Student Experience as a Catalyst for District Transformation

2017–2023
About the BELE Network

From 2017-2023, the Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network brought together educators, researchers, school support organizations, and philanthropic foundations, including the National Equity Project, to learn about, document, and share best practices for creating equitable learning environments grounded in the science of learning and development to ensure every student has the experiences and support needed to thrive.

At the core of this work is a commitment to transforming student experience, particularly the experiences of young people most often marginalized within schools.

Research tells us that students are more engaged when learning aligns with their interests and needs (Cantor et al., 2019; Farrington, C. & Paunesku, D., 2020). We also know that a student’s daily experience in school—including how they feel and what they think—is fundamental to their lifelong well-being and development as a person. A student’s experience in school shapes their identity, perceptions, and beliefs about their capabilities and their role in society.

The BELE Network demonstrated tangible methods for leveraging student experience to inform changes in classroom, school, and district policies and practices. Through extensive research and collaborative efforts spanning across researchers, schools, leaders, teachers, and organizations, three pivotal insights have emerged (BELE Playbook, 2023):

1. Student experience matters, is measurable, and directly contributes to the academic success and well-being of young people. Learning conditions are early indicators of learning outcomes. How students experience learning conditions in the classroom, from experiencing meaningful work to feeling like their teacher cares and beyond, dictates how much and how deeply they learn.

2. When educators create space for students to share authentic feedback over time and work with them to decide what they learn and how, students learn more because they are connected to their learning. Educators and other leaders across the school system play a meaningful role in creating cultures of belonging and positive learning conditions that maximize student learning. When educators and leaders participate in repeated improvement cycles, they transform how students experience school and improve student outcomes.

3. When educators, students, parents, and community members recognize each other as partners and collaborate to change policies and practices, student experience improves. Reimagining our school systems to create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments can start with authentic partnerships among different groups, including educators, students, families, and caregivers. Change happens when different groups recognize each other’s distinct contributions, commit to working towards a shared vision, and actively seek each other’s input and feedback.

“We need to take a different approach to school improvement—not from curriculum and skills but with a focus on student experience.”

Illinois District Administrator
BELE Learning Partners

From 2017-2023, the BELE Network was co-lead by a set of BELE Learning Partners: the National Equity Project, Education Counsel, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), UChicago Consortium on School Research, PERTS, and Rally, with funding by the Raikes Foundation.

The BELE Network Learning Partners worked collaboratively to enact a multi-pronged theory of action:

1. **Applied practice, support and learning.** BELE Learning Partners and School Support Organizations partner with districts and charter management organizations to realize the commitments in the BELE Framework and Essential Actions in their schools and classrooms.

2. **Strategic collaboration with schools and districts.** BELE convenes, collaborates with and shares learnings from Learning Partners and School Support Organizations across the Network.

3. **Influence and field building.** BELE works to expand the field’s definition of education success to include the aspirations and desired outcomes of young people, their families and communities; raises awareness about systemic barriers that need to be addressed, and highlights effective approaches and practices.

4. **Build the case and create public demand.** BELE raises awareness and builds support for policies and practices that create positive learning experiences through storytelling, research, and training.

BELE Essential Actions

The BELE Network is grounded in a set of Essential Actions. The BELE Essential Actions outline the processes needed, at a systemic level, to realize the systemic transformation required to build resilient school systems that support the academic, social, and emotional development of all students and their communities. These Essential Actions serve as a roadmap of high leverage researched-based strategies to ensure that all students meet universal goals of whole child well-being and academic excellence.

**Essential Action 1: Make Systems Human Centered**
Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.

**Essential Action 2: Transform Teaching & Learning**
Create learning conditions that transform students’ daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students’ cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.

**Essential Action 3: Empower Youth**
Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students – especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities – to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.

**Essential Action 4: Partner with Caregivers and Communities**
Partner authentically with students’ communities – including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners – to transform students’ daily experiences, create a network of support for students and their families, and allow all to be healthy and whole.

**Essential Action 5: Invest In Staff**
Create the conditions that allow all educators to fully engage in their work, feel equipped to form meaningful relationships with students, and to be positive contributors to students’ daily experiences in school.

**Essential Action 6: Measure What Matters**
Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback students provide about their experiences, along with feedback from educators and caregivers; use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments.

**Essential Action 7: Create Equitable Policies**
Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students’ experiences, voices, and humanity.
“We hardly ever ask kids how they want to learn...this is a huge problem.”
California High School Teacher

National Equity Project’s BELE District Network

The National Equity Project has served as a nonprofit, social impact organization committed to increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated and just communities since 1995. Our mission is to transform the experiences, outcomes, and life options for children and families who have been historically underserved by our institutions and systems.

Our approach focuses on systemic change through leadership development. We support leaders across systems to build culture, conditions, and competencies for excellence and equity in school districts, organizations, foundations, and communities. Since 2017, National Equity Project has been a co-designer, facilitator and learning partner in the BELE Network’s strategy and effort to accomplish two primary goals:

1. Shift the experience and outcomes young people, especially Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) youth and families have in school.
2. Build demand for equitable learning environments by catalyzing a movement leveraging the science of learning and development in service of educational equity.

From 2019-2023, the National Equity Project operated the BELE-NEP District Network, partnering directly with a national cohort of districts. The goal of the district network was to learn how to apply our Leading for Equity approach and methods to support districts in using data-driven methods to advance the BELE Essential Actions and improve student experiences. In doing so, the program aimed to help adults identify and disrupt disparities and transform learning outcomes for BIPOC youth.

This work included:

- Design and implementation of a BELE District Network of 17 districts from across the U.S.
- Coaching educators to transform student experience by shifting learning conditions in the classroom.
- Coaching students, through near-peer Youth Organizing Coaches, to identify equity challenges and co-design solutions through youth-adult design partnerships
- Development and dissemination of knowledge, tools, and resources
- Influencing the education ecosystem, to build demand, demonstrate what’s possible, engage with and invite more people and organizations into this movement.
NEP-BELE District Network Participating Districts (2017-2023)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District/Campus</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>% Students of Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bloomfield Hills Schools</td>
<td>Bloomfield Hills, MI</td>
<td>5,100</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burlington Area School District</td>
<td>Burlington, WI</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Public Schools</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>323,000</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis Joint Unified School District</td>
<td>Davis, CA</td>
<td>8,400</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeForest Area School District</td>
<td>DeForest, WI</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elk Grove Unified School District</td>
<td>Elk Grove, CA</td>
<td>63,000</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Park School District 91</td>
<td>Forest Park, IL</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalamazoo Public Schools</td>
<td>Kalamazoo, MI</td>
<td>12,400</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montclair Public Schools</td>
<td>Montclair, NJ</td>
<td>6,200</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan Hill Unified School District</td>
<td>Morgan Hill, CA</td>
<td>8,700</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newberg Public Schools</td>
<td>Newberg, OR</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak Park School District 97</td>
<td>Oak Park, IL</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton Public Schools</td>
<td>Princeton, NJ</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockford Public Schools</td>
<td>Rockford, IL</td>
<td>27,200</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy School District</td>
<td>Troy, MI</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waunakee Community School District</td>
<td>Waunakee, WI</td>
<td>4,400</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Regional Educational SD (not a school district)</td>
<td>Clatsop, Columbia, Tillamook, and Washington counties, OR</td>
<td>170,000</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact Stories

Co-Design & Partnership Change

Essential Action: Empower youth

Supporting young people to meaningfully identify equity challenges and co-design solutions with adults is critical to the Essential Action of Empower Youth. NEP Youth Organizing Coaches provided equity leadership coaching to students working in youth-adult design partnerships (National Equity Project, 2023). This coaching helped students develop their capacity to elevate their voices and share their experiences when partnering with adults within educational systems.

At one campus in Illinois, a Youth Voice Committee (YVC) of 7th and 8th grade students was facilitated by a campus counselor and an NEP Youth Organizing Coach. The YVC launched in fall of 2022 as a direct result of the campus’ BELE involvement and one-on-one NEP coaching with the principal. The Committee members organized into three sub-committees: Equity, Student Activities, and the Lunch Hour. The committees convened weekly to discuss challenges in their topical area and brainstorm strategies and solutions, in partnership with school adults.

The campus had administered Elevate, a survey tool designed by PERTS to support teachers and students to co-create equitable classroom conditions using students’ anonymous feedback. In deep partnership with their NEP Youth Coach, the students of the YVC interrogated the campus’ Elevate data and drafted a follow-up survey to circulate with their peers to dig deeper into a pattern of observed gender disparities in students’ comfort with sharing their thoughts and opinions in class.

YVC students also joined teachers in facilitating two professional development sessions to discuss their Elevate data results and move into action planning with a specific focus on co-crafting elements of their School Improvement Plan. This led to a structural change as students became formal members of the School Improvement Plan committee.

The Youth Organizing Coach is a paid contractual position whose primary responsibilities are to connect with students, share knowledge around youth organizing and navigating oppressive systems, and support students to address specific needs in their schools. Youth Organizing Coaches are college students who commit approximately 10 hours per week during the school year and summer months to the work of youth empowerment. (NEP, The Transformative Power of Youth Organizing Coaches, 2023)

“As a youth organizer...our role is not trying to change the school...We ask ourselves, how can I bring [students’] other identities into the space and show [them] how their identities are of value.”

Youth Organizing Coach (NEP, The Transformative Power of Youth Organizing Coaches, 2023)
PRIOR TO THE BELE STUDENT ADVOCACY GROUP:

“Advocacy was by luck, not by design.”

NOW:

“Advocacy is structural, not coincidental.”

Co-Design & Process Change

Essential Action: Create equitable policies, Make Systems Human-Centered

Building structures and systems that allow for meaningful collaboration between students and educators in decision-making and school design conversations is a central facet of the BELE Essential Action of making systems human-centered.

At a school district in California, NEP facilitated cross-functional, intergenerational “Circle Teams” at both the campus and district levels. As a result, a BELE Student Advocacy Group was initiated at one district high school. After two years, the two educators who facilitate the group are determined to see it continue and become institutionalized.

According to one teacher, prior to the Student Advocacy Group’s existence, “advocacy was by luck, not by design.” This meant that only students who happened to be connected to “the right adult” could receive support if they experienced hurt or harm. The formation of the BELE Student Advocacy Group as a formal, institutional body, is how they are making “advocacy structural, not coincidental.”

A key accomplishment of this group in its first year was to design and launch a new schoolwide process for increasing accountability when students report harm or wrongdoing to educators on campus. Referred to as “transparency sheets,” the issue is documented in triplicate so that the student, educator, and administrator all have copies of the documentation and educators have a formal and traceable process for reporting incidences of harm raised by students.

“Students are the ones who experience these things, not the teachers or the staff. So it’s important to get our input on it.”

California High School Student
Co-Design & Curricular Change

Essential Action: Transform teaching and learning

The BELE Essential Action of Transforming teaching and learning begins with creating learning conditions that prioritize trusting relationships and foster student agency.

At a middle school in Wisconsin, teachers and students began authentically discussing students’ classroom experiences, which led to permanent curricular changes that have been well-received by the classroom communities.

Across the district, campus infrastructure was strengthened to systematically hear from students through the use of the Elevate survey (PERTS, 2023). At the middle school, the English Language Arts (ELA) department made department-wide changes based on students’ Elevate feedback, namely their beliefs about “meaningful work” in the classroom.

As one of the core learning conditions evaluated in Elevate, students engage more deeply with meaningful work than what they perceive as “busy work.” In order to co-create a shared definition of “meaningful work” that both honored the students’ perspective and recognized the state standards to which the classroom is held accountable, the ELA teachers facilitated a multi-stage discussion, including independent journaling, small group discussions, and classroom town halls, on what constitutes “meaningful work.” From those conversations, the groups co-constructed anchor charts of a shared definition of “meaningful work” that hangs in the classrooms and is continually referenced throughout the year.

“"We want them to be an advocate for their learning. We want them to express what they need in the space.”

Wisconsin Middle School Teacher

“"When students are seen authentically by their teachers, that leads to better learning outcomes, and a stronger sense of belonging in the school community.”

Wisconsin District Administrator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle 1</th>
<th>Cycle 2</th>
<th>Cycle 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Work</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Community</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Influencing the Education Ecosystem

The National Equity Project, alongside the other BELE Learning Partners, implemented an ecosystem strategy to help drive policymakers and thought leaders to align with educators, students, families, and communities to make the necessary changes that will bring about positive learning experiences and equitable outcomes for students.

BELE National Convenings

In 2022 and 2023, the BELE Network hosted two virtual national convenings, bringing together over 500 leaders in the education system. The events centered around the following objectives:

• Articulate the what, why, and how of transforming student experience as evidenced by showcasing brilliance and innovation from the field
• Highlight stories gleaned from the work of BELE learning partners through the voices of educators, students, caregivers, and community partners.
• Broaden the tent and expand the national movement to adjacent partners aligned with the vision, mission, and work of creating learning environments centering equity, excellence and well-being for all students
• Develop pathways for ongoing collaboration and movement expansion.

2022

On Our Watch: Shifting the Purpose of Education to Learning, Belonging and Well-Being, Bettina Love Keynote

Featured breakouts included: UChicago Consortium, Kingmakers of Oakland, Equal Opportunity Schools, Rally, Village of Wisdom, EL Education, School Board Partners, PERTS.

2023

Partners, Power, And Pathways: Mobilizing A Coalition To Transform Student Experiences, Shawn Ginwright Keynote

Knowledge Products

Catalytic Resources

In 2022-23, the NEP team worked to create a suite of knowledge products on Youth-Adult Co-Design and Design Partnerships. These Knowledge Products represent key findings over the last 5+ years of BELE work and will have immediate utility to the field at a time when it is critical that educators have the practices, tools, and mindsets needed to listen to students and partner with them to co-lead the change in response to students’ need and aspirations. Over 32K people accessed these resources from January to May 2024.

Learning Briefs

NEP collaborated with BELE Learning Partners CASEL and the UChicago Consortium on a Learning Series to share an action research agenda and collaborative learnings regarding the conditions necessary to create and cultivate transformative and equitable learning environments.

Playbook

We also aligned with our BELE Learning Partners on a cumulative resource, Centering Student Experience: A playbook for improving student outcomes by centering student experience. This resource is designed to be a tool for people across the education space to leverage research-backed, role-specific resources that offer a path to bring practices and policies that center student experience to the classroom.
What’s Next

We envision an education system where every young person and family experiences thriving, learner-centered environments of opportunity, value and belonging and has access to the opportunities and resources they need.

The effort required to design, lead and support school districts to lead for equity in these unprecedented and vitriolic times cannot be understated. Even so, the National Equity Project is proud of the progress, changes in conditions and experiences made by the committed educators and youth leaders in the BELE Network over the past 5 years.

We know there is work ahead to foster the kind of relationships, culture, and structures that can transform whole systems. We are excited to build on what we have learned from our BELE Learning Partners and from our districts.

NEP will continue to engage directly in co-design efforts with school district partners who are committed to transforming how we approach school and school change. In August 2023, NEP launched the next iteration of our District Redesign Network, a three-year initiative focused on supporting network of school districts to deeply understand their own equity landscape in order to redesign their school system to improve learning conditions and experiences for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQIA+ students. In year one, the Network includes 9 districts from California, Illinois, Michigan, and New York.

NEP is designing a new District Partnership Model based on our 30 years of experience developing leaders for equity in and around PK12 districts and systems. This work will include multi-year partnerships with district leadership teams in regional hubs.

Ultimately, all of our work with schools, districts and communities is in service of our vision of an education system where every young person and family experiences thriving, learner-centered environments of opportunity, value and belonging and has access to the opportunities and resources they need.

Current Partnerships & Alliances

- Aspen Institute Education & Society Program
- California CORE Districts
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Centering Youth Thriving
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
- DOE Effective Educator Development National Advisory Board Member
- EdCounsel
- KP Catalysts
- LearnerStudio
- National Education Leaders Network (NELN)
- Next Generation Learning Challenge
- Partnership for the Future of Learning
- PERTS
- Special Olympics’ Unified Champion Schools (UCS)
- SoLD Alliance National Advisory Committee (SNAC)
- SoLD Sub-committee on Community Engagement
- US Department of Education Effective Educator Divisions
- Partnership for the Future of Learning
- PERTS
- Special Olympics’ Unified Champion Schools (UCS)
- SoLD Alliance National Advisory Committee (SNAC)
- SoLD Sub-committee on Community Engagement
- US Department of Education Effective Educator Divisions

NEP as a Field Catalyst

Our work in the BELE Network ecosystem has demonstrated NEP’s unique role to play in these turbulent times. For many years, but especially since the pandemic, NEP has been called on to convene, connect, and support field leaders across sectors and across the country seeking guidance about how to effectively take leadership in ways that dismantle structural barriers and advance equity in their organizations and communities.

NEP has important opportunities in the coming years to leverage our experience and reputation to catalyze partners and field leaders in service of a coherent, compelling, and actionable vision for ecosystems that support equitable whole child and whole community development.
References


PERTS. (n.d.) Elevate: Measures Summary & References. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sSTvqA2Q_gBmikh8Q1LyG2RiX7Mnn-A_etzbHrIh/preview


Appendix A: Definitions

Co-design

Co-design is a broad term that refers to the intentional forging of a design partnership over time between people working together across differences in power, identity/perspective, role, etc. to create positive change. For those with traditionally more power (e.g. adults in an education system), this can mean partnering especially with those who are “closest to the pain, furthest from power” (e.g. students, parents, community members) in order to catalyze greater equity and liberatory conditions in a context. Solutions to challenges must meet their needs, and cannot be developed without their perspectives, experiences and ideas.

Co-design sits within the larger field of approaches around transforming governance, authority and decision-making to center the voices and leadership of those closest to the pain and typically further from power. Many approaches to co-design exist (e.g. participatory action research, community-based participatory research, Liberatory Design). For NEP, youth-adult design partnerships are grounded in a Liberatory Design approach.

Design Partnership

A design partnership is the structure and process that enables powerful co-design through the creation of mutually trusting relationships, shared purposes, supportive structures, and liberatory processes. A design partnership for equity provides the “container” in which hierarchical power dynamics (e.g. across role, identity) that typically undermine liberatory collaboration can be transformed into mutually generative and mutually empowering relations.

Youth–Adult Design Partnership

In a youth-adult design partnership, educators and students/youth work together in authentic relationship over time to co-design approaches to generating more meaningful learning and more equitable experiences and outcomes in educational contexts.

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