsured (roughly 24 million) or underinsured, putting them at risk for medical debt, onerous health cost burdens, and poor health outcomes, including deaths that could have been prevented.¹⁶ Most of these people are either unable to work or are in low-wage jobs that do not offer insurance and do not pay enough for workers to purchase insurance. They also disproportionately live in states that have refused to expand Medicaid. In 2019, 94 percent of those in the top 10 percent of wage earners—but only 24 percent of those in the bottom 10 percent of wage earners—had access to health insurance through their employer.¹⁷
- *Education is compromised.* There are large gaps in educational achievement between children from the families with the fewest resources and those with the most. The strong relationship between income inequality and educational inequality perpetuates lack of opportunity, decreases social mobility, and “represents a societal failure that betrays the ideal of the ‘American dream.’”¹⁸
- *Safe, affordable housing is elusive for many families.* More than 60 percent of workers do not earn enough to afford a two-bedroom rental home (with “affordability” defined as costing no more than 30 percent of income); the median wage is just barely sufficient for a one-bedroom rental.¹⁹ And there is no place in the country where a full-time worker earning the federal minimum wage comes even close to being able to afford a two-bedroom apartment.²⁰

The sum total of these impacts is devastating: *every year, approximately 250,000 people die from poverty and income inequality.*²¹

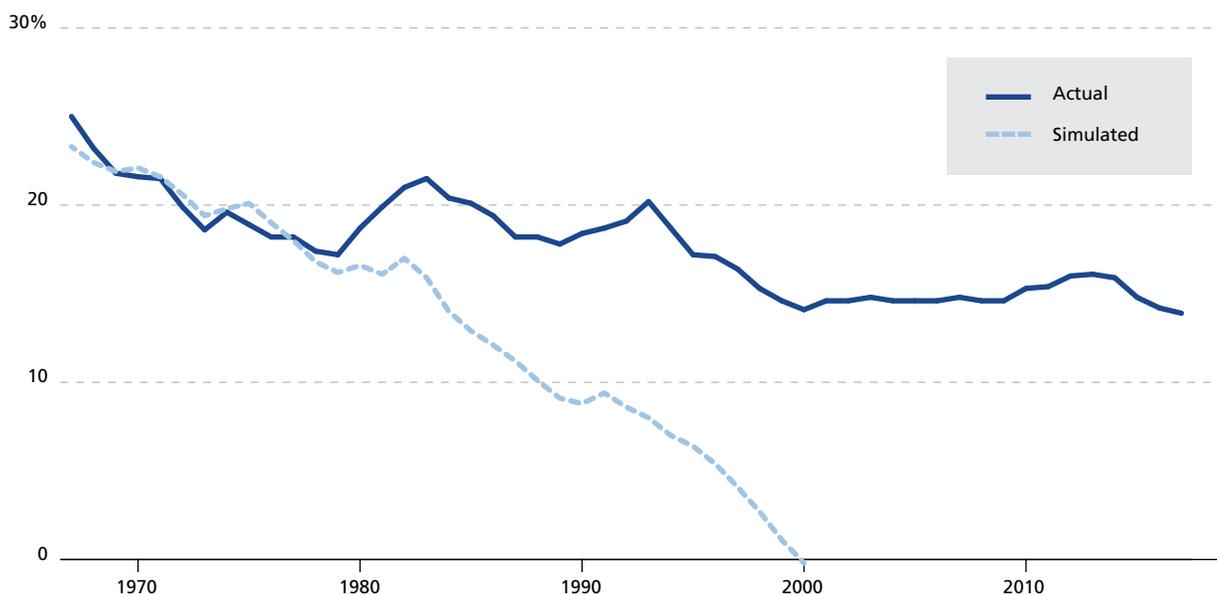
This human tragedy goes largely ignored, which allows inequality to grow unchecked and does not make good economic sense. In today’s severely unequal economy, economic growth is slower, downturns are more severe and painful, and our economy fails to reach its full potential. When low-wage workers get a raise, they generally put that money right back into the economy, spending it on things their families need—which in turn supports jobs and economic growth. In contrast, high-wage workers are much more likely to save any extra dollars they receive.²²

Maintaining this vastly unequal economy has costs. For example, the aggregate costs of child poverty, considering everything from child homelessness to crime and health costs to lost economic productivity, is estimated at \$1 trillion per year.²³ Similarly, barriers to full labor market participation and compensation for women and people of color were estimated at \$2.6 trillion of our gross domestic product in 2019.²⁴ But the full extent of such losses is impossible to quantify. Children lifted out of poverty and protected from its destabilizing effects are potential teachers, firefighters, healthcare workers, researchers, innovators, caring family members, good neighbors, loving parents, and engaged citizens. People performing valuable—but chronically underpaid—services, such as cleaning buildings, stocking grocery store



The poverty rate would have dropped to zero without rising inequality

Supplemental poverty rate, actual and simulated, 1967–2017





shelves, and caring for elderly Americans, deserve to be paid fairly, to receive necessary benefits like sick leave, and to be protected at work; they should not live in poverty or near poverty, wondering how they will pay their rent and buy food or what will happen if they get sick. And everyone living in our society must have

some adequate foundation of economic security if they are unemployed or to fall back on in times of crisis.

How We Got Here

The wedge between pay and productivity is no accident. It is the result of intentional policy and fiscal choices designed to redistribute economic leverage and bargaining power away from typical workers. There was no single piece of legislation that did this; instead, it was the accumulation of dozens, if not hundreds, of choices made in the form of legislation, regulatory changes, and administrative and judicial decisions that consistently allowed the wealthy to reap the vast majority of the benefits of economic growth.²⁵

As corporations and employers have been prioritized over communities and employees, anti-poverty programs have been consistently underfunded, while spending on war, prisons, and immigration enforcement has been steadily increased. These choices were only possible because our democracy has been weakened by voter suppression, keeping those who are most impacted by these skewed priorities out of our political system.

Here we describe six policy choices and three fiscal choices that have promoted the steady growth of inequality over the last 40 years.

Policy Choices

Chronic excessive unemployment has been enabled by austerity-driven macroeconomic policies. The Federal Reserve Board (Fed) has the dual mandate to pursue the maximum level of employment consistent with stability in inflation. However, post-1979, Fed policymakers have too often guarded excessively against inflation, with grave consequences: they cut recoveries short before the benefits had reached low- and moderate-wage workers.*

Further, during recessions, Congress has too often failed to pass needed recovery measures. We saw this most starkly in the aftermath of the Great Recession, when economic recovery was actively held back by a Republican-led US Congress and Repub-

lican state governments that imposed steep austerity measures. Public spending grew more slowly in the recovery following the Great Recession than during any other recovery since World War II.²⁶ Federal aid to state and local governments was stopped too soon, and Republican governors embraced austerity as an economic strategy to further reduce government outlays. This throttling of state and local government spending delayed a full recovery (i.e., a return to 2007's pre-recession unemployment levels) by four full years.²⁷

Corporate-driven globalization has shifted economic leverage away from low- and middle-wage workers. Globalization was expected to depress wage growth for the majority of American workers, but policy failures have significantly amplified these damaging effects, turning it from a manageable challenge into a deep economic wound. Globalization has been used—at the behest of

corporations—as a tool to shift economic leverage and power away from low- and middle-wage workers. Non-college-educated workers have seen their wages cut and their jobs become less secure, while multinational corporations and highly credentialed professionals have seen their incomes and market power carefully protected. Contrary to stereotypes, these effects are not just a problem for white manufacturing workers in the Rust Belt (an area of industrial decline stretching from the Northeast to the Midwest); they impact the majority of workers and likely fall disproportionately on the wages of nonwhite workers.²⁸

Collective bargaining rights have been eroded. The National Labor Relations Act, which is supposed to protect the right of private-sector employees to form a union and bargain collectively, has increasingly failed to safeguard workers' rights and has been inconsistently enforced, with too many loopholes that employers

 **As corporations have been prioritized over communities, anti-poverty programs have been underfunded.** 



*The "maximum level of employment," which we also refer to as a "tight labor market" and a "high-pressure market," occurs when the demand for workers is strong enough to push the unemployment rate to very low levels. When the labor market is tight, workers across the board are empowered to demand and receive pay increases, and greater pressure is put on employers to reduce discriminatory barriers to hiring and pay practices.

have been able to exploit. Unions address inequality on multiple levels. Unions help to narrow wage gaps, relative to white men, for women and for Black and Hispanic workers.²⁹ When we had higher levels of unionization, the top 10 percent of wage earners commanded a lower share of total income in the United States, as seen in the figure below.³⁰ But, as also seen in the figure, union membership has declined over the last several decades, accompanied by rising inequality. This erosion of collective bargaining has lowered the median hourly wage by \$1.56, which adds up to \$3,250 per year for a full-time worker.³¹

The bulk of this decline has taken place in the private sector, as unions have faced intense opposition from private employers; however, public-sector unions have been increasingly under attack in recent years. For example, in Wisconsin, public-sector union membership rates dropped from 50.3 percent in 2011 to 24.4 percent in 2018, following the 2011 passage of Act 10, which undercut collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers in the state.³² The 2018 Supreme Court decision in *Janus* (which allows nonmembers to benefit from collective bargaining without paying any union fees) poses a major threat to public-sector unions. Although unions like the AFT remain strong, the full extent of *Janus*'s impact remains to be seen.³³

Labor standards have been weakened. Key changes include a steady decline in the value of the minimum wage, insufficient pro-

tections against unpaid overtime and wage theft, and inadequate resources dedicated to enforcement to help workers whose employers have underpaid them or failed to pay them altogether.

The federal minimum wage was meant to guarantee a living wage and protect workers from being exploited, but it has been raised in only an ad hoc manner since its inception in 1938 and infrequently since the late 1970s. In recent decades, its real value has declined by a third. In 2021 dollars, the real (inflation-adjusted) value of the hourly minimum wage has dropped from its high of \$10.59 in 1968 to \$7.34 in 2020.

Making matters worse, employers are able to get away with misclassifying employees as “independent contractors”; those workers lose out on rights and benefits associated with being an employee, such as the protection of minimum wage and overtime laws, workers’ compensation, and health insurance benefits—amounting to a significant savings for employers.

Employers who misclassify workers also don’t contribute to those workers’ Social Security and Medicare (the workers must pay the entire tax). Misclassification is harmful to workers and profitable for employers—and there are few disincentives to stop employers from doing it.³⁴

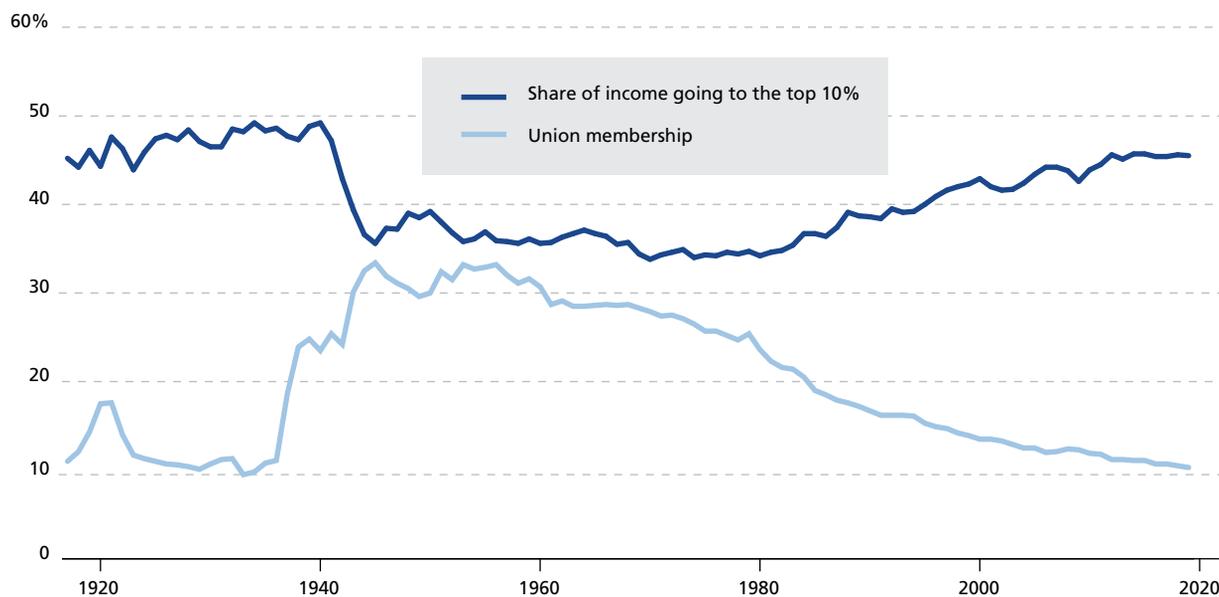
Immigrant workers, especially those who are undocumented, are particularly vulnerable. US immigration policy has effectively created “labor standards free zones,” allowing for wage suppression and other forms of exploitation—particularly

These choices were only possible because our democracy has been weakened by voter suppression.



As union membership has declined, income inequality has grown

Union membership and share of income going to the top 10 percent, 1917–2019





against migrant workers. This, in turn, suppresses wages for US workers across the board.³⁵

Employer actions to limit employees' rights have been allowed to grow unchecked.

Many employers require their employees to sign away certain rights on the first day of work as a condition of employment (for example, through non-

compete and forced arbitration agreements).³⁶ The use of such strategies to undercut workers' rights has been allowed to grow without intervention from policymakers, hurting the economic position of workers.

New corporate structures that consolidate market power have been tolerated by policymakers. New and emerging corporate structures have put further pressure on workers' rights, depressed wages, and made it difficult for workers to hold their employers responsible for labor law violations or to collectively bargain over wages and working conditions. These include workplace "fissuring" (e.g., subcontracting even core services and treating workers as independent contractors),³⁷ industry deregulation, privatization, buyer dominance affecting entire supply chains, and increases in the concentration of employers.³⁸

Fiscal Choices

Inadequate poverty measures have led to inadequate poverty programs and misguided national priorities. The federal government's official poverty measure was developed in the 1960s based on food and expense data from the 1950s. Other than being adjusted for inflation, it has remained essentially the same for over 50 years, even though the costs of many basic necessities have outpaced inflation and other costs, like healthcare and childcare, were not even imagined at the time. Today, the poverty thresholds are approximately \$12,880 per year for a single person and \$26,500 for a family of four. When compared against the contemporary costs of basic necessities, these amounts are absurdly low. Even the government's Supplemental Poverty Measure, which is an improvement, is still too low given the costs of living today.*

*The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) takes into account out-of-pocket expenses for food, clothing, housing, and utilities; government transfers like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (i.e., food stamps); and the earned income tax credit. It is also adjusted for geography and housing tenure. In 2019, the SPM threshold for a family of four was anywhere from just over \$21,000 for a home-owning household in nonmetro Iowa to nearly \$37,000 for a renting family in Los Angeles. These values are still too low. Fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles is about \$2,000 per month (according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's FY 2021 Final Fair Market Rents Documentation System), which would take up two-thirds of the SPM threshold for a family of four.

Because anti-poverty programs are based on these measures, they have never met the need at hand—and they have even been scaled back. The largest reduction in cash assistance to low-income families came with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC; a program created under the Social Security Act of 1935) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).³⁹

TANF not only ended the entitlement of a right to welfare but also drastically reduced resources available to families in poverty and imposed unrealistic work requirements on recipients. Former TANF beneficiaries forced into the labor market faced low wages, irregular schedules that made work-life balance nearly impossible, and precarious work that often provided no employee benefits.⁴⁰ These changes curtailed the reach and impact of our welfare programs. In 1996, AFDC reached 68 percent of poor families,⁴¹ far more than the 23 percent of poor families that TANF reached in 2019. In all but three states, TANF benefits have declined since 1996 in real value, with monthly benefits at or below two-thirds of the federal poverty line.

These cuts mirrored cuts to other federal programs and assistance. The affordable housing stock, for example, has declined by 60 percent since 2010,⁴² and 10,000 public housing units are lost every year.⁴³ Consequently, only about one in four people eligible to receive federal housing assistance actually receives it.⁴⁴ Likewise, federal support for basic needs, such as water or sanitation, has declined precipitously. From its peak in 1977, federal assistance to local water systems has fallen 77 percent,⁴⁵ even as pipes are aging and water, sanitation, and wastewater infrastructure investment needs are rising.

This has led to higher water rates, mass water shutoffs, and toxins like lead leaching into water sources, compounding other health crises in poor and low-income communities.

Alongside failures to meet these fundamental needs of tens of millions of people are choices to allocate our public resources to war and war preparedness, mass incarceration, cruel immigration enforcement, brutal policing, and polluting sectors of the economy (e.g., oil and gas production). These policy decisions compromise our quality of life and life itself, both in America and around the world.⁴⁶ Indeed, the US Department of Defense is the largest institutional emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, and its overseas operations have the worst environmental impacts.⁴⁷ And our expanded fossil fuel infrastructure poses serious threats to the climate, water quality, and public health through leakage as well as catastrophic spills, which are mainly concentrated in poor and low-income communities.⁴⁸

Tax policy has favored the wealthy and powerful. Our tax code has been riddled with loopholes and giveaways to rich, large corporations and Wall Street for years, but the 2017 tax

Alongside failures to meet needs are choices to allocate resources to war, incarceration, and polluting sectors of the economy.



cuts grew their wealth enormously. The new law cut the top marginal tax rate for individuals from 39.6 to 37 percent and privileged income from investments over income from work by making the top base rate on income from capital gains just 20 percent. This was a huge giveaway to the richest 1 percent, who hold more than half of national wealth invested in stocks and mutual funds.⁴⁹

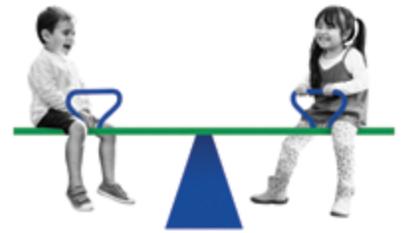
The corporate tax rate was also cut back from 35 to 21 percent, a move that will cost \$1.3 trillion over 10 years.⁵⁰ Although corporate profits were already near record highs, the tax break was justified to boost investment and job creation. However, in the first few months after passage of the new tax law, US corporations announced nearly \$1 trillion in stock buybacks,⁵¹ while real investment in plant and equipment began quickly cratering.⁵² As a 2021 study concluded, these so-called trickle-down tax policies really only benefit the wealthy and therefore increase inequality.⁵³

Voter suppression has marginalized the concerns of poor and low-income Americans.

The concerns of poor and low-income people—who make up more than 40 percent of the population—are not marginal issues, but their concerns have been marginalized within the national political discussion. A 2020 report published by the Poor People’s Campaign finds that among adults eligible to vote, people with low incomes are significantly less likely to vote than people with higher incomes, which means their interests are not well represented by policymakers.⁵⁴ A long and ongoing history of voter suppression is certainly a major factor—if not *the* factor—at the root of this low voter turnout. That suppression is often racially motivated and is used to enact policies that increase inequality and negatively impact the 140 million Americans living in or on the edge of poverty.



There has been a dramatic rise in voter suppression since 2013, when the Supreme Court gutted key protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in *Shelby v. Holder*. One of these protections was the preclearance requirement, which mandated that the US Department of Justice (DOJ) investigate and approve any changes to voting laws in jurisdictions with a noted history of racist voter suppression. Up until *Shelby*, preclearance had been effectively used for decades.



In North Carolina alone, the DOJ had objected over 60 times to more than 150 changes to voting laws on the grounds that they were racially retrogressive.

Since 2013, there have been hundreds of voter suppression laws introduced in nearly every state in the country, and two presidential elections have taken place without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act.⁵⁵ In fact, in just the first six months following the 2020 election, 47 states introduced over 380 laws to suppress the right to vote.⁵⁶ Although Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and poor people are often the direct targets of these laws, the impact of these laws is felt among the broader population of poor and low-income people.

To fight back, a multiracial democracy must rise up to demand better economic and social policies.

These policy decisions compromise our quality of life and life itself.

Transformative Policies

Because policy and fiscal choices have been used to perpetuate and deepen inequality, they can also be used to usher in an era of greater equality and equity. Here we offer 10 discrete, ambitious policy changes that would be transformative, especially for the 140 million poor and low-income people who were facing significant challenges even before COVID-19.

1. Prioritize “High-Pressure” Labor Markets

Policymakers must commit to ending recessions and restoring “high-pressure” labor markets (in which unemployment is very low) as quickly as possible. This would represent a fundamental break with decades of past practice, when policymakers’ prime concern was very low inflationary pressures, which led them to engineer (or at least tolerate) excessively high unemployment.⁵⁷ High-pressure labor markets fundamentally change the bargaining dynamic between workers and employers, forcing employers to go begging for workers and increasing workers’ leverage over wage negotiations.

2. Raise the Federal Minimum Wage

In 1963, the March for Jobs and Freedom (a.k.a. the March on Washington) demanded a federal minimum wage of \$2 per hour.

Adjusted for inflation, this would be roughly \$15 today. Adopting the march's demand and boosting the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025 would give a raise to 32 million workers, with Black workers and women seeing the greatest gains. If the federal minimum wage had kept up with productivity since its inception, it would be over \$23 per hour today. A labor market is only as strong as its floor, and the federal minimum wage needs to be significantly strengthened to bolster this floor.⁵⁸

3. Uphold the Right to Form and Join Unions

We should act to close loopholes in current labor law to protect workers from employers' anti-union tactics. Passage of the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act would strengthen workers' rights to form unions and negotiate with their employers for better wages and working conditions. Specifically, it would reform our nation's labor law so that private-sector employers are no longer able to intimidate workers seeking to unionize or perpetually stall union elections and contract negotiations.⁵⁹ Further, passage of the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act would give public-sector workers the ability to form unions and engage in collective bargaining on the federal level.⁶⁰ Currently, more than half of the states in the United States lack comprehensive collective bargaining laws for public-sector workers like teachers.⁶¹

4. Reform Unemployment Insurance

We should follow the lead of other rich countries and greatly expand the share of the unemployed who receive unemployment insurance (UI) benefits in normal times while also making normal UI benefits significantly more generous. A transformed UI system can be a revolutionary change for US workers, significantly blunting the anxiety and deprivation inflicted by even short spells of joblessness.



We need long-term policies that establish justice, reject decades of austerity, and build strong social programs.



5. Provide Universal Healthcare

The COVID-19 shock has been only the latest crisis highlighting the perversity of tying access to health insurance coverage to specific jobs. Nearly every other rich industrialized nation has delinked health insurance and the labor market and has instead made access to insurance coverage a universal right. The United States should join this community and provide coverage to all—and, more importantly, this coverage should not become degraded or ruinously expensive whenever one loses a job. The steps forward made by the Affordable Care Act have exposed an important truth: we need substantial increases in publicly provided insurance, beginning with the expansion of Medicaid. Universal healthcare not only would have profound effects on the economic security of households in the United States but also could boost wages and jobs, leading to labor markets that match jobs and workers more efficiently.⁶²

6. Provide Universal Access to Vital Goods and Services

High-quality child and elder care, and early childhood and higher education, are examples of vital goods and services that are out of reach for too many families. These should also be universally accessible through public programs. The upfront costs of providing these are considerable, but the payoff over time to society is huge.⁶³ Some studies find that investments in top-notch early childhood education, for example, are more than 100 percent

self-financing; when the participants reach adulthood, they are more productive, have higher wages, pay higher taxes, and, with a strong early foundation of systemic supports, are less likely to end up in the criminal justice system. High-quality elder care can allow a large expansion in the labor force of adult women. And access to free, or at least more affordable, higher education would produce a better-prepared workforce while reducing student debt.

7. Create a New Poverty Measure and Expand Social Welfare Programs

In order to respond to the changing, post-pandemic economy, we need to have accurate measures of poverty and economic insecurity to inform social welfare programs that truly meet all basic needs. Instead of the current official and supplemental (yet still inadequate) poverty measures, the federal government should establish a new poverty measure that reflects what it takes to have a decent standard of living in the country today. This new measure should provide the basis to expand public benefits, including cash assistance and other programs to guarantee adequate incomes, housing, food, water, and other human needs.

8. Invest in Safe Communities

Recent years have seen a growing recognition that the brute force model that combines aggressive policing and mass incar-

ceration has failed as a mechanism for guaranteeing public safety. We need a new model that rests on investments in health, education, and opportunity for people in chronically under-resourced neighborhoods. These investments can include pilot programs that give primary responsibility for ensuring public order and safety—and the investment to back it up—to community-based organizations. Many community-based organizations already do much of this work, building safe public spaces and intervention programs to prevent violence or crime. These organizations are forced to do this work on the cheap, but their work is often effective and, if financed publicly, could build trust rather than antagonism between communities and those tasked with providing public safety.

9. Tax the Rich and Corporations

In the 30 years following World War II, the fruits of economic growth were far more evenly distributed and tax rates for the rich and corporations were substantially higher.⁶⁴ These higher tax rates provided revenue for needed public spending and reduced the incentive for privileged economic actors to rig the rules of the market to tilt more gains their way. We should raise taxes progressively to help finance needed public investments and safety net spending and to reduce the payoff to exercising market power. This market power should also be confronted directly with legislation and regulation, but as a backstop we should tax its payoff.

10. Protect and Expand Voting Rights

For any of the policies above to be advanced, we must protect and expand voting rights, especially for poor people and poor people of color. A motivating belief of the Poor People's Campaign is that the votes of poor and low-income Americans can make a difference in our elections. And, in fact, the increase in turnout among these voters in the 2020 presidential election—six million more than in 2016—may have tipped the scales.⁶⁵ But voter suppression laws continue to proliferate across the states. Pushing back begins with restoring the full power of the Voting Rights Act by updating the preclearance formula to cover all jurisdictions—those with deep-rooted histories of voter suppression as well as those that have more recently passed voter suppression laws or used these tactics. Other key changes include making Election Day a national holiday, establishing a fair redistricting process that eliminates racist and political gerrymandering, increasing polling locations, modernizing voter registration (with online, same-day, and automatic registration), implementing early voting and mail-in voting in every state, and ending felony disenfranchisement.

If America does not address the problem of inequality by making visionary social and economic choices, the health and well-being of the nation will continue to decline. We need long-term policies, enshrined in law, that establish justice, promote the general welfare, reject decades of austerity, and build strong social programs that lift society from below.

Such policies will help us not only live up to the constitutional and moral commitments this country was founded on but also revive our economy. By organizing against the policies that have pushed millions of people out of the political narrative

and increasingly out of any economic power, we can begin a path to recovery that will reduce inequality, increase workers' power, and morally and economically benefit us all. □



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All Children Thriving

A New Purpose for Education



By Pamela Cantor

Education has long been central to the promise of the United States of America. But our current education system has never been designed to promote the equitable opportunities or outcomes that our children and families deserve and that our democracy, society, and economy now need. The people who built the education system in the 19th and 20th centuries believed that talent and skills were scarce. They trusted averages as measures of individuals. And many of their educational beliefs were grounded in racist stereotypes that deemed only some children worthy of opportunity. These beliefs influenced the learning and development ecosystem beyond school as well, such that access to high-quality enrichment opportunities were more often a reflection of wealth and zip code than need or interest.

Pamela Cantor, MD, is the founder and senior science advisor of Turn-around for Children; she is also a governing partner of the Science of Learning and Development Alliance and a visiting scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. As a child and adolescent psychiatrist for nearly two decades, she saw the impact of concentrated poverty and the need for new systems and supports in schools and communities to foster healthy learning and development. Cantor's scholarship focuses on synthesizing research from multiple disciplines to bring meaning and actionable insights to whole-child development—especially for children in chronically under-resourced neighborhoods. This article is adapted from Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving: A Dynamic Systems Approach, by Pamela Cantor, Richard M. Lerner, Karen J. Pittman, Paul A. Chase, and Nora Gomperts (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

COVID-19, the resulting recession in the service economy, and ongoing racialized violence have laid bare the inequities of experience and opportunity among our youth. They have also highlighted the resiliency of our young people, families, educators, and community organizations. When schools were forced to close abruptly and convert to remote instruction, teachers, school staff, and community partners stepped up to reinforce relationships, provide critical supports, and acknowledge both the losses and the learning happening. It can be hard to find silver linings when there has been so much suffering. But here is one: we now have a chance to design something different and better for all of our children.

In recent years, teams of educators, youth development practitioners, and researchers have been striving to dismantle our outdated system. Today, there is a new vision for learning and development emerging for all children across the United States:

Imagine a world where every child's life was a succession of opportunities in which they come to know who they are and in which they discover who they could become.... Imagine too that educators could find how best to identify each child's specific abilities, interests, and aspirations and then align these attributes with the specific contexts that best promoted the child's talents, achievements, and successes in life. Finally, imagine that each child lived in a world that removed the constraints of racism, poverty, disparities, and injustices and provided them with the specific relationships and supports needed for thriving.¹



Intuitively, we know that each of our journeys through life is unique. They take place through an open-ended set of experiences that happen all the time and in every space in which we grow and learn across the lifespan. A comprehensive understanding of whole-child development, learning, and thriving requires a dynamic and integrated view of the journey each young person takes, namely the environments, experiences, and relationships they are exposed to. Current scientific understanding and measurement of these dynamic, individualized journeys must become the foundation for the beliefs, knowledge, and practices of all practitioners, administrators, and policymakers working with and on behalf of children. Specifically, they must understand the learning processes, potentialities, and capabilities that can and will emerge in students across time and across settings, especially when such settings are intentionally designed to promote whole-child development, learning, and thriving.

Whole-Child Development: A New Dynamic Understanding

“Whole-child development” can mean different things to educators, researchers, other child- and youth-serving professionals, and policymakers. Some define it relatively narrowly, focusing on integrating health services and programs more deeply into the day-to-day life of schools to ensure that all students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.² Others include an explicit reference to the inclusion of instruction for social and emotional learning (SEL).³ Still others offer a more expansive concept, seeing whole-child development as a comprehensive

approach building on a young person’s assets and on the understanding that (1) physical conditions, emotional states, and pro-social experiences (i.e., caring relationships) have a direct impact on learning and (2) student success and well-being must be conceptualized and measured* to include more than academic skills and knowledge acquisition.⁴

These views are based on research and were crafted to challenge the status quo of learning and education in the United States. Still, as explained below, these viewpoints do not offer a complete picture of the multiple dimensions of human development, including and importantly, how children become learners.⁵

Multiple bodies of research and methods of analysis affirm that child development (and human development in general) is dynamic, bi-directional (i.e., the child and context influence each other), and individualized. It results from both nature and nurture. More specifically, it results from each person’s biology, developing brain and body, psychology (social, emotional, and cognitive development), and gene expression, and from each person’s parental, familial, educational, communal, environmental, cultural, and societal influences.⁶

*The research on human development described here has profound implications for the measurement of learning. Children and their contexts are not only related to one another, they are contingent and mutually influential. If this could be more accurately understood and measured, the educational and opportunity path of each child and each context could be enhanced. Although much work remains to be done and a measurement discussion is outside the scope of this article, educators and policymakers should be alert to the necessity of completely rethinking current assessment practices and policies.

The takeaway? Learning happens everywhere all the time, among all young people in all settings.

But our systems were not designed with this knowledge. In fact, no single system—neither public schools nor youth development organizations—can fully address the whole child or involve the whole community. This is not because education leaders or equity advocates think academic success is the only goal. Nor is it because youth development organizations believe that building relationships, experiences, and opportunities that support youth thriving is more important than academic competence and credentials. It is because these leaders, like the leaders of related systems (such as child welfare, family supports, juvenile justice, and youth employment), think, see, and act using the language, goals, and metrics of their individual systems. Typically, they do not have the capacity or incentives to integrate broader youth ecosystems aimed at learning and thriving.

To begin this integration, we must carefully consider the word *all*. *All young people at all ages in all settings* have learning gifts and needs that should be documented, discussed, and seen by the systems they interact with as part of their individualized developmental path.⁷ *All youth-serving systems* should see themselves, and recognize each other, as active participants and partners in the endeavor to educate and prepare whole children, whether they are in public schools or community-based organizations. *All settings* are places where learning and growth occurs; that includes family rooms, classrooms, gyms, cafeterias, athletic fields, rehearsal spaces, playgrounds, community centers, and more.* *All learning approaches* contribute to a child's development of skills, competencies, agency, and identity to various degrees. *All adults* need more substantial and sustained training, supports, and resources (including time) to optimize the experiences and relationships they build together with children.

The goal? *All children thriving.*

In this article, and in the real-world school- and community-based work it represents, my colleagues and I have chosen to focus on thriving because we believe that our approach to whole-child development will enable programs and policies (both in and out of school) to promote positive and healthy development for all young people, including those who have experienced significant adversity and oppression. Everyone involved will need to understand, believe in, and embrace the dynamism and complexity of learning, development, and thriving as integrated processes and not seek to oversimplify them at the expense of many learners.

Before offering a more comprehensive description of our vision for whole-child development, I want to present some current misconceptions and distinctions about resilience and thriving, why

our current educational systems demand so much resilience from our least-advantaged youth, and thus why resilience is not enough.

The Difference Between Resilience and Thriving

Resilience and thriving are different but connected processes. They both represent positive adaptation to life events. Resilience offers us a picture of adaptive functioning in high-risk or adverse settings. Whereas thriving focuses on optimal functioning, resilience attends to adequate or “okay” functioning, largely because resilience research has focused on children and families facing enormous challenges, adversity, or trauma.⁸

Thriving itself is a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual growth that is positive, strengths-based, and multidimensional, across multiple domains, including physical, emotional, and cognitive. Thriving reflects the optimization of a young person's holistic, adaptive response to their experiences of community, family, culture, and learning settings.⁹

Today, researchers, educators, and policymakers are becoming more aware of individual children's sensitivities to the effects of cumulative stress.¹⁰ These stresses are often associated with socio-economic and relational inequities and the stresses experienced by their caregivers, family members, teachers, and child workers.¹¹

Adverse stressful experiences occur both inside and out of school. When they are severe, sustained, and not buffered by protective factors such as positive relationships, they influence a young person's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and attainments in any learning setting. Disparities in opportunities and marginalization based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, community, access, income, and/or other intersectional aspects of identity prevent the chances for thriving.¹² Belief in one's ability to grow, learn, and succeed through education may be more important than any specific curriculum for predicting and nurturing educational outcomes and life successes. But unfor-

Talents and skills are ubiquitous. Education should be designed to reveal the talents and skills in each child.



*Some educators and researchers find it helpful to think about learning settings in three broad educational categories: formal (e.g., classroom instruction), nonformal (e.g., recreation center swimming lessons), and informal (e.g., everyday conversations and activities).

tunately, for marginalized students, this belief is shaped significantly by racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes and by discriminatory practices, including inadequate funding to schools in low-income communities. In short, multiple factors influence a child’s growth and development, for good or for bad.

Historical and Longstanding False Assumptions in Public Education

Public education in the United States was designed long before researchers and practitioners had an understanding or knowledge of developmental and learning science and therefore was based in part on a set of false assumptions. The table below presents these false assumptions and corrects them with current knowledge and evidence.

Most 20th-century learning environments did not reflect the integrated, dynamic, and individual nature of human development that we now know undergirds the learning process itself. Across the country, public education focused on delivery and acquisition of content—primarily mathematics and English language arts—using

standardized approaches and was not designed to intentionally develop the learner or to promote equity. With funding largely driven by local property taxes, the system was designed to offer rich learning opportunities to certain groups often residing in specific zip codes, but not to groups marginalized because of their race, gender, and culture.²⁰ Indeed, the US education system was designed to select and sort, and institutionalized racism, classism, and segregation remain embedded in the system to this day.²¹

Fortunately, developmental and learning science tell an optimistic story about what all young people are capable of. Children’s brains and bodies are malleable. The contexts and relationships they are exposed to are the primary drivers of who they become and of the expressions of their genes. (For a closer look at the keys to human development, see the sidebar on page 18.) The rest of this article focuses on translating that science into action, discussing how adults can use the principles of whole-child design to build environments in all the settings children inhabit: classrooms, cafeterias, camps, libraries, parks, playgrounds, buses, etc. This will enable children to thrive: to

False assumptions about learning	Evidence-based concepts about learning
Genes are the primary determinant of learning and development (rather than contexts). Contexts and relationships (in and out of school) are secondary contributors to skill development and mastery of content. Intelligence and cognitive abilities are fixed, and personality is stable. (In common terminology, this view prizes nature over nurture.)	Contexts—relationships, environments, and experiences in and out of school—are the primary determinants of learning and development. ¹³
Talent and skills are scarce, distributed in a bell curve (i.e., with most people clustered in the middle near average). Specific students (in many cases white students or, even more narrowly, middle- and upper-class white boys) have talent and skills (determined by genes); other students (mainly students of color, students from low-income families, and girls) do not. The system should be designed to identify and support (i.e., select and sort) those with innate talent and skills.	Talents and skills are ubiquitous. Education should be designed to reveal the talents and skills in each child. ¹⁴
An average score on a test usually administered once a year represents a student’s competency and is a good enough approximation of what the student knows. Measuring to determine an average score is sufficient for understanding the competency of individuals.	There is no such thing as an average child; an average of anything rarely represents any attribute of the individuals being measured. ¹⁵
Memorization of content and facts will lead to mastery, competence, and higher-order thinking skills. Measurement of content acquisition is a good representation of student competency.	Mastery of content, competencies, and higher-order thinking skills comes when educators scaffold and teach essential skills and engage each child with challenging, relevant content within the child’s <i>zone of proximal development</i> (i.e., what is challenging but not frustrating) during each period of development. ¹⁶
The potential of a student as a learner is knowable in advance; some children arrive at school ready to engage in learning (especially white children from middle and upper socioeconomic status families), and others (especially children of color from lower socioeconomic status families) do not. Skill and competency development are discrete, linear, and measurable. Growth trajectories are predictable.	The potential of a child is not knowable in advance. The purpose of education should be to develop and extend the talents and potential in each child. Human development is a jagged process with peaks and valleys along the way and with additional growth almost always possible. ¹⁷
Student agency and students’ beliefs about intelligence are not relevant to identity formation and do not require adjustments in expectations and opportunities by leaders and teachers. Specifically, children of color are assumed to be growing up in poverty, ill-suited to educational settings and academic rigor, and even prone to criminality.	Student agency and students’ and teachers’ beliefs about intelligence are highly relevant to identity formation. ¹⁸
Adversity does not disrupt learning or developmental processes.	Adversity can have effects on the neural systems that govern learning and behavior, but with support from caring, trusted adults, these effects are preventable and reversible; children can overcome the effects of adversity and thrive. ¹⁹

cope with stress, build resilience, develop 21st-century skills and mastery-level competencies, and live self-directed lives with many opportunities for fulfillment.

A Dynamic Systems Approach to Human Development and Learning

When thinking about how to apply new science to reshape the 20th-century education system, it is helpful to begin by considering other fields. What was done when scientists learned that germs—not miasma—cause disease? When scientists learned that cancers can be transmitted, not like infections, but instead through gene mutations? Although health disparities continue to exist, and contribute to racial and socioeconomic inequalities, there have been dramatic changes in medicine in the last 50 years based on new knowledge. Cures for diseases, highly effective vaccines against COVID-19, and changes in how scientists conduct research and how physicians practice medicine have occurred in part because of willingness to challenge assumptions and take a holistic view of the biologic ecosystems that produce health and illness. In other words, scientists are willing to let go of old assumptions in favor of new knowledge and a dynamic systems approach. We must do the same for our learning systems.

Think about the human embryo. An embryo is an extraordinary feat of human development. It is a structure comprised of multiple substructures, with every future system that a human

being will have or need represented. The embryo also contains the potential to interact with and influence all the other systems and structures involved in human life. The embryo is, therefore, a “pluri-potential” structure—meaning its potential development is not fixed—and it is a powerful example of the dynamic systems theories of human development. In fact, the

embryo can be both the metaphor and lens through which we represent the structural sequences and processes that produce a whole human being who becomes an engaged, productive learner. At every moment throughout the human lifespan, environments, experiences, and relationships are activating the processes that bring each human being to life.

Positive development and thriving²² emerge from the integration of several individual and contextual systems, from the biological and physiological to the cultural and historical.²³ In this dynamic, relational, developmental systems framework,

the life cycle of an organism is not preprogrammed genetically.²⁴ Rather, genes act as chemical followers, not prime movers, in developmental processes.²⁵

There are approximately 20,000 genes in the human genome. As packages of biological instructions, genes require signals to determine which processes are carried out, with social and physical contexts influencing if, when, how, and which genes are expressed.²⁶ The term “epi” comes from the Greek and means “over” or “above,” indicating that *epigenetic* effects

All children are malleable to experience, and experience is something we can influence.

Human Development: Key Concepts

Here, I summarize key concepts in human development, using a dynamic systems approach, to explain the unfolding story of how an embryo becomes a human being. The concepts are sequenced to account for the beginning: the embodied miraculous nature of the embryo itself, containing all the structures it will need to become a whole human being. Then, I offer an explanation of the opportunities and constraints in relationships and experiences across the lifespan that bring about the expression of fullest potential of the embryo.

Embodiment: The human body is composed of many biological subsystems. Less obvious are the ways these biological subsystems carry the history of what they have experienced thus far in their lives; this is known as the principle of *embodiment*. For example, whether or not an individual has

consistently had adequate nutrition, sleep, safety, and shelter is recorded within every cell and structure of the human body.

Context: Together, the environments, experiences, and relationships of a human life form its context for development. Context has several levels of organization, including the biological (the systems of the human body) and the social, cultural, and physical world in which the child grows up. The most common example of positive context is the human relationship itself, and the most common example of negative context is the experience of stress.

Culture: Culture frames the way individuals construct and make meaning of every facet of their lives, founded on their specific histories. This means that learning is a social, relational, and cultural process.¹

Culture functions as a set of meanings, practices, values, and artifacts, including and importantly, language.

Holism: Context and culture provide the foundation for the principle of *holism*, which means the whole defines the parts and the parts define the whole.² We see this every day. Think of a sentence. The letters form words and the combination of words form the sentence. Yet if we only looked at the letters or the words, we would not understand the meaning of the sentence. As our embryo grows into a young adult, it develops based on its relationships and experiences, into its very own unique self.

Plasticity and malleability: Plasticity refers to the ability of individual cells to change based on experience and the contexts they

are effects that are “beyond” the effects of genes.²⁷ This helps to explain why, in our lifetimes, fewer than 10 percent of our genes will ever be expressed—with context as an overwhelming determinant of which of our genes are actually expressed. The expression of individual potential rests on this one profoundly important point: that all children are malleable to experience, and experience is something that we can influence.

How does any complex skill develop? Through the interaction of the child and *their* context in pursuit of specific goals.

A child’s web of experiences can alter the ways in which complex skills develop. Multiple neural systems, not merely those associated with cognition, contribute to core learning processes, such as attention, concentration, memory, knowledge transfer, motivation, and generalization.

Complex skills, such as reading, mathematics, riding a bicycle, playing an instrument, or developing resilience, are competencies that are built when neurons connect to one another across brain structures. For example, the capacity to read involves seeing, hearing, comprehension, and expression; these different structures get wired together through the experience of reading. The consistent firing of neurons produces the “wiring” of the brain. In other words, as reflected in Hebb’s Law,²⁸ neurons that fire together become wired together, which produces more deeply ingrained pathways and therefore increasingly complex skills. All complex skill development requires “practice,” meaning the more neurons fire and wire together, the more the brain develops the circuitry to execute complex skills fluently.

A seminal work on dynamic systems theory explains:

Skills do not spring up fully grown from preformed rules or logical structures. They are built up gradually through the

practice of real activities in real contexts, and they are gradually extended to new contexts through this same constructive process. A skill draws on and unites systems for emotion, memory, planning, communication, cultural and historical scripts, speech, gesture, and so forth. Each of these systems must work in concert with the others for an individual to tell an organized story or perform a complex task in a way that it will be understood and appreciated.

And further that:

Skills are context-specific and culturally defined. Real mental and physical activities are organized to perform specific functions, in particular settings.... The context specificity of skills is related to the characteristics of integration and inter-participation because people build skills to participate with other people directly in specific contexts for particular socio-cultural and adaptive reasons. And, as a result, skills take on a cultural patterning.²⁹



are exposed to. When cells change, structures and systems in the mind and body change; as this happens, we change. This is what is meant by the malleability of human beings to experience, positive or negative. This capacity to change based on experience is what affords the greatest opportunities in development—and also the greatest risks.

Relationships: The bonds between and among children and adults represent a primary process through which biological and contextual factors influence the plasticity of the developing brain and body. Relationships that are reciprocal, attuned, culturally responsive, and trustful constitute a positive developmental force between children and their physical and social context.

That relationships are important is not new knowledge.³ However, we must define

“relationship” in a way that accounts for the power of relationships to shape development in constructive ways, including at the cellular level. One pair of researchers conceived of “developmental relationships” as having four characteristics: enduring emotional attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity of joint activity, and a power balance that allows for transferability to new settings.⁴ They and others hypothesized that these four factors are the active ingredients in effective interventions across settings.⁵

Neural integration: The catalyst for the developing brain is an activation process that depends directly on human relationships. The process by which brain structures become connected and organized to produce increasingly complex skills is called *neural integration*.

One crucial and unique property of the human brain is its ability to self-organize in response to the contexts it is exposed to. This can happen in adaptive or maladaptive ways depending on the supports or constraints of experiences.⁶ Self-organization of the brain means that the person, as a complex living system, will build and organize increasingly complex skills to attain specific goals. Those goals may promote growth and even survival or evolve to solve a specific problem, such as the process of learning itself.⁷ This unique and profound organizing and processing power of the brain, through pathways of billions of neurons, yields the particularly unique human ability to remember experiences, compare them with other experiences, and generalize what has been learned to future experiences.

—P. C.

(Endnotes on page 47)

It follows then that inequities of experience based on race, social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability status, or sexual orientation are not biologically mandated necessities of nature. They are disparities that exist based on false beliefs, prejudices, or oppressive policies established by privileged groups.³⁰ When such systemic societal inequities are addressed, the malleability of human beings to positive experiences and relationships can unfold.

Supporting the learning of a complex skill means that even the most discrete skill, like solving an algebra word problem, needs to consider the person learning or performing that skill. It means taking into account prior experience, culture, history, foundational skill development (in reading and math), identity (and identity threat), agency, and motivation. All these dimensions will be present in a whole child in the context of a classroom or other learning setting.

If educators teach only to discrete math skills, for example, some children will “learn it.” But if educators teach to the whole child, they can support all students to understand it, become curious to learn more, and be able to apply it to other problems. Students will build analytic skills and even discover parts of themselves they did not know about, such as, “maybe I am a math person after all.”

Developmental Range and Human Potential

“Developmental range” is the fullest expression of what each child is capable of—the child’s inner potential under highly favorable conditions—and creating those conditions is the doorway to the

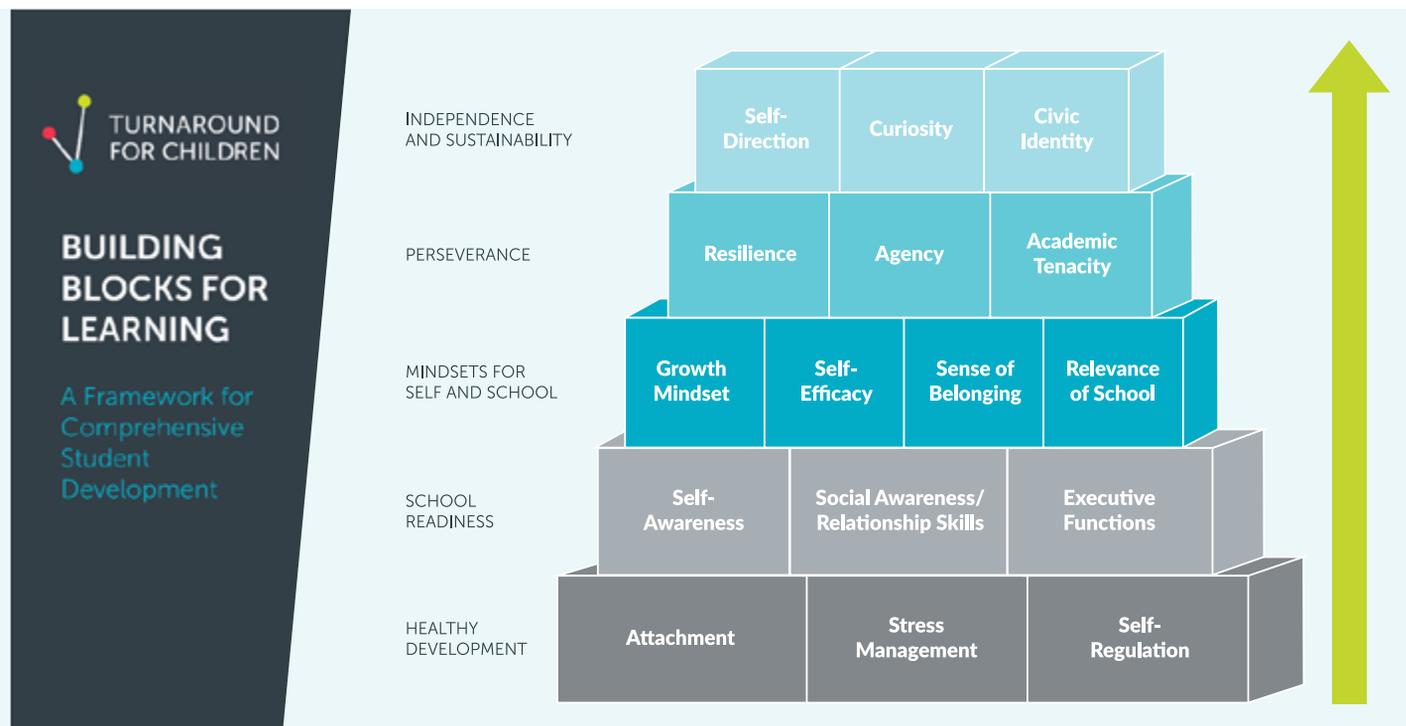
development of increasingly complex skills. Developmental range is the concept that has the greatest implications for the design of all learning settings and the training and preparation of adults within them.

Skill development, as described above, is variable and varies with context. There are no fixed patterns of intelligence or learning styles, no fixed stages or fixed end points. A child who can solve a math problem at night with parents or after school with a coach may not be able to solve the same problem in a classroom. A newly developing skill, in particular, can have a great range of levels of performance based on contextual factors—think about the effect of seeing an older sibling or friend perform the skill first. Opportunities for young people to “preview” a future skill with peers or under the guidance of adults are crucial for the cultivation of motivation, belief, confidence, willingness to take academic risks, and, most of all, seeing the emergence of their own capabilities. Conversely, the presence of unchallenging curricula, of stereotype threat, or of gender assumptions can contribute to the under-development and under-education of young people and undermine their belief in themselves as learners.

There are no fixed patterns of intelligence or learning styles, no fixed stages or fixed end points.

Building Blocks: An Empirical Developmental and Learning Framework

To more fully grasp the process for developing complex skills and how to optimize development and learning, one powerful framework is Building Blocks for Learning, shown below. This is a theo-



retical empirical framework that depicts the pathways for learning, cognitive development, and academic and life success across five levels (or tiers) of interconnected skill development. Learning and cognitive development rest on the possession of foundational skills, including positive social attachments, stress management, executive function, and self-regulation, each conceived of as a set of skills that all children would have the opportunity to develop in an equitable world. In that context, the possession of these attributes would enable children to develop skills that prepare them for success in learning, work, and life. These crucial skills form the foundation for the development of higher-order skills such as self-direction, curiosity, resilience, perseverance, and civic identity.

This framework helps us to understand what we see in any classroom: variation is the norm in the development of all learning skills. The pathways to developing skills are numerous. Learning happens in fits and starts with forward movement and

backward transitions. It is, in fact, jagged. We see this when a student appears to go backward while a lower-level skill is consolidated before a more advanced skill can be mastered. We also see that skills can grow out of experiences outside the classroom, including sports or the arts, at just the right time to reveal a young person's *zone of proximal development*.³¹

The Opportunity We Have Today

Over the last several decades, large-scale efforts to improve opportunities to learn have focused on interventions and programs that generate only incremental change, only for some children. What we need now is a transformational paradigm shift.

The dynamic concept of whole-child development, learning, and thriving that my colleagues and I



Equitable Learning Environments: Identity Matters

BY BROOKE STAFFORD-BRIZARD

Mounting evidence demonstrates that development of the individual cannot be disentangled from the context in which that individual develops, including political and sociocultural elements of context. Therefore, these elements must become central when leveraging developmental frameworks like the Building Blocks for Learning (BBFL).

Developmental frameworks like BBFL are designed with universal goals in mind—outcomes that matter to every human being. But, while frameworks might be universal, they cannot be colorblind. When accessing such a framework to inform the design and delivery of equitable learning environments and experiences for children, researchers and educators must prioritize the role that a sociocultural element such as racial identity plays in development¹ and how targeted supports connected to identity can reinforce progress toward a universal goal.² This focus cannot be an additional or supplementary one; this focus is integral to how constructs within the framework are operationalized

and how they develop and co-act with each other within the framework as a whole.

Take self-regulation for example. Within the BBFL, self-regulation involves regulating attention, emotion, and executive functioning in the service of goal-directed actions.³ However, without centering race and culture as critical contextual factors, this construct can easily be operationalized through a dominant or individualistic lens, which denies the centrality of community and collective success that many cultures within our society, like those within Indigenous communities, place on development. Acknowledging the interconnected role that culture, community, and multifaceted development (including spirituality) play in the development of something like self-regulation is important when taking a context-sensitive and inclusive approach to whole-child development.⁴

Beyond the role that racial identity must play in defining these constructs, the science demonstrating the role that race and ethnicity play in an individual's experience within US society and the impact that racial-ethnic identity has on the development of BBFL skills and mindsets must become a normative presence in all learning settings. Racial-ethnic identity reinforces positive development of individual skills and mindsets within the BBFL, including stress management, self-efficacy, relationship skills, and

resilience.⁵ When addressing the role that broader context plays in individual development, we cannot ignore the role that racism plays within society as a macro-stressor and source of stress for families of color and especially Black families.⁶ Racism as a macro-stressor and contributor to adversity is an important addition to other named adverse childhood experiences, like neglect, abuse, and instability,⁷ that impact development of BBFL skills and mindsets.

We cannot ignore the role that racism plays as a source of stress for families of color.

A dramatic shift in the US education system grounded in the developmental and learning sciences is long overdue. If we know that to learn and thrive students must bring their whole selves to the classroom, then we cannot ask them to leave any part of themselves, their culture, or their community behind. This includes intentionally integrating strengths and assets connected to racial-ethnic identity into whole-child learning and development. □

(Endnotes on page 47)

Brooke Stafford-Brizard is the vice president for research to practice at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. This sidebar is adapted from her sidebar, "Building Blocks for Learning and Whole-Child Development," in *Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving: A Dynamic Systems Approach*, by Pamela Cantor, Richard M. Lerner, Karen J. Pittman, Paul A. Chase, and Nora GomPERTS (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

have crafted emerges from research describing the malleability, agency, and developmental range of children as they draw on available resources and build a web of relations and experiences across multiple settings. If well-designed and intentional, these webs can provide the foundation for the development of complex skills that ultimately reveal the talent, passions, and potential of each child. Children's pathways will be diverse and their patterns jagged. That lack of uniformity is appropriate because all children possess a broad set of potentialities across multiple domains (e.g., physical health; mental health; complex social, emotional, and cognitive development; core academic skills and knowledge; positive identity formation; agency) and each child is an integrated, dynamic system with virtually infinite horizons.

To summarize, relationships, environments, and experiences will: drive the expression of each child's genetic endowment and epigenetic attributes, harness the malleability of their bodies and brains, and nurture the fullest expression of what each child becomes.

In schools and other settings that aim to foster learning and thriving, the primary role of the adult is not to teach discrete skills, but to create opportunities for each child to want to bring their interests, passions, talents, prior experiences, culture, and existing capabilities to bear to master increasingly complex skills. Such settings will:

1. Be attuned to the presence of biological, psychological, and sociocultural attributes of each child.
2. Foster positive relationships in all aspects and activities.

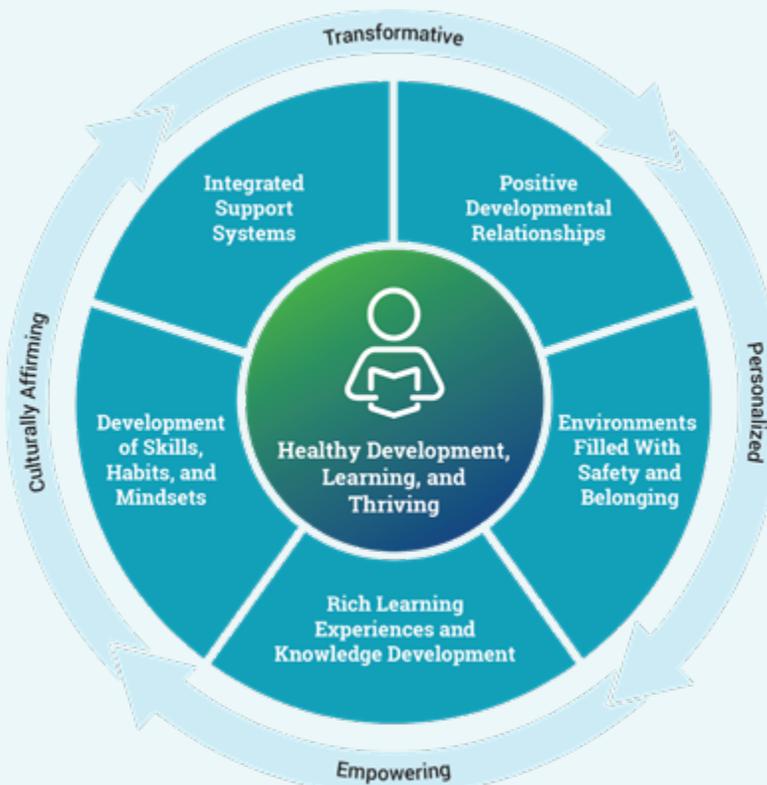
3. Integrate multidimensional practices to meet all learners where they are in their development across a diverse set of attributes to foster acting with agency and voice.
4. Create conditions of support and opportunities for growth *within* and, critically, *across* settings to capitalize on the malleability of children and the variable and jagged pathways through which they will acquire increasingly complex skills and academic competencies.
5. Capitalize on the specific strengths, and potential growth in the strengths, of each child to build the cognitive, social, emotional, metacognitive, and motivational skills and positive identity to enable the child to adapt to new challenges, including transferring skills to new settings.
6. Address sources of institutionalized racial oppression, sexism, marginalization, stereotyping, and individual bias that diminish the opportunities for positive identity formation and the expression of an individual child's potential.
7. Be aligned with the resources for positive growth found in communities, families, schools, child development programs, faith-based organizations, culture-sustaining organizations, and athletics.

Nothing less than this elaborate, comprehensive web of environments, relationships, and experiences will optimize each child's learning and healthy whole-child development.

Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design

The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design,

The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design



- **Positive Developmental Relationships:** Relationships engage children in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people.
- **Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging:** Children struggle to engage and learn when they don't feel safe physically, emotionally, and with regard to their identity—when they don't feel like they and their culture are represented and valued in their learning community.
- **Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development:** These are the kinds of intentional, nourishing, personalized instructional experiences that fully engage and challenge us, helping us discover what we are capable of.
- **Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets:** Because learning is integrated (there is not a math part of the brain separate from a creative part of the brain), we need to focus on developing skills like self-regulation, executive functions, growth mindset, and perseverance as part of mastering challenging content. Skills and content work together to produce problem solving, collaboration, and metacognitive and analytic skills, as well as mastery-level academic competencies.
- **Integrated Support Systems:** Learning environments need to be set up with many more protective factors, including health, mental health, and social service supports as well as opportunities to extend learning beyond the school day and build on interests and passions.

shown on page 22, is a framework that aims to guide the transformation of learning settings for children and adolescents.

Although these principles resonate with many educators, they have not yet been widely used to develop schools and learning settings, nor have they been engineered in fully integrated ways to yield healthy development, learning, and thriving. Progress has been impeded by both historical, ingrained practices and current policy (which is built on dated, false assumptions about school design, accountability, assessment, and educator and practitioner development). The current educational system and the constraints built into federal law (e.g., requiring high-stakes assessments in reading and math) do not support robust implementation, let alone integration, of these practices. Nor do they prioritize deep connections across school- and community-based resources. If, however, the purpose of education is the equitable, holistic development of each student, scientific knowledge from diverse fields and sources can be used to redesign policies and practices to create settings that unleash the potential in each student.

Redesign around these core principles has implications for all levels of the ecosystem, from the classroom to the school, district, and larger macrosystems that must join together to produce an intentionally integrated, comprehensive developmental enterprise committed to equity of development, opportunity, and experience for all students, not just some. Although my colleagues and I separate and enumerate each principle individually, we believe the unique application of these principles will be to use them in reinforcing and integrated ways to truly support learners' needs, interests, talents, voices, and agency. The aim is a context for development that is greater than the sum of its parts and is transformative, personalized, empowering, and culturally affirming for each student.

Our Shared Challenge: Bringing Whole-Child Design to Every School and Community

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

—James Baldwin

It is not possible to talk about the development, learning, and thriving of young people without talking about opportunity, access, resources, and social capital. And it is not possible to talk about any of those things without talking about race. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi wrote:

What if, all along, these well-meaning efforts at closing the achievement gap have been opening the door to racist ideas? What if different environments lead to different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement? What if the intellect of a low-testing Black child in a poor Black school is different from—and not inferior to—the



The aim is a context for development that is transformative, personalized, empowering, and culturally affirming for each student.

intellect of a high-testing [w]hite child in a rich [w]hite school? What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environments? What if we measured intellect by an individual's desire to know? What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students?³²

If the United States wanted to right the wrongs of today—and of 402 years of policies and practices since the first enslaved Africans arrived in modern-day Virginia—it would have to rethink

systems based on the scientific principles outlined above, such as malleability, relationships, the importance of context, and human potential. The principles can serve as a guide to not only what we can do to benefit all young people's learning and development, but also what we must stop doing now because it is actively harmful to the learning and development of many young people. This includes dismantling the institutions that preserve and sustain harmful, racist practices, such as tracking, harsh discipline, exclusion, shaming, and many others. It also includes embracing the cultural nature of learning.

Learning is inherently cultural.³³ As the lead editor of the *Handbook of the Cultural Foundations of Learning* explains:

To best represent what we know about human complexity and diversity, ... a theory that captures the fundamentally cultural nature of learning must rest on four key propositions, viewing learning as:

- *Rooted* in our biology and in our brains, both of which science increasingly recognizes as social and cultural;
- *Integrated* with other developmental processes, whereby learning involves the whole person—emotion, cognition, and identity processes working together;

- *Shaped* through the culturally organized activities of everyday life, both in and out of school, and across the life course;
- *Experienced* as embodied and coordinated through social interactions with the world and others.

These RISE principles recognize that learning occurs across multiple developmental niches and timescales and is deeply contextual and social. Understanding the cultural nature of learning is critical for the design of schools and school systems that build trusting relationships, provide space for identity exploration and positive identity mirroring, engage with curricula with an eye toward identity and connection, and view family and community knowledge as core to disciplinary knowledge.... This approach is aligned with anti-racist teaching practices and fosters embracing multiplicity and understanding learning as integral to liberation and freedom.³⁴

Consider the power and influence you hold. Take a moment to think about who is walking into your programs and through your classroom doors and the variation you will see: You may have children who are happy, children who are anxious, children who are eager, and children who feel disconnected. You may have young people who have experienced trauma, who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, or who have supported their family and siblings after the loss of a job or a loved one. There could be students who have not been inside a school building for a year and a half but have learned how to cook, repair the family car, tutor their younger brother or sister, or play a jazz riff on the guitar. All of this and more is likely walking through your door. And then there is what COVID-19 brought to your own lives. So how can you be ready to welcome it, all of it, the good, the great, and the challenges you see before you every day? What are the nonnegotiables for your well-being and theirs?

There are assumptions and dominant narratives about what we are looking at: the trauma of COVID-19, the impact of racialized violence and historic inequities of educational opportunity, the problem of learning loss and lost learning time, the beliefs young people have about whether they and their identities and cultures are welcome in their learning communities, the fears young people have about their futures.

How many of our students, particularly those most vulnerable, will internalize these messages about difference as damage or loss as personal failure? This is a narrative that runs counter to everything we know about from developmental and learning science.

This situation begs the question: Are we looking at different problems or are we looking at different faces of the same problem? Variation and individuality are the essential features of human development. However, the approaches we have taken thus far to learning and schools have not fully challenged our false assumptions about learning: Is it highly variable or does it fall into a bell curve? Or intelligence: Is it defined by our genes or by the context that drives their expression? Or skills: Are they malleable or fixed?

What would it mean if all the places where children are learning were designed to meet each child, the whole child, where they are?

Or talent: Is it plentiful or scarce? Or even human potential: Is it limited or can we begin to imagine what any child would be capable of under the right conditions?

Should we continue to offer menus of labels and interventions or instead conceive of a new education system that reflects a new, equitable purpose for all of our learning settings—one that is encompassing, relationship-rich, holistic, rigorous, and profoundly positive about and engaging of students' interests and capabilities? What would it mean if all the places where children are growing and learning were designed to meet each child, the whole child, where they are, and help each and every one develop to their fullest potential?

What we have seen during the pandemic we cannot unsee. In the realm of education, now more than ever, we should see young people walking through the door as individuals, each with their own experiences of lockdown and the national reckoning on race, each with their own developmental starting point, relational and experiential web, and jagged pathway.

The core message from learning and developmental sciences is clear: the range of students' academic skills and knowledge—

and, ultimately, students' potential as human beings—can be significantly influenced through exposure to highly favorable conditions (i.e., learning environments and experiences that are intentionally designed to optimize student development).³⁵ Importantly, this is true even for students who have experienced trauma; highly favorable conditions will foster healing, learning, and thriving for all of our young people.

Whole-Child Design Is Happening Today

There are robust examples of whole-child design today in schools and youth-development and community-learning settings across the United States. In the two schools described here, you will see the power of integration across all five principles of whole-child design and the overwhelming importance of putting relationships at the center of learning.

Collaborative Learning and Development at the Springfield Renaissance School

The Springfield Renaissance School³⁶ in Massachusetts is a regular, nonselective district school for grades 6–12 serving mostly students of color from low-income families. Ninety-five percent of its students graduate and are accepted into college. Most are the first in their families to go.

What is producing these remarkable results? Renaissance cultivates a learning community that supports, respects, and empowers students in a holistic way. Because students are known and valued as individuals with positive personal and academic identities, they are more confident and resilient in taking on unusually complex and meaningful work.

School staff collaborate to improve the cultural responsiveness of their curriculum and teaching, their active work for

equity and anti-racism, the efficacy of their lessons, and the classroom cultures that foster positive relationships and bring out the best in students.

Students meet in small “Crews” (advisories) every day—and their Crews stay together from 6th through 8th grades and from 9th through 12th grades. Crews support the social and emotional health of students, foster their academic resilience and growth, affirm their identities (e.g., race, culture, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical abilities), and compel them to work on their character: to be responsible, respectful, courageous, and compassionate. Students see their role at school as more than their own success—they are responsible for the success of their Crew and classmates.

Building upon a foundation that meets academic standards and fosters deep knowledge, Renaissance educators invigorate learning through interdisciplinary projects, service-learning opportunities, and project-based learning expeditions, which call upon students to conduct research in the field that culminates in a product, presentation, or performance. The projects are also motivated by purpose, typically designed to contribute to the well-being of the community.

In Renaissance classrooms, teachers talk less. Students talk (and think) more. Lessons have explicit purpose, guided by learning targets for which students take ownership and responsibility. Student engagement strategies and activities differentiate instruction and maintain high expectations to bring out the best in all students, cultivating a culture of high achievement.

Developing Habits of Mind and Heart at East Palo Alto Academy

East Palo Alto Academy (EPA) ³⁷—a small public high school launched in a chronically marginalized and under-resourced

community in California once so violence-ridden it was identified as the murder capital of the United States—transformed student outcomes by incorporating practices built on the science of learning and development. In a district where two-thirds of students once failed to graduate, the new school enabled 90 percent of students to graduate and 90 percent to go on to college by creating the conditions for cognitive, social, and emotional learning.

During the school’s first year, teachers identified the fundamental competencies necessary for success in school and in life, then infused them into every aspect of the school. Their Five Community Habits—personal responsibility, social responsibility, critical and creative thinking, application of knowledge, and communication—became the basis of rubrics used for guidance and evaluation in every class by every teacher.

The social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits, and mindsets incorporated into the rubrics include personal awareness and self-management for attendance, participation, personal honesty,

and care for others. Rubrics also include interaction and collaboration skills, empathy and perspective taking, and community building. Executive functions like planning, organizing, and managing projects; metacognitive skills like reflection for self-improvement; and capacities for perseverance exhibited by willingness to revise work are also incorporated into the rubrics.

Together, these rubrics form a framework that is used to teach students in a consistent and persistent manner what it means to be a student, a worker, and a member of their school community. Some skills, such as conflict resolution and study skills, are taught in advisory classes, while all are taught, modeled, and reinforced in academic and cocurricular settings. One student described these rubrics on the five habits as “the best thing for me over the last four years.”

Because teachers incorporate these skills and habits into content classes as well as advisory classes, students grow to have a thorough understanding of the standards, commonly reference them, and know what is needed to meet them. And because students are constantly reflecting on the skills in self-assessments, exhibitions, and student-led conferences, they internalize them deeply. Ericka, a student from the first graduating class, demonstrated her deep understanding of the habit of social responsibility as she reflected at her senior exhibition:

It was hard for me, because freshman year I was just really a cocky individual. I thought I knew it all; I didn’t want to work for anybody else, because I was big-headed. And part of this habit is how well you interact in a group. How well do you work with people who are not like you? If I put you in a group with [two other students], can you work with them? Can you get the job done? How do you move your group forward? ... Are you interrupting me every time I’m trying to speak? ... I would apply this [to the challenge of] being able to work with people who are not like you, who have different backgrounds

Renaissance educators invigorate learning with interdisciplinary projects, service learning, and project-based expeditions.



from you, who have different viewpoints from you. Being able to tackle that in high school I think [will make it] easier for me to tackle it when I go to college.

Partnering for Play and Enrichment

Some schools and youth development organizations have seen the value of working more closely together to alleviate the exhaustion from the pandemic and, more importantly, to offer students many different experiences to discover their passions, interests, and capabilities. For example, Playworks is an organization that helps schools and districts make the most out of recess through onsite staffing, consultative support, professional development, and free resources. Playworks helps schools create safe, joyful, inclusive opportunities for children to play alongside adults. Students develop leadership and conflict resolution skills while priming their brains and bodies for academic success. A review found that the Playworks Coach service is one of only seven interventions to meet the highest criteria for evidence of impact under the Every Student Succeeds Act.³⁸

A more community-focused example is the Providence After School Alliance, a public-private partnership that aims to close opportunity gaps by expanding and improving quality afterschool learning opportunities. Middle and high school students throughout Providence, Rhode Island, are offered year-round access to free, hands-on learning and enrichment opportunities provided by over 80 community-based organizations four days per week. Students build solar-powered go-karts, study marine biology in Narragansett Bay, and can choose to learn how to act, dance, cook, sail, throw a pot, kick a soccer ball, or design a robot. During the multiweek sessions, students explore their career interests, deepen existing skills, and discover new activities with the guidance of adults with whom they build lasting relationships. Transportation, snacks, and meals are also provided free of cost.

With what we know today, we can build many more environments that help protect children from developmental harm, including racist policies and behaviors, and promote their healthy development and success as learners. The nonnegotiable elements of whole-child design described here will simultaneously ignite brain development and learning, promote wellness, support positive identity formation, and enable the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and mindsets that are critical for success in learning, work, and life and build resilience to future stresses.

In the design process, we can ask and answer the same question that researchers and practitioners in other fields have asked: What can we do that will work optimally for this specific child, in this context? This question will move scientists, educators, and youth development practitioners of all kinds to fundamentally different answers about the way our schools and learning systems of the future must be designed: toward integrated, holistic,

and personalized processes, using tools, platforms, and support systems to integrate rigorous academic instruction with the intentional development of the skills and mindsets that all successful learners have.

Insights from brain science align profoundly with what so many parents want for their kids, and what so many teachers have been saying for years: that we can create a system that recognizes

children as whole people, values their assets, and supports them to excel in myriad ways.

The message in the science is so optimistic: context shapes the expression of our genetic attributes. This is the biological truth. And schools designed using the levers of human development—so that what one child can do, nearly all children can do under highly favorable conditions—can become our new learning system: a system designed to see and unleash talent and potential and ensure that all young people can thrive.³⁹ This vision constitutes a transformational shift in the purpose and potential of our learning systems, and a dismantling of

the systems and laws that constrain this vision, grounded in what we know today about human development, the development of the brain, and learning science. □

In Providence, students build solar-powered go-karts, study marine biology in the bay, and can choose to dance, sail, throw a pot, or design a robot.

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What Will It Take to Promote Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving at Scale?

Three Networks Offer Promising Models

BY LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND

In the United States, progressive educators have long sought to transform schools to allow more student-centered, inquiry-driven, and community-connected approaches that nurture the whole child. From John Dewey, founder of the University of Chicago Laboratory School, to William A. Robinson, principal of the Atlanta University Laboratory High School and an organizer of Black progressive educators in the South,¹ innovators have drawn on the sciences of learning and development as they evolved, and on their own close observations of children, to create schools that mirror the principles described in the main article.

Yet, sustaining and spreading these models remains a challenge. Classrooms and schools that support long-term relationships, student-centered learning, and strong community connections confront a wide range of institutional barriers. These barriers include the factory-model school structures that depersonalized schools at the turn of the 20th century; the textbooks and pacing guides that direct attention away from students' interests, cultural and community experiences, and zones of proximal development; and the testing and tracking systems that presume fixed intelligence along a bell curve, reinforcing discrimination based on race, economic status, and language background. Developing and retaining the "infinitely skilled teachers"² who can support this kind of learning (without the systemic resources it merits)

Linda Darling-Hammond is the president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University, and a past president of the American Educational Research Association. This sidebar is adapted from her sidebar, "What Will It Take to Promote Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving at Scale?," in *Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving: A Dynamic Systems Approach*, by Pamela Cantor, Richard M. Lerner, Karen J. Pittman, Paul A. Chase, and Nora Gomperst (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

has also been a challenge in sustaining progressive education reform.

Nevertheless, there are thousands of schools in the United States that have been redesigned to reflect student-centered principles. Many have now created networks that support professional development to deepen their work. For example, these three networks create positive outcomes for high school students from marginalized racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups:

- Big Picture Learning, which has an experiential approach grounded in personalized courses of study and workplace learning, typically takes place in community-based internships.
- The Internationals Network for Public Schools serves new immigrant students through collaborative, inquiry-based learning for new English learners.
- New Tech Network offers interdisciplinary project-based learning that is team based and technology supported.

All of these networks enable students to "learn how to learn" by developing both content knowledge and the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and mindsets that increase self-awareness, executive function, perseverance, and resilience. These developments are made possible through

- advisory systems that enable small groups of students to work with the same advisor who supports their social, emotional, and academic needs over multiple years;
- teacher teams that share students and sometimes loop with them for more than one year, while collaborating on untracked curriculum that is interdisciplinary and project based;
- restorative practices enabling strong, caring communities in which students preserve and strengthen relationships and supports for each other; and
- linkages to community organizations providing a range of wraparound supports as well as internships and authentic learning experiences.



Schools that support student-centered learning and strong community connections confront a wide range of institutional barriers.

The three networks have planted these sophisticated models in hundreds of public schools across the United States by working closely with districts to engage communities, helping educators and members of the public see and experience new models of education, co-constructing new school structures along with pedagogies, developing knowledgeable leaders, providing curriculum supports and ongoing training and coaching to teachers and other staff, and engaging in continuous improvement. Although the work is difficult, these efforts show that it is possible and worthwhile. □

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Because of the pandemic, this school year will be different from the past, even in places where in-person schooling was maintained throughout. Many educators and members of the public now more fully understand that relationships matter for learning. Debilitating inequities in educational resources and learning opportunities, known yet effectively ignored by policy-makers for decades, are now undeniably exposed. And for the first time, federal monies are available on a scale sufficient to enact meaningful changes.

Many of my fellow educators and researchers have long known⁴ that genuine opportunities for deep learning require two basic things: rigorous, authentic learning goals and instructional supports that ensure a sense of safety and belonging. The fact that these remain aspirational goals, rather than widespread practices, tells us that the impediments are real and enduring. Inequities are systemic in American society. Learning opportunities are not equal before or during schooling, and testing often intensifies the marginalization of students with low scores because they are given remediation instead of enrichment. So the students who face the most challenges outside of school (due to everything from residential segregation to inadequate access to healthcare⁵)—specifically, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, nonnative speakers of English, and students with special needs—tend to be given the least inside of school. Therefore, any effort to invest in creating more equitable learning opportunities requires recognizing built-in racist and classist causes of inequity and working consciously to remove these systemic injustices.

Developing equitable assessment practices requires starting over, with up-to-date research on teaching and learning. My goal in this article is to provide a new vision of assessment integrated with instruction for the sole purpose of supporting learning—not ranking students, teachers, or schools. I explain how *ambitious teaching practices*, framed by sociocultural theory, are essentially one and the same as *equitable assessment practices*.⁵ I begin with a summary of the outmoded beliefs about learning and motivation underlying our current accountability systems. In the concluding section, I address what teachers need from district leaders and higher-level policymakers.

Outdated Beliefs About Learning and Motivation Underlie Assessment Mandates

Countless studies have shown the curriculum-narrowing effects of accountability pressures. In schools worried about raising test scores in reading and mathematics, science and social studies are driven out of the curriculum along with art, music, and PE. Worse still, testing pressure can undermine learning even in

⁴For an in-depth discussion of the connections between race, opportunity, and well-being, see “Healing a Poisoned World” in the Fall 2020 issue of *AFT Health Care*: aft.org/hc/fall2020/washington.

reading and mathematics because low-scoring students often receive repetitive drills, using decontextualized worksheets and other formats that closely resemble multiple-choice test items.

I don’t believe that anyone is truly in favor of children receiving such a dry, uninspiring education—so how did we get to this point? To better understand our current situation, let’s look back a few decades.

The cognitive researchers who helped politicians launch the first wave of standards-based reforms in the 1990s had some good ideas. Importantly, they pointed to the evidence that thinking and reasoning abilities are developed (not genetically fixed).⁶ They sought to make rich and challenging curricula available to all students, rather than an elite few, hence the slogans “all

students can learn” and “world-class standards.” They already had evidence from the 1980s showing the harmful effects of teaching to basic-skills tests, so they called for performance assessments aligned with ambitious new standards. These would be “tests worth teaching to,” with students writing essays, conducting chemistry experiments, and engaging in other

It’s long past time to reckon with how the accountability testing strategy has failed.



demonstrations of their current competencies. The researchers emphasized that their aspirations for a “thinking curriculum” were unprecedented and would require substantial “capacity building” and resources to help teachers teach in profoundly different ways.

Unfortunately, the idea of capacity building was replaced almost immediately by a competing theory of change based on incentives that used test scores to mete out rewards and punishments for educators.⁷ The name “standards-based reform” had been hijacked. Under the new theory of action, it was assumed that with sufficient motivation (from accountability pressure), teachers and other school personnel would find the means to improve instruction and that improvement would show up in students’ test scores. What research over the next decade showed, however, was that many administrators and educators did not understand the instructional changes that were needed or lacked the capacity to make them happen in a sustained, impactful way.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enacted in 2002, dramatically increased both the stakes and the amount of testing, from milestone testing in grades 4, 8, and 12 to every-grade testing from 3 to 8, plus high school testing. Because of the amount of testing required, the elaborate performance assessments that had appeared briefly in the '90s were too expensive and were replaced by mostly multiple-choice tests. In addition, because of draconian NCLB performance expectations—all students proficient by 2014—districts began purchasing commercial interim tests to get ready for state tests. Just as “standards-based reform” was hijacked, so was “formative assessment.” Machine-scored, multiple-choice tests are called “formative assessments,” but they are nothing like the curriculum-based, ongoing, interactive processes documented in the literature on formative assessment.⁸



Thus, we now have a multi-layered testing system that is limited in its ability to document progress toward deep learning goals, much less cultivate deeper learning. State tests must be curriculum-neutral to allow for local control, interim tests purchased by districts have to be generic enough to sell to national markets, and costs preclude portfolios or performance tasks. Although external tests could be useful once-per-year barometers of programmatic trends (if they did not have performance-distorting stakes attached), they are sold as if they have instructional meaning for individual students. Worse, frequent test-score reports give students the wrong idea about the purpose of learning. Feedback about how many additional points are needed to reach proficiency does not help students improve. In fact, research on motivation shows compellingly that data walls and other types of normative comparisons are harmful to learning. Initiatives for culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy,^{*} for example, cannot help if students experience public shaming for their low scores. Simply put, test-driven schooling is antithetical to what research on learning tells us about effective teaching and productive learning environments.

^{*}For details on culturally sustaining practices that reinforce the ambitious teaching I describe in this article, see “Liberatory Education: Integrating the Science of Learning and Culturally Responsive Practice” in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2021/hammond.

Current Research Supports Integrating Ambitious Teaching with Equitable Assessment Practices

Creating truly equitable and excellent educational opportunities means ensuring that each child has access to rigorous curricular resources and is supported to participate fully in instructional activities that enable deep learning. This “ambitious teaching” centers on each student’s engagement and participation; it requires paying explicit attention to who students are as they enter the classroom, including their prior learning experiences (inside and outside formal educational settings), their family- and community-based funds of knowledge, and their races, ethnicities, gender identities, social classes, and other aspects that influence their identities as learners.

Ambitious teaching practices are consistent with asset-based pedagogies, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, and learning research in literacy (including biliteracy and bidialectism[†]), mathematics, and science. The foundation for all of this work is sociocultural learning theory,^{*} which is the state-of-the-art model for understanding how learning happens and why context, culture, and sense of belonging are an integral part of learning.⁹ Sociocultural learning theory builds on important lessons from cognitive research (in laboratory and classroom settings) about sensemaking, prior knowledge, and metacognition; it also attends to the ways that social and cultural contexts shape development, identity, and new learning.

Importantly, it explains why motivational aspects of learning—feelings of self-efficacy, belonging, and purpose—are completely entwined with cognitive development.¹⁰ Because learning is seen as transforming one’s ability to *participate* in a community of practice, learning involves developing communication skills and gaining experience with tools for thinking along with an increasing sense of competence and ability to contribute.

Sociocultural learning theory, thus, creates an imperative to deeply know each student—academically, emotionally, socially, and culturally—and to offer a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe to talk together about their thinking and reasoning. That’s why ambitious teaching is only possible when equitable assessment is fully integrated into instructional practice. Unlike our existing testing regime, equitable assessment is almost entirely formative—but not the *so-called formative* of today’s widely used benchmark assessments (which are mainly another form of test prep). True formative assessment takes many forms, from peer conversations and sharing out of group work to classroom quizzes and exit tickets, but a core feature is that it is grounded in the classroom curriculum and makes visible useful

[†]To learn about bidialectism, or speaking more than one variety of English, see “Teaching Reading to African American Children” in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington_seidenberg.

^{*}Although various lists of effective teaching practices have been derived without a theoretical foundation, theory is important for continuing to improve; it aims to explain why certain practices work, helps us think about improvements when initial efforts fall short, and provides a model of how all the pieces fit together.

information for guiding day-to-day instruction. Often, students do not know they are being assessed—they are simply sharing their thoughts and participating in activities as a normal part of the learning process.

Assessment integrated in ambitious teaching is equitable in several important ways. First and foremost, it positions students as capable learners and offers helpful information about what next, rather than a sometimes overwhelming list of all the things not known. Because students are assessed on the specific knowledge and skills they have been taught, questions and expectations are more recognizable and relevant as compared with curriculum-general state assessments. In addition, because the teacher is engaging with the student, the results are more meaningful; problems like bad days, issues at home, or simply misunderstanding a question do not skew the teacher’s understanding of the student’s progress.

When well-integrated, equitable assessment is embedded in and enables ambitious teaching. The summary of shared and unique practices shown below follows from a set of “Classroom

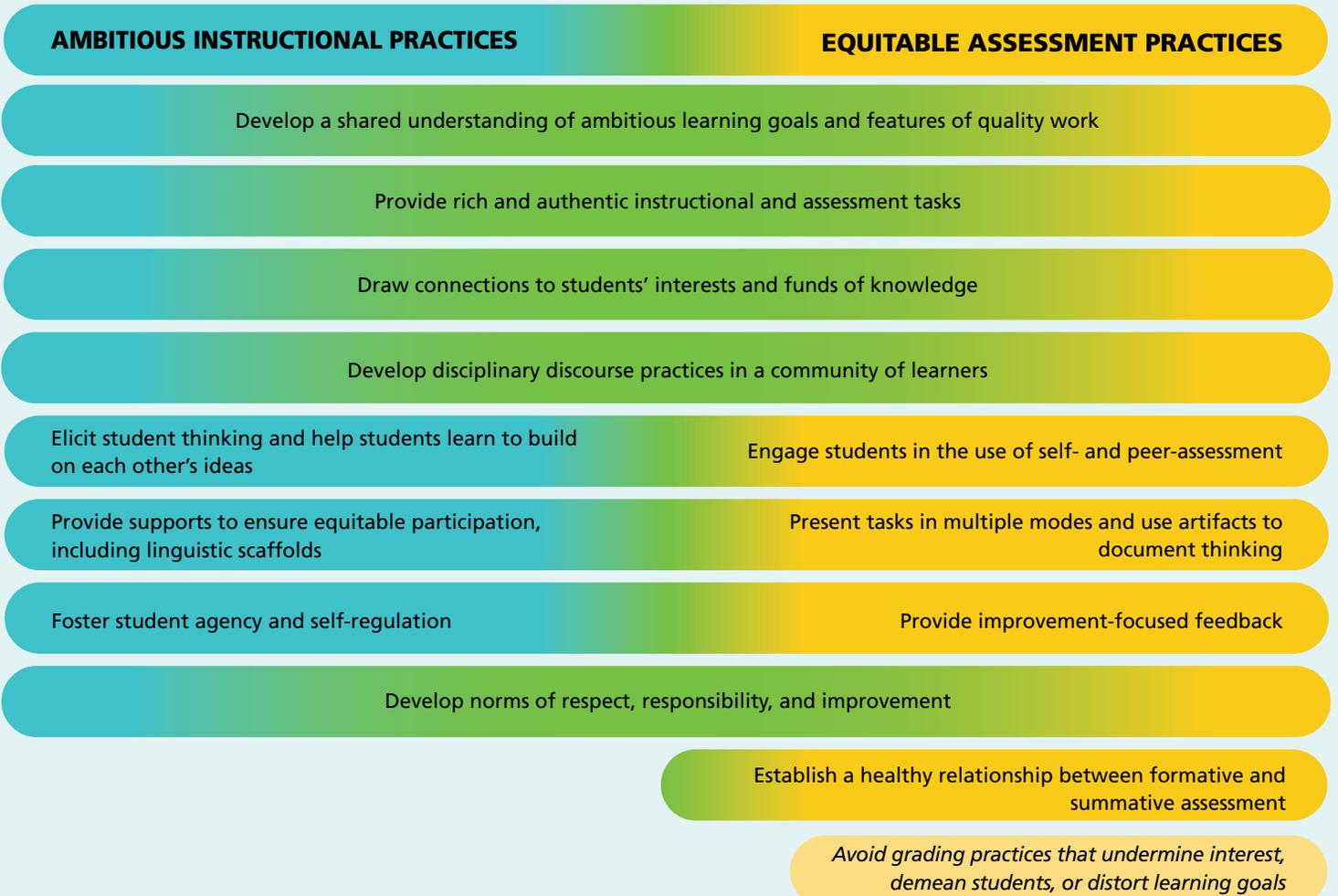
Assessment Principles”¹¹ that my colleagues and I developed in collaboration with our district and state assessment partners. We also invited and received extensive feedback from an array of participants who attended a national conference on classroom assessment. There was only one criticism to which we were unresponsive: the complaint that our principles for assessment “looked mostly like high-quality instruction.” Yes, that’s exactly our intention.

In the remainder of this article, I walk through each item in the figure. Although these practices would be daunting and likely incoherent if attempted piecemeal, they are highly interconnected and mutually supportive when viewed from a sociocultural perspective.

Develop a shared understanding of ambitious learning goals and features of quality work. Learning goals direct effort and shape thinking. Goals help to explain context and purpose and create a vision for what mature or expert practice looks like. To serve equity, goals must be challenging for all students (instead

Using Sociocultural Theory to Integrate Equitable Assessment with Ambitious Instructional Practices

Sociocultural theory is the foundation from which both ambitious instructional practices and equitable assessment practices derive.





of reserving ambitious goals only for some students and not others). Equity also requires that challenging goals be accessible and meaningful, which means they are not carved in stone and handed down from on high. Rather, they should be negotiated and connected based on students' interests and experiences outside of school.

For example, *Ambitious Science Teaching*¹² describes how *anchoring events or phenomena*

can create a more particularized and compelling context for considering more general curriculum topics.* Teachers and eighth-graders in Washington state took up the problem of killer whale populations declining in Puget Sound as they learned about ecosystems. And kindergartners used their 5-year-old words like “sticky,” “push,” and “pull down to the ground” (for friction, force, and gravity) to talk about whether somebody little could bump somebody big off the end of a playground slide.

Involving students in shaping goals and in monitoring their own progress develops self-regulation capabilities as well as deeper understanding of success criteria. It is well recognized in the formative assessment literature that coming to understand the features of quality work—what it means to be a good writer, a good student of history, and so forth—is an integral part of developing subject matter expertise.

Provide rich and authentic instructional and assessment tasks. It follows that ambitious goals require instructional activities and assessment tasks that fully represent or embody those goals. If a goal is for students to be able to develop and evaluate historical claims and arguments, then instructional activities must involve this kind of experience, including reading across texts, examining primary documents, presenting and critiquing arguments, and the like. Formative assessment can occur as part of learning activities, with both planned-for and in-the-moment questions designed to elicit student thinking. To further the activity, some questions can be asked of the group, but individual questions are also needed to check for understanding,

*While this discussion draws from the *Ambitious Science Teaching* book, there is also a companion website with excellent, free resources: ambitiousscienceteaching.org.

possibly as an exit ticket. Reporting back and showing students how their responses have helped shape next steps can enhance trust and demonstrate a joint commitment to learning (in contrast to more typical testing strategies that feel like catching and punishing students for what they don't yet know).

In a partnership of researchers and practitioners working to improve middle school mathematics instruction, the collaborators noted the importance of open-ended, high-cognitive-demand tasks.¹³ Problems that can be solved in multiple ways and that expect students to engage in mathematical reasoning help students develop an understanding about why procedures work and which procedures are appropriate to use in particular situa-

tions. And when showing their reasoning is part of the learning activity, students give teachers an abundance of information to determine next steps instructionally. Similarly, *Ambitious Science Teaching* emphasizes the importance of authentic tasks, for both instruction and assessment, that simulate the kinds of intellectual work that is called for in real-world contexts—this often means deciding what the problem is that needs solving as well as transferring learning of a

concept from one specific project or problem to another. Tasks with lower cognitive demands can also be informative, but these should be selected carefully, as something like scaffolds, to help teachers see students' partial understandings when they are not yet able to complete more ambitious transfer tasks.

Draw connections to students' interests and funds of knowledge.

Most teachers are aware of the importance of eliciting and building on students' *prior knowledge*. But too often they've been told to probe for an inert list of prerequisite school skills. More up-to-date research acknowledges the profound ways that cultural patterns affect all aspects of learning and development. This makes experiences from home and community highly relevant to school learning. The term “funds of knowledge”¹⁴ is becoming widely used to recognize the robust, accumulated wisdom developed in families and communities about daily concerns like cooking, budgets, first aid, and automobile repair and about core cultural values regarding morals and ethics. This knowledge, always there but sometimes disregarded in school, can be explicitly engaged as a resource for teaching. Attending to students' lived experiences furthers learning in several important ways. It shows respect and helps to counter negative positioning of students from communities that have long been marginalized. Drawing connections and providing scaffolds from everyday knowledge to academic knowledge also support intellectual development while contributing emotionally to a student's feeling of belonging.

A similar concept emerged from research on teachers who were recognized by parents and principals as successful with African American students.¹⁵ The practices they had in common, now known as *culturally relevant pedagogy*, affirm students' cultural identities while at the same time challenging and helping

them to succeed academically. Culturally relevant pedagogy also entails engaging students in recognizing and critiquing social inequities. There is no simple formula or list of strategies; this approach centers on teachers forming strong relationships with students and being committed to their success.

In the original research,¹⁶ the successful teachers did not use any “language of lacking,” such as attributions to single-parent homes or poverty. They fought against the idea of one-right-answer thinking and demanded that students work to high intellectual levels. Teachers’ assessment strategies focused on allowing multiple ways to demonstrate learning (which is discussed again later in this article). Assessment insights were also gleaned from all of the connections teachers made between school and community. Connecting rap lyrics to poetry is the most obvious; other examples included examinations of zoning laws that allowed liquor stores near schools with predominantly Black students but not near those with mainly white students and critical analyses of social studies textbooks under consideration by a state evaluation panel.

Develop disciplinary discourse practices in a community of learners. Students learn more from talk-based instructional practices,¹⁷ primarily because explaining your reasoning to someone else is usually more challenging than passively listening without any meaningful check for understanding. In addition, developing language and inquiry skills specific to each discipline, such as mathematics, history, and science, helps students develop a much deeper understanding of that discipline. Including disciplinary practices as learning goals along with big ideas in content domains[†] addresses equity by ensuring that students from all backgrounds have opportunities to develop problem-solving, reasoning, and communication skills that enable participation.

Disciplinary practices, such as posing questions, analyzing and interpreting data, modeling, and argumentation, can be thought of as tools for thinking. Talk-based instructional strategies and documentation (e.g., poster presentations), as students engage with these disciplinary practices, provide opportunities for assessment and feedback without the need for separate quizzes and tests.

Elicit student thinking and help students learn to build on each other’s ideas. By now, the integration of these various ambitious instructional and equitable assessment practices should be apparent. An overarching idea is that engaging students in challenging intellectual work requires emotional support, respecting who students are, and specific academic scaffolds, enabling next steps for learning. A critical aspect of assessment that’s embedded in instruction is that students’

thinking has to be visible—at least to the teacher and the student, and often to classmates. This means intentionally creating a productive classroom learning environment in which students are not afraid of offering inaccurate or incomplete thoughts.

In the research partnership on middle school mathematics noted earlier, the participants recognized the importance of whole-class and small-group discussions to further conceptual understanding. Making this happen requires high-quality tasks, otherwise there’s nothing to question or discuss. In addition, it is crucial that classroom *norms* be established about the value of learning from mistakes, what counts as an acceptable explanation for the academic discipline, and the importance of giving a rationale for why particular steps were taken. The researchers emphasized the critical role of the teacher in “pressing students to elaborate their reasoning and to make connections between their peers’ solutions and key mathematical ideas.”¹⁸

Engage students in the use of self- and peer-assessment. Self- and peer-assessment are two of the many formative assessment practices that have been shown to increase student learning.¹⁹ Self-assessment was initially thought of decades ago as a specific strategy to help students develop more explicit understandings

of success criteria and to get better at applying these criteria to improve their own work. Subsequent theoretical framings and studies have helped us understand the power of self-assessment to enhance metacognition and executive function and also, from a sociocultural perspective, to enhance self-regulation and student agency.

Peer-assessment shares many of the same benefits for learning as self-assessment.²⁰ Peer-assessment provides a vehicle

for student talk and more explicit attention to the features of quality work. Getting better over time at learning from and being able to critique the work of classmates contributes directly to students’ use of disciplinary practices, such as making claims from evidence or being explicit in the use of definitions.

None of these claims about the benefits of self- and peer-assessment are true, however, if students aren’t taught how to engage in this kind of feedback meaningfully or if these

Showing students how their responses helped shape next steps can enhance trust and demonstrate a joint commitment to learning.



[†]This is one positive feature of some recently developed standards, including the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards.

strategies are imposed only as an additional bureaucratic requirement. This is not about checking right/wrong answers or assigning grades. Rather, self- or peer-assessment practices should be taken up with explicit attention to the ways that they are expected to further self-monitoring and new learning. Because an essential purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback about how to improve, there must be subsequent opportunities to revise. Too often, students complete assignments “to be done,” rather than seeing learning intentions and how new learning will be used and built upon in subsequent classroom work. Insights from self- and peer-assessment need to have a place in the rhythms of classroom activities.

Provide supports to ensure equitable participation, including linguistic scaffolds.

Talking about thinking is one of the most powerful tools we have to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage fully with rigorous learning goals. But hoped-for critical-thinking talk doesn’t happen automatically. *Ambitious Science Teaching* explains the process by which participation in talk leads to higher-order learning. It also provides advice about how to set goals for classroom conversations, how to plan high-cognitive-demand questions, and how to use a repertoire of “talk moves” to be responsive to student ideas. For example, “pressing” is a way to ask students for more: “Can you give an example?” “What evidence supports that idea?” “Sounds like you have the beginning and the end of an explanation [repeat students’ partial explanation]; can you say what happens in the middle?” *Ambitious Science Teaching* also offers scaffolds for student talk, which are especially important for students who have not participated in such conversations previously. Scaffolds include teacher modeling and coaching, sentence starters or sample questions to launch group work, and ways to simplify complex tasks without doing the thinking for students.

Scaffolds to support participation are especially important for English learners. Most teachers are aware of the importance of making sure that students are comfortable with the meanings of academic words like *compare*, *contrast*, *hypothesize*, *cause*, and *effect*; but like everything else, real understanding is more likely

in discussions about specific applications of such words. Thus, it is beneficial to make these clarifications part of class discussions as new work is being launched. Later, during discussions when students are being asked to explain their group’s model or problem solution, teachers may need to invent specific scaffolds for students who are not yet fluent in English. This might mean pointing to the relevant portion of a graphical aid, letting students ask a classmate for help, or coming back at the end to invite an English learner to say “I agree with...” and having permission to repeat what another student has said or posted. Again, these

moves are done in the spirit of collaborative learning, with an appreciation shared by the class that our thinking is almost always ahead of our ability to put our thoughts into complete verbal explanations.

Engaging students in challenging intellectual work requires emotional support, respecting who students are, and specific academic scaffolds.

Present tasks in multiple modes and use artifacts to document thinking.

In addition to talk-based instructional practices that elicit and build on student thinking, presenting tasks in multiple

modes and allowing students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning can serve equity goals and affirm a positive learning culture.* In addition, representing learning in multiple ways can deepen students’ conceptual understanding by drawing connections and offering more than one way to think about a new idea.

The teachers that parents and principals had identified as exemplary teachers of African American students held multifaceted conceptions of assessment and engaged students in work reflecting multiple forms of excellence.²¹ In one example, a teacher helped her students choose the standards by which they would be evaluated and what evidence or work products they wanted to use as proof of mastery of specific concepts and skills. Another teacher emphasized questioning as a recurring pattern in classroom interactions, asking “Why are we doing this problem?” This invited students to interpret tasks and respond in ways that played to their particular strengths—it also created greater access to the content and the classroom discourse. As students’ various answers and approaches were shared across the class, much more robust understandings developed about how targeted knowledge and skills were to be explained and used.

Foster student agency and self-regulation.

Fostering student agency and developing self-regulation capabilities are broad, overlapping categories of practices that sum up several of the specific strategies and intentions addressed above and below. Self-regulation, which emerged from cognitive theory, and student agency, which emerged from sociocultural theory, are closely overlapping constructs having to do with both cognitive and affective aspects of learning. They are about developing the



*While multiple modes are beneficial, this should not be confused with learning styles. For details, see “Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Does Tailoring Instruction to ‘Learning Styles’ Help Students Learn?” in the Summer 2018 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2018/willingham.

awareness, self-confidence, and skills to take responsibility for one's own learning—and they are critical for motivation.

In summarizing the vast research on motivation, the recent milestone report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How People Learn II*, concluded that, “Motivation to learn is fostered for learners of all ages when they perceive the school or learning environment is a place where they ‘belong’ and when the environment promotes their sense of agency and purpose.”²² The report also summed up what educators can do as follows.²³

Educators may support learners' motivation by attending to their engagement, persistence, and performance by

- helping them to set desired learning goals and appropriately challenging goals for performance;
- creating learning experiences that they value;
- supporting their sense of control and autonomy;
- developing their sense of competency by helping them to recognize, monitor, and strategize about their learning progress; and
- creating an emotionally supportive and nonthreatening learning environment where learners feel safe and valued.

With this understanding of motivation—which, notably, does not include external rewards like scores, stickers, or pizza parties—we can see how it is that equitable assessment bolsters motivation. Self-assessment in particular is intended to help students develop their agency and self-regulation. This practice can be especially fruitful when students are given feedback about the quality of their self-assessments. Indeed, all of these ambitious teaching and equitable assessment practices are intended to work together in support of student agency and self-regulation.

Provide improvement-focused feedback.

Assessments that result in normative comparisons—posting Jacob's score as “Below Basic” or telling Keisha that she scored at the 55th percentile, for example—undermine learning. This conclusion comes from many hundreds of studies²⁴ showing that students who receive this kind of feedback do worse, on average, on subsequent measures of achievement than students in control groups that received no feedback. This type of feedback, where students are told how their performance compares to other students, is also called ego-focused or person-focused feedback. In contrast, task-focused feedback that shows students something about how to improve has a positive effect on learning.

How People Learn II provides this summary of the relevant research.²⁵

Feedback is most effective when it is

- focused on the task and learning targets; that is, detailed and narrative, not evaluative and graded;

- delivered in a way that is supportive and aligned with the learner's progress;
- delivered at a time when the learner can benefit from it; and
- delivered to a receptive learner who has the self-efficacy needed to respond.



In reflecting on how all the equitable practices in the figure on page 31 fit together, notice that they all attend to the identity and feelings of students as members of a learning community. Equitable assessment is not about offering false praise or lowering expectations. Rather, engaging students with specific information about how to improve their work conveys respect (because of the teacher's confidence that the student is able to do this higher-level work), and it invites students to take greater ownership and thereby have

a greater sense of control. I have said this many times before, but it is worth repeating: feedback that helps students think about how to improve their work requires *substantive insights* and is, therefore, more often qualitative (e.g., written comments or a discussion) rather than quantitative (e.g., a score).

Task-focused feedback that shows students something about how to improve has a positive effect on learning.

Develop norms of respect, responsibility, and improvement.

The practice of developing classroom norms in support of mutual respect, personal responsibility, and a shared focus on learning is fundamental to the idea of a learning culture. Creating an environment where students feel safe to ask questions, are willing to share partially formed explanations, and are able to offer critiques of each other's reasoning without meanness or injured feelings requires explicit negotiation and scaffolds (as is true when working toward any meaningful learning goals). Explicit work to jointly establish such norms is imperative if students have not become accustomed to such expectations in other classrooms or in prior years of schooling.

Ambitious Science Teaching suggests ways that norms can be co-constructed through role playing, for example, or by asking students directly what kinds of comments might keep them from participating and then discussing as a class how disrespectful

comments might be avoided. Examples of the kinds of norms that might be negotiated include students taking responsibility for their own learning by seeking clarification when they don't understand something and not interrupting or talking over classmates when they have the floor. For these norms to be felt and lived by, they must also be enforced, as when a teacher needs to step in and say, "That's a put-down rather than a fair critique of an idea; how can you rephrase what you said?"²⁶ A good indicator of when norms are embedded in the learning culture is when students remind each other to stay on topic or to let someone else have a turn.

Establish a healthy relationship between formative and summative assessment.

Ideally, in an affirming learning culture, students are excited to engage with new learning because of the intrinsic appeal of the goals and tasks—and because it feels good to contribute to the efforts of the group. Formative assessment practices such as making posters or using Google Docs to report out group questions or initial models for discussion should be seen as helping the class learn together. For more formal assessment practices, such as feedback or peer- and self-assessment, it is important that there be clear conceptual linkages to culminating summative assessments. That way, formative assessment can be seen as supporting improvement toward the same criteria and goals that will be called upon by summative assessments.

Current summative assessment strategies, like regularly giving students formal tests and posting the scores in electronic gradebook management systems, may be handy for parents to check on progress, but they are antithetical to what we know from learning research. First, they involve reducing substantive insights about what students know to mere points, which cannot tell the story about student interest or effort or how to improve. Point systems can foster extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation to learn (and can reduce intrinsic motivation, as discussed next). And, oddly, even when recorded weekly, each data entry is typically treated as if learning were finished rather than a step in a learning progression; it fails to note substantive improvements over time, much less guidance about how to improve further.

Avoid grading practices that undermine interest, demean students, or distort learning goals.

Much of the research on grading tends to involve surveys of current practices rather than examining how grading practices affect learning. One comprehensive summary of these survey studies noted that teachers give credit for "enabling factors"²⁷ (e.g., effort, ability, improvement, work habits, attention, and participation) in addition to mastery of learning goals. Better evidence about how grades affect learning comes from the motivation literature and from formative assessment research (much of which is summarized earlier). In short, grading best supports learning (and a learning orientation, which is crucial for future learning) when grades reflect mastery of the specific learning goals toward which instruction and feedback have been aimed and when grades are *not* used to try to motivate or control student behavior.

Even with my decades of assessment experience, I find it difficult to convince fellow educators to give up grades as motivators. After all, extrinsic

rewards do work, and students are more likely to turn in assignments and turn off their phones if you make these things "count" toward their grades. What was most convincing to me were the studies of extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards,²⁸ which show that students (even kindergartners) have less interest in learning activities after these activities had been "reinforced" with extrinsic rewards. Another important nuance related to grading is that many teachers want a way to credit nonachievement factors like effort because of their kindness and caring for students. An alternative practice that is kind and keeps the focus on learning is to allow students to submit new evidence of learning in place of earlier assignments. This makes sense especially when teachers and students together are aware of how a later assignment subsumes knowledge and skills required for an earlier assignment. As it stands now, many teachers feel they are bound by the bureaucracy of prior gradebook points. But ultimately, grades should be about the substantive learning that has been demonstrated—*not* whether it was demonstrated in week 14 or week 17.

Even with my decades of assessment experience, I find it difficult to convince fellow educators to give up grades as motivators.

Conclusion: What Districts Can Do to Support Ambitious Instruction and Equitable Assessment

Sociocultural theory helps us understand why personal relationships—between student and teacher and among students—are critical for academic achievement. It helps us see how to create affirming classroom environments by attending to students' identities and sense of belonging and, at the same time, how to ensure rigor by explicitly structuring and scaffolding students' participation skills to cultivate higher levels of thinking. Equitable assessment practices are themselves ambitious teaching practices and are entwined with additional instructional practices that together lead to high levels of engagement and deeper learning.



Some teachers already exemplify ambitious teaching and equitable assessment. After all, the science and math partnerships and the teachers succeeding with African American students described here are all grounded in observing teachers who had been identified as highly effective. Many teachers have implemented some but not all of these ideas. An especially familiar pattern is when teachers are able to implement one set of ambitious practices, such as discourse-based instructional practices, but then maintain more traditional, multiple-choice quizzes and tests instead of show-your-thinking, authentic assessment tasks. For other teachers, both ambitious teaching and equitable assessment practices are new; this is particularly likely in contexts where districts have not had the resources to invest in professional development or curricular materials connected to topics and problems of particular interest to local communities.

Learning to teach or improve one's practice in the ways described in this article can be daunting. Support for teacher learning is just as important as an equity-focused vision for student learning. In our "Classroom Assessment Principles,"* my colleagues and I identified five recommendations as to what school and district leaders could do to support equitable assessment practices in classrooms.

1. Implement coherent curricular activity systems that integrate curriculum, instruction, and assessment based on well-founded theories of learning.
2. Build collaborations between assessment and curriculum department staff to inform the design and implementation of coherent curricular activity systems in schools.
3. Provide professional development and coaching structures (e.g., time, supports for educator collaboration) that help to coordinate all of the different new things that teachers are being asked to learn, including learning and motivation theories, asset-based pedagogy, disciplinary practices as part of content standards, and classroom assessment principles.
4. Develop or adopt district-level assessments that embody the full range of desired learning goals.
5. Establish grading policies in support of grading practices aimed at creating clear success criteria, while avoiding the use of grades as motivators.

The single most important idea here is that district leaders must understand the research base informing these recommendations and themselves hold a coherent vision of how equity-focused assessment practices fit within commitments to asset-based pedagogies, rigorous subject-matter standards, and culturally responsive and sustaining teaching. The theories of learning (whether implicit or explicit) that govern district-level decisions matter: unhappily, districts are sometimes the cause of impediments to best practice. This happens when district leadership

*This detailed resource, which also addresses what state leaders and teacher educators should do, is available for free at go.aft.org/yui.

applies intense pressure to raise scores on accountability tests at the expense of other considerations, when districts invest in multiple-choice "formative" test products instead of substantively rich curricular and assessment resources, and when the rules for data management systems emphasize quantizing information rather than substantively describing progress. It also happens when districts create incoherence. Many districts, with the best of intentions, launch multiple worthwhile initiatives, but they do not coordinate among those initiatives, leaving educators struggling to make connections and to find time to squeeze in each mandated activity. Even under the current, highly counterproductive federal and state testing regimes, districts can and must do better.

As we emerge from the pandemic and take stock of our values, I hope we will fundamentally rethink how we approach teaching, assessment, learning, and youth development. The vision offered in this article would be one way to conceptualize how new monies and all the many reform ideas—about

rigorous content standards; diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; social-emotional learning; culturally sustaining pedagogy; and equitable assessment practices—could be coherently aligned and mutually supportive. If not this particular vision, then the important thing is that a coherent plan be devised that is grounded in what research on learning has taught us about equity. □

I hope we will fundamentally rethink how we approach teaching, assessment, learning, and youth development.



Endnotes

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(Continued on page 48)

Indebted No More

Paying for College Should Be Our Collective Responsibility



By Caitlin M. Zaloom

Pursuing a college degree—and the open future for young adults it is believed to secure—anchors what it means to be middle class in the United States today. Acting on the conviction that the rising generation can and should do better than their parents is a middle-class inheritance, and getting young adults to and through college is at the heart of this quest. American families hold fast to the goal of a college degree even during crises like the pandemic-induced economic crash that has consumed the United States.

The families I spoke with for my book, *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*,* largely handled the load as they believed all middle-class families should: in private. Today, however, more and more American young people and their parents are

speaking out about the personal and social costs of college. After I highlighted some of the book's key findings in a *New York Times* op-ed, more than 2,000 readers wrote in with their experiences and criticisms of higher education's financial burdens.

These commentaries reinforced one of my book's central arguments: for middle-class American families, college education is both an achievement of generations working collectively and an expression of a family's commitment to the future. They also lent support to the fact that, in previous decades, middle-class parents and their college-going children experienced planning for college very differently from the way they do now. Across responses to the op-ed, parents stressed the contrast between their own realities as students with what they face for their children's educations.

A teacher from Cleveland whose daughter attends a state university wrote in that she and her five siblings attended college without crippling debt. Her parents could offer meaningful assistance to all of them, even though their pay, as a teacher and a part-time nurse, was middling. Along with the modest wages she and her siblings earned through part-time work, they were able to make do. Today, she and her husband have continued her parents'

Caitlin M. Zaloom is a professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University. As an anthropologist, she studies family, politics, and economic life. She is also a founder of the magazine Public Books and editor of the forthcoming The Long Year: A 2020 Reader. This article is excerpted from INDEBTED: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost by Caitlin Zaloom. Copyright © 2019 by Caitlin Zaloom. Published by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.

*Although *Indebted* was originally published in 2019, this article is adapted from the 2021 paperback edition and draws in part on its updated preface.

commitment to education. They take on just about every additional job they can—as a grader of Advanced Placement exams, summer school and substitute teacher, and coach to a variety of teams—to supplement their income. But it’s not enough. “Welcome to the middle class,” she wrote, “where you work harder, longer, and do more to provide less for your children.”

In contrast, some people have responded to *Indebted* by asking why young people don’t attend a cheaper four-year college outside the United States, enroll in community college to lower costs, or join the military for the education benefits. We should reflect on the assumptions behind these questions, primarily that middle-class and lower-income college students in the United States should not rely on the educational system to support them. These responses assume that the United States, the richest democracy in the world, should encourage its young high achievers and their families to focus not on cultivating their youthful talent and figuring out how to contribute to their communities, but rather on cost—on how they, as individuals, will pay the tuition.

These responses, by fingering personal decisions, also let our politicians off the hook. State governments have slashed funding for our public institutions of higher education, and federal bureaucracies have pushed the cost of college onto the shoulders of students and their families. In addition, federal and state policymakers have failed to address the fact that providing a middle-class life for children has become increasingly expensive while, at the same time, middle-class incomes have stagnated.[†] The middle class simply takes home a smaller share of the country’s wealth than they did in prior decades.¹

In this article, I examine middle-class families’ laudatory emphasis on developing their children’s potential and their problematic norm of keeping their financial sacrifices hidden. Breaking the collective silence around debt would require admitting to the fragile nature of their finances, imperiling the very middle-class identity that they are trying to shore up by sending their children to college in the first place. My hope is to spark an open, honest, and public debate about how to support middle-class families and the rising generation in ways that live up to our highest ideals.

Developing Young Adults’ Potential

Among all the things that middle-class families consider when choosing a college, none is so important as which institution will best cultivate their children’s potential. In my interviews, parents and students told me that finding the right college was essential, because only in the proper environment could young adults

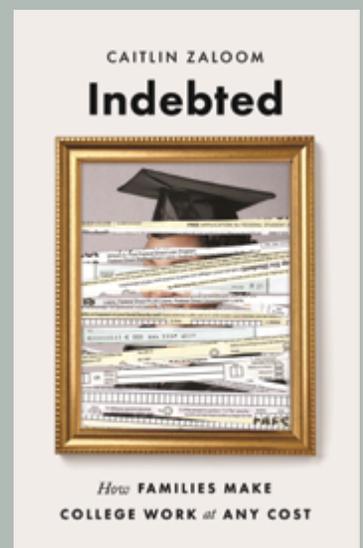
explore and develop themselves. Although college is, of course, also about preparing for work life, parents and students alike spoke about self-cultivation as the main reason for pursuing higher education. The college years are a unique time, they said, during which students have the freedom to discover interests and nurture talents; they can develop as whole people—not just as budding employees—and make their own choices about their futures. The college campus is also a unique place, one where students can come together in pursuit of fashioning themselves and their new collective futures.

State governments have slashed funding for higher education, and federal bureaucracies have pushed the cost of college onto families.

In recent years, a chorus of politicians, policy experts, and economically minded columnists have located the value of college in preparing young people for jobs. They argue that college students should spend their time in classes that will further their future careers and that colleges should offer curricula directed toward the positions corporate America can offer graduates. One prominent argument in these discussions is that students should train in science, technology, engineering, and math—the vaunted STEM fields—rather than allowing them, let alone encouraging them, to devote themselves to pursuits seen as less pragmatic and the development of skills portrayed as less in demand. While he was governor of Florida, Republican Rick Scott espoused this position in 2011 when he announced his intention to direct state funds toward STEM education and away

from the liberal arts and social sciences. In conversation with radio host Marc Bernier, he singled out anthropology for wasting

Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost, from which this article is drawn, is based on a unique research study: more than 160 in-depth interviews with parents and students who are taking on debt to pay for higher education. The conversations broach topics—family history, job security, debt, aspirations, anxiety, and hope—that are rarely discussed outside the domestic sphere. *Indebted* argues that the problem of paying for college today involves such profound moral, emotional, and economic commitments that it has redefined the experience of being middle class.



At press.princeton.edu, use code AFT20 to receive 20 percent off either the paperback or hardcover edition of the book until December 31, 2021.

[†]For details on the problem of wage stagnation and what to do about it, see “Moral Policy = Good Economics” on page 4.

students' time and state monies. "You know, we don't need a lot more anthropologists in the state. It's a great degree if people want to get it, but we don't need them here. I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, math degrees ... so when they get out of school, they can get a job."²

A political proposition that college should be considered primarily a route to a job hides under the economic veneer of such arguments. Proponents of this perspective hand the reins of college students' futures to the corporations that can hire them, wresting them away from students and steering students away from the open future that they and their parents value. The proposition can be summarized this way: The children of middle-class families, who need the government's support to go to college, should consider pursuing their own interests in college to be a luxury. Higher education should be for buckling down and studying the material that will bring solid salaries and help them pay their debts. Everything else is frivolous. What's more, they should certainly not use their post-college years to continue with personal exploration. They should commit to a career path and stick with the jobs that corporations need them to do.

College, in this view, amounts to little more than higher-level vocational education for the middle class, anointing them the yeoman workers of the corporate economy. This perspective applies the same fundamental justification for limiting middle-class students' educational choices as it does for low-income students. Both should serve corporate interests by pursuing technical educations, whether as undergraduates or in vocational schools; neither should aspire to the broader opportunities college offers.

Cultivating Changemakers

This morally laden political argument for yeomanship presents itself as hardheaded, but it mischaracterizes the realities of the job market that it vaunts. For one, the presumption that a liberal arts education would prevent students from getting jobs is spurious. Graduates with a broad-based education are in demand. Writing for the National Bureau of Economic Research, economist David Deming argues that employers are currently seeking skills that come from a more exploratory college education, like the one students receive by studying liberal arts. What's more, these workers' "soft skills," their capacity to communicate and work with others, are in short supply. Still further, Deming points out that the income benefits of STEM jobs are in decline. Economists have observed that, since 2000, managerial, professional, and technical occupations have stalled considerably in both the number of jobs and their wage growth.³ In other words, colleges and universities need to provide the materials for students to cultivate their potential, not just to obtain the kind of targeted, cognitive skills that STEM education offers.

The argument for yeomanship also fails to acknowledge that the connection between college and good jobs is not as clear as it may seem. Economists John Schmitt and Heather Boushey found that among 24- to 35-year-olds, almost 20 percent of college graduates "actually do no better than their counterparts who left school after high school," even before taking college debt into account.⁴ The high cost of college makes the return on investment less certain, and the nature of employment has become less solid too. Jobs are much less secure now than they were in the post-World War II decades, and they are likely to become even less so in the future. The argument for yeomanship denies the turbulent job market graduates will face. College students will enter a work world in which increasing numbers of jobs are designed to be temporary.

The growth of temporary employment has reorganized how Americans both live and work. Because it has coincided with massive technological changes, like the development of the internet, this social reorganization has appeared to be largely a natural consequence of innovation and competition rather than the outcome of human choices.⁵ But as historian Louis Hyman demonstrates, the shift was an explicit goal of business leaders. Beginning in the 1970s, corporate heads and their consultants began to look for short-term profits, cutting their commitments to their employees. Workers who might stay for years or decades required promotions and benefits and were protected by unions. Disposing of expensive workers became a key to meeting profit targets (and increasing executives' compensation). In their place, corporations began to rely on short-term employees who would stay for the job at hand and then leave.

Education scholar Cathy Davidson emphasizes that today's students need universities and colleges that will help them "navigate a world in flux" in which constant changes are the norm and learning how to learn, adapt, and understand rapid change is the central problem of living and of citizenship. Only with a college experience that focuses on the cultivation of potential will students be able to become "changemakers," assuming their responsibility to design the future and "serve society."⁶ During the college years, students should be learning to direct and thrive in a radically open future. Parents' and students' idea that the college years should be primarily about potential is not idealistic or naive; it is prescient.

Hiding Financial Sacrifices

Along with developing potential, helping children achieve autonomy is a guiding principle for American middle-class families. Across my discussions with parents, they emphasized how college was essential to their goal of enabling young adults to take charge of their own futures. Parents also stressed the need to keep their own end of the autonomy bargain, maintaining their households

African American parents taught their children about the limitations of the American fiction of equal opportunity.

separately from their adult children once they're on their own, leaving them unencumbered. These long-standing aims have come to involve an unavoidable paradox: independence must be cultivated under conditions not only of intimate connection but also of extended financial assistance.

The paradox was created by the political morality that, beginning in the 1980s, shifted primary financial responsibility for college onto the shoulders of middle-class families. The requirement to pay so much for college means that families stretch the expense over decades, from saving (or worrying about not saving) when the children are young, to paying out and taking on debt over the college years, to paying off the loans and making up the savings deficit far into the future.

From the mid-20th century up to the 1980s, the US government had prioritized higher education for twin reasons. A highly educated citizenry was deemed vital to the nation's prosperity and security; an educated workforce would boost national economic growth, which also strengthens defense. Supporting college educations for more Americans contained a loftier goal as well: it would advance the promise of equal opportunity. These broad national benefits supported the rationale for direct aid to students in the form of grants, as well as subsidies for low-interest loans and other forms of higher education support.

Since the 1980s, the argument that a college degree primarily confers private benefits has justified an analogy that underwrote the expansion of student loans. A college degree should be considered like another major family asset: the home. Advocates of this perspective accept that, like a home, a college education should be an expense borne by families. And they view the rewards of a college education as measurable—as they would be in a home—in the private value that it will deliver over decades, by way of a good job with a solid and growing income. Following this analogy, higher education aid should also carry the essential features of a mortgage. It should be paid for with private debt that spreads the onus over many years. This view has recently come under fire, but it has held sway among policymakers for decades.

Nested Silences

The concept of *private* debt seems ingrained in parents too. Frank conversations about the financial costs of college were remarkably

uncommon in the middle-class families I interviewed, though some families did discuss the particulars. Most parents did not want their young adult children to feel burdened by knowing how much they would have to pay for college or how the costs might affect their futures. Even though college is now the second-largest expense that typical American middle-class families pay for in their lifetimes (after their home), parents rarely disclosed to their children the financial sacrifices they faced. They obscured their struggles to allow their children to imagine their own futures freely. Children, for the most

part, willingly participated in the silence. They avoided asking their parents about the financial strain of college expenses. They valued the freedom to pursue their futures on their own terms, and they wanted their college choice to be made on the basis of noneconomic matters, such as the educational and social opportunities a school could provide. They understood that college was expensive, and that paying for it was a challenge for their family, but when they discussed where to go to college and what being a college student meant, the finances were not the central themes.

These tacit agreements to keep quiet, which I call “nested silences,” preserve essential middle-class boundaries.⁷ American middle-class families keep financial information to themselves; they do not share how much they make or what they owe with outsiders, insulating the household from the world beyond. This norm creates a zone of family privacy, and discussing finances breaches this sacred boundary of middle-class life. Many parents enforce silence inside the family too. They create an internal boundary between generations, across which they do not share financial details. This divide maintains the separation of responsibilities. Silence between parents and children around paying for college supports parents' moral commitment to shoulder their payments willingly.

Donna and Russell were exemplary. They never discussed their finances in front of their children, Karen and Owen, and they didn't believe they should start when it came time for college. Donna recounted that her own parents had never allowed her to know about their financial troubles, even though they did not have much money and supported nine children. During Donna's childhood, her father worked at first as a custodian, then as an insurance salesman, and, finally, in a car parts plant. Her mother was a hospital orderly, a stable job if not a well-paid one. Donna's father died when he was in his 30s, and after that her mother struggled to support the children. “She put us through the rest of



White parents did not discuss their own privileged social positions, a silence that upholds the mythology of the level playing field.

school—through high school—and did the best she could to make ends meet,” Donna told me. “We didn’t grow up with a whole lot, but we didn’t go hungry and we didn’t go without clothes. But we didn’t go on Disney trips either.”

Throughout, Donna’s mother shielded her children from her financial stresses. “That was grown folks’ business,” Donna explained, “and you would have to go outside when it was being discussed. My husband’s family didn’t discuss money either.... There wasn’t really any money to discuss. Bills got paid as they could get paid and they did the best that they could do.”

Rather than apprising their children of the family’s finances, many parents taught the value of fiscal prudence. Parents communicated to their children that they would need to make trade-offs among their desires. Donna related that she had been explicit about achieving this balance with Karen and Owen, telling them that “they couldn’t have everything that they wanted to have, and they had to make choices.” The lessons of prudence allowed parents to teach moral lessons about household management while maintaining silence about their own finances.

Parents worried that knowing about their finances would lead children to see themselves within a social hierarchy, and parents feared that this knowledge could hinder their children’s feeling that they are free to make their own way as adults. Just as their children were stepping onto a playing field that should be level, they would find it slanted by their parents’ histories. Maintaining this commitment to abstract equality marks families as middle class even when young adults face social and economic obstacles beyond their control.

Nested Inequities

Donna and Russell, who are both Black, were explicit with Karen and Owen about the ways their family legacy would have an impact on the children’s financial lives. They wanted them to understand that they would face racial and gender discrimination, and that getting ahead would mean surmounting prejudice. African Americans and women face hurdles others do not, they wanted Karen and Owen to know. To make this point, Donna told a story of having learned that she was being paid far less in her paralegal role than a white male coworker. When she took her discovery to her boss, the white male attorney told her that her performance was strong, but, “You know, this guy has a family to feed.” She recounted, “I started laughing, like ‘Are you kidding?’ I said, ‘I have a family to feed.’ And he says, ‘Yeah, but you have a husband.’ I said, ‘He has a wife.’ So every time he said something I came up with just the same thing, you know? And, finally, he said, ‘I sound pretty stupid right now, don’t I?’” Donna summed up the larger problem, “As a Black woman, I make less money than other people, and I know this to be true.”

She’s right. Reporting on the gender and racial wage gap in Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the Pew Research Center found

a substantial gap between white male and Black female workers: Black women made 65 cents on the white male dollar.⁸ Donna made sure her children were aware of this discrimination, and so did other African American parents. They explicitly taught their children about the limitations of the American fiction of equal opportunity. White parents, however, did not discuss their own privileged social positions or suggest that they conveyed such an understanding to their children, a silence that upholds the mythology of the level playing field.

Silence about finances maintains the separation between parents’ and children’s responsibilities under these conditions of intense and extended familial connection. This ring-fencing of generations can be difficult to maintain, however. Donna and Russell have struggled. As Karen was entering her junior year in college, Owen enrolled in school. He was awarded a partial scholarship, and together he and his parents paid for the remainder by taking out a formidable load of loans. The debts Donna and Russell already carried were significant—a mortgage and car loan, as well as their own student debts, which, at 49 and 50 years old, respectively, they were still paying off. They were forced to tighten their belts even more than they had when Karen went to school—including no longer contributing to their retirement funds. Donna had no doubts, though, that they had done the right thing: “I just feel like my job is to be a parent first, and that’s what we’ve been. I think me and my husband both feel the same way.” As with so many parents, their commitment will continue past their children’s graduation. Donna said of Owen, “Of course, we’ll help him pay his loans.”

Unfortunately, Donna and Russell’s struggle is not unique. With, on average, much less wealth to draw on for college expenses and credit scores that limit their borrowing potential, African American families have less margin for error in their budgets than white families. As a result of the legacies of discriminatory practices in education, housing, and pay, the median net worth of white families is \$171,000, about 10 times that of Black families.⁹ Although the families of Black college-educated parents do better, they still have far less wealth than college-educated white families, and the gap is growing. This means that African American children are far less likely than white children to get a substantial inheritance, the kind that can help them pay off their debts and use their income in more productive ways.¹⁰

Investing in Our Nation’s Future

The tectonic shift in who bears the burden of paying for college—from government to families—goes against long-established national principles. Government support for higher education was once transformative, fulfilling cultural ideals of access and opportunity.

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In recent years, protests calling for student debt forgiveness and for free tuition have swelled around the world, and in the United States too. Critics have labeled the antidebt activists “entitled,” unwilling to pay their fair share of college costs, but protestors’ demands are motivated by a different political view of moral responsibility than their detractors see. They are advancing a new idea—or, perhaps more accurately, reviving an old and still compelling one—of why college is important and who benefits from it. College, they argue, is not an “investment” in private labor market value, or “human capital”; this reigning political concept falsely reduces the value of education to pure economic outcomes. Instead, the value of higher education lies in the possibility of intellectual growth, solidarity among peers, and, ultimately, unconstrained prospects. It is both personal and collective, and finding better ways to support it is essential.

These activists demand from their governments what the parents and students I spoke with assume to be their just inheritance as Americans. They want a right to the future, by which I mean the freedom and capacity to live full, decent lives and pursue their own interests without debts that tie them to inequities and errors of the past. A college education that enables student autonomy, for both individuals and their generation, is one of the fundamental building blocks of this right.¹¹ But it is only possible when the prevailing political morality of education supports institutions that bring diverse students together to craft new visions of social, political, and economic life. And it only works when these institutions are accessible to everyone, without crippling costs.

A right to the future speaks to threats that young adults feel beyond higher education too. Climate change, for instance, weighs down young people with an inheritance of destructive decisions that exacerbate existing inequalities. So too does residential segregation by race and class and the continued patterns of gendered wage discrimination in the workplace. The rising generation will need to confront these unequal histories as well as the prejudices of the economic systems that have generated and sustained them. College is not just essential for developing and transmitting knowledge about these problems. It’s also one of the few places where young adults can come together and teach each other ways to change the world.

As a key site for securing young people’s right to the future, college should foster social solidarity and a spirit of equity among students. It should enable young adults to use their

educations for creative, collaborative social experiments. The right to the future is a claim to the possibility of generational reinvention. In this moment, we need young people’s leadership more than ever. But the cost of college and the sacrifices it requires compromise the lives and stymie the futures of those most needed to reinforce our democracy, pursue equality, and heal our environment.

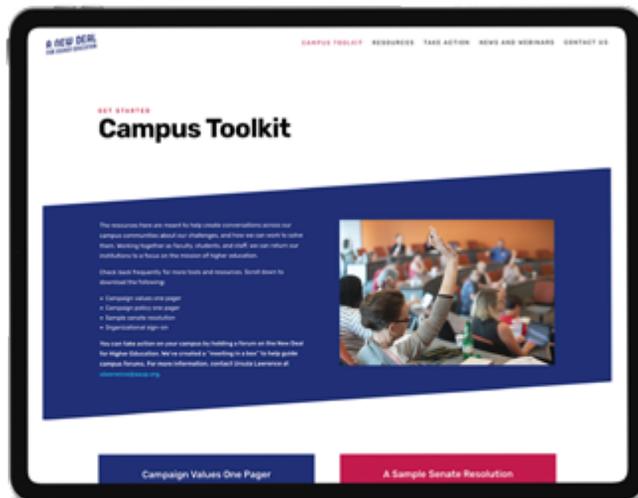
It shouldn’t be this way. The parents and grandparents of today’s college students still remember a time when our federal and state governments were committed to sustaining and enlarging the American middle class by investing in higher education. Free or low-cost public colleges and universities were the key. The best way to remake and revitalize the United States is to return to this ideal. We need our young people to make the most of their educations—for themselves, for their families, and for all of us who live in a society where our fates are intertwined. □



The cost of college compromises the lives of those most needed to reinforce our democracy, pursue equality, and heal our environment.

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New Deal for Higher Education

Higher education in the United States is in crisis. Decades of draconian cuts to public funding for colleges and universities have shifted the burden of paying for higher education from the broader public to the individual student. Abandoning higher education as a common good has led to crippling student debt, the replacement of a full-time faculty with protections for academic freedom and a voice in shared governance by an exploited contingent teaching corps, and a diminished ability for academic experts to use their skills for the public good. Increasingly, colleges and universities are portrayed as merely tools for job training and personal advancement, or even mischaracterized as centers of liberal indoctrination. The crisis closes doors to students, exacerbates racial and class inequalities, demoralizes the ranks of faculty and staff, and hollows out the teaching and research upon which our nation relies.

We need a New Deal for Higher Education. The challenges of the 21st century—emerging diseases, racial inequality, climate change, food insecurity, and others—require we reinvest in our educational system and return to the mission of higher education.

The New Deal for Higher Education campaign, launched in February 2021 with our partners at the American Association of University Professors, embraces American higher education and the people who work in it as they support a diverse citizenry and promote the general welfare. The campaign uses collective action to influence college and university policies, advocate for state legislation, and push members of Congress to reauthorize the federal Higher Education Act and create other federal policies that establish stable, dedicated public funding streams and hold administrations accountable for how those monies are spent. This campaign advocates for

- prioritizing teaching, research, and supporting student success;
- allowing all students to access higher education regardless of their ability to pay;
- ensuring job security, equitable pay, professional voice, and sustainable careers for all faculty and staff;
- creating academic environments free from racism, sexism, and other bigotries that prevent learning, degrade research, and perpetuate inequality; and
- canceling student debt for borrowers who have unjustly shouldered the burden of financing higher education the last 40 years.

We're already making progress. Public higher education institutions received a historic infusion of federal funding to assist in COVID-19 recovery efforts thanks to the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act. And the infrastructure package the AFT has been advocating for offers more funding to stabilize pandemic-stricken colleges and universities, make college more accessible to more Americans, and create a safe workplace for higher education employees and students. Reforms to our student debt system, including desperately needed fixes to Public Service Loan Forgiveness and even broad-based debt cancellation, are within reach.

The New Deal for Higher Education is committed to seeing that these possibilities become realities and using that momentum to lay the foundation for a 21st-century higher education system that benefits and empowers all of us. But successfully returning to the mission of higher education requires establishing engaged, effective coalitions on our members' campuses—and we need your help. Learn more about the campaign and how you can get your campus involved through our Campus Toolkit, available at newdealforhighered.org/campus-toolkit. If you'd like to talk more about organizing campus events, email us at highered@aft.org.

Professional Development Offered Through Summer Educator Academy

Every summer, the AFT's eight-day Summer Educator Academy is offered to all K–12 locals looking to build their internal capacity to lead professional development for their members. The academy is a comprehensive and intensive training designed to equip educators with high-quality, research-based content they can use daily in their classrooms and share with peers in their locals.

Professional development offerings fulfill a central tenet of the AFT's philosophy of professional unionism: the benefits of union membership include collective bargaining for better working conditions and job security and an emphasis on helping educators cultivate their professional expertise and enrich their students' learning.

In nonpandemic times, the Summer Educator Academy is a face-to-face training. In these times, when we all had to pivot to online teaching, learning, communicating, and socializing, the AFT's educational issues professional development team, along with AFT national trainers, designed online train-the-trainer versions of courses. Summer 2021 sessions covered a dozen topics, including strategies for English language learner success and for all students to succeed in our "new normal," instructional and assessment strategies for all disciplines, organizing the classroom for effective teaching and learning, strategies for social and emotional learning, and a course exploring how educators' personal and social identities inform their teaching.

Although courses were primarily held mid-July through mid-August, two trainings have additional sessions scheduled. "Beginning Reading Instruction," which focuses on the best ways to teach reading from pre-K through the primary grades, will have a six-hour presentation on September 18. And training in the "Thinking Mathematics 3–5" course, which focuses on how children learn

math concepts, will have a two-day follow up in January 2022. For more information about the Summer Educator Academy and the many other professional learning opportunities offered by the AFT, contact Lisa Dickinson at edickinson@aft.org or visit aftlearning.org/professional-learning.

AFT Teacher Leaders Program Growing, Reaches Tenth Year

In 2011, noting that teachers were too often excluded from educational policy discussions affecting their classrooms, the AFT began the Teacher Leaders Program to prepare educators to take active leadership roles in their schools, unions, and communities. This yearlong program, which has grown from five locals in the pilot 2011–12 year to 26 in the 2020–21 year, is where the rubber meets the road. The Teacher Leaders Program taps into what we know exists within educators, empowering them to seize their leadership potential through skill in research, advocacy, and public speaking.

Research projects have included topics related to curriculum, politics, mental health, restorative practices, testing, evaluation, and health and safety. If it happens in schools, these educators research the policy around it and recommend strategies to enhance students' learning conditions and mitigate any unintended consequences. In addition to developing more than 200 separate research projects, our Teacher Leaders have dedicated time to speaking with boards of education, state legislators, and business professionals; writing blogs; and attending professional development sessions—all while continuing to educate their students virtually and in person.

As of June 2021, close to 1,500 classroom teachers, school custodians, para-educators, school nurses and counselors, and other school staff members have completed the program. To learn more about the Teacher Leaders Program and how you can participate, contact Marjorie Brown at mbrown@aft.org.

Share My Lesson Site Gets a Facelift

Share My Lesson released a major site upgrade in time for the new school year, featuring content for AFT members and brand-new sections for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, specialized instructional support personnel, higher education professors, parents and caregivers, AFT member-only content, and, of course, teachers.

The updates—based on user feedback—make it even easier to find the great content you need quickly, saving you time so that you can stay focused on your students. With nearly half a million free resources and content organized by grade, subject, and topic, Share My Lesson has something for everyone.

We've added more professional roles and subjects to our resource bank to fully support the education profession. Whether you need a resource on how to improve positive behaviors and communication along your bus route or a lesson to help fourth-graders master fractions, Share My Lesson has you covered. We've also added new health and wellness subjects to support the work of counselors, nurses, therapists, and other school-based health-care providers.

And for our higher education faculty, Share My Lesson is a great platform for sharing your favorite lessons and finding a wide variety of resources to meet the needs of your students.

Finally, our AFT Members section highlights AFT affiliate pages and member benefits, including research-based professional development. Check out the site at sharemylesson.com.

Grief-Sensitive Educator Project Helps Educators Support Grieving Students

More than 18 months into the pandemic, it can still be challenging for educators to connect with and comfort students who have experienced loss, whether it's the passing of a loved one, the loss of a home, or missing social relationships. The Grief-Sensitive Educator, a collection of grief support resources, was launched in late December 2020 to help. Since then, close to 750 educators have participated in its 90-minute grief and loss training sessions to learn strategies to support bereaved students, including tips on what to say, how to make assignment accommodations, and how to teach kindness so other students can support those who are grieving.

The sessions are grounded in survey data from AFT members showing that educators felt underprepared to address students' pandemic-related emotional needs and in the AFT's work with the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, a rich resource for better understanding the needs of grieving students in the classroom. In addition to the training sessions, members have access to the coalition's self-paced learning sessions, via Share My Lesson, and other helpful tools. Members can connect to the project via the archived webinar, "Supporting Students with Grief and Loss," at go.aft.org/ae321uh. To learn more about the work of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, visit grievingstudents.org.



Project ELITE Provides National Training for ELL Tutors

The AFT invited a group of approximately 30 members representing 13 locals to be part of a special pilot literacy training—Project ELITE (Expanding Literacy Instruction by Tutoring ELLs)—for educators working one-on-one with English language learners in grades K–5 or who train other educators. The training is being developed by Diane August, one of the foremost experts in the field of second language acquisition and literacy and the author of two authoritative research volumes on ELLs from the National Academy of Sciences.

Through this 20-hour course, participants learned research-based practices to support the literacy development of ELLs with digital learning resources and individualized instruction. Feedback from the sessions was overwhelmingly positive, with a majority of attendees reporting the training was a high-quality overview of literacy skills and would help them better support their students. We will be following up with participants this fall and winter to check on their progress. To learn more, email edissues@aft.org.

The Dual Enrollment Playbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students



ARIEL SKELLEY / GETTY IMAGES

Millions of high school students participate in dual enrollment programs to take credit-bearing college courses and get a head start on completing a college degree. The benefits of high-quality dual enrollment include increased academic motivation and self-

confidence, stronger academic performance, and higher graduation rates in high school and college. Dual enrollment can be most beneficial for students from marginalized communities with historically low access to college—such as students of color (particularly Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Pacific Islander), from low-income backgrounds, who are learning English, and/or who are in special education—but it needs to be carefully planned to offer equitable instructional supports. As more educators consider starting or expanding dual enrollment programs, one critical goal is to increase equity in opportunities to participate and to succeed. This is the focus of *The Dual Enrollment Playbook*, a collaborative report published by the Aspen Institute and the Community College Research Center.

The report summarizes lessons learned from an examination of nine successful dual enrollment programs in Florida, Ohio, and Washington. It offers the following five “Principles to Advance Equity in High-Quality Dual Enrollment.”

Set a Shared Vision and Goals That Prioritize Equity

Successful dual enrollment partners connected the program to a broader vision: students who are ready not only for college but also for meaningful, in-demand careers. They understood the equity gaps in their schools and set goals for addressing them. In one high school, staff started an awareness campaign featuring a “men of color event” for Black and Latinx students to learn how dual enrollment could lead to rewarding careers. In another school with significant achievement challenges, many teachers and families thought students could not meet the high expectations of the dual enrollment program. One determined English teacher persisted, and with years of patience, establishing trust, and growing the program, the culture of the school and community changed. Families now demand more accelerated programs and courses for students—and the school significantly improved its graduation and college-going rates.

Expand Equitable Access

In successful dual enrollment programs, educators and partners believe all students—and especially students of

color—can succeed in college and eliminate barriers to equitable access. Beginning in sixth grade in some cases, they initiate conversations about college prep programs and provide knowledge about what it takes to enroll and succeed in college. Middle school teachers arrange college campus field trips and highlight the accomplishments of former students who completed dual enrollment. High school staff actively recruit students who do not know about dual enrollment, debunk myths about college, and seek funding to support students who need help with program costs, transportation, and technology.

Connect Students to Advising and Supports That Ensure Equitable Outcomes

The programs highlighted in the playbook had mandatory student advising to help students match their life goals to a degree and resulting well-paying career. Advisors helped students design an academic plan to meet degree goals efficiently. Because failing even one dual enrollment course can derail students’ progress toward a degree, successful programs featured frequent communication between high school and college instructors and counselors to monitor student progress and to provide supports (e.g., tutoring, peer mentoring, mental health counseling, and social services) for struggling students.

Provide High-Quality Instruction That Builds Students’ Competence and Confidence

The authors found that in high-quality dual enrollment programs, high school teachers explicitly taught students what to expect and told students that they were capable of meeting these expectations. Those who taught dual enrollment courses showed students the lecture-based instruction they were likely to receive in future college courses and ensured strong academic preparation using active learning and culturally responsive teaching strategies. Students also learned college expectations and study skills through orientation sessions and courses integrated into the program. In addition, instructors were carefully selected and intentionally supported; college faculty who were not accustomed to teaching younger students and high school teachers who were not accustomed to teaching college-level material were both provided professional development.

Organize Teams and Develop Relationships to Maximize Potential

The authors stress that the foundation of a successful dual enrollment program is partnership between the stakeholders: middle and high school teachers and leaders, college faculty and administrators, district superintendents, student advisors, transition coaches, and community program champions. The strongest programs identified partners that met regularly in strategic teams to collaborate on solutions to improve access and equity; collected data on student participation, academic progress, and success outcomes; and used that data to evaluate the program and make improvements.

Visit go.aft.org/v1h to download the full report, plus guides for getting started and increasing equity.

Moral Policy = Good Economics

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