Leadership for Learner-Centered Public Education

Kathleen Osta, LCSW  |  Managing Director, National Equity Project
July 2024

“To support the democracy, given increasing economic, political, racial, and cultural diversity of the populace, the public education system itself will need to become more democratic.”

Karen Pittman and Merita Irby (2023), KP Catalysts.  
Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response

The United States stands at a pivotal moment in its educational journey. For centuries, our collective commitment to public education has been rooted in the belief that a strong democracy requires citizens equipped with core competencies for work and civic life. We now face an unprecedented opportunity for transformation, driven by a growing wave of education leaders embracing youth-centered approaches to learning and development. This is our moment to reimagine the entire ecosystem of education—to expand traditional boundaries and redefine how, where, and when meaningful learning occurs. This profound shift will require not only innovative educational practices but also fundamental changes in how we cultivate leadership across our communities.
In *Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response* (Pittman & Irby, 2023), Karen Pittman and Merita Irby make a compelling case for rethinking the purpose of public education, highlighting a growing consensus among different perspectives that new approaches are needed to address the complex challenges of the 21st century and ensure equitable outcomes for all learners. They point to broad swaths of data demonstrating that the current state of our schools is not working well for most young people, families, or educators. We see this reflected in record numbers of teachers leaving the profession (M. Franco & Patrick, S. 2023) and in chronic absenteeism among students (AttendanceWorks, n.d.).

The authors shine a light on an increasing interest in moving away from the prevailing *industrial model* of education in which learning is thought to happen primarily in classrooms, measured by credits and grades, to more dynamic, competency-based approaches that center the learning and development of the whole child in the context of their interests, identities, and the broad array of people and resources in their communities (UChicago Consortium, 2015). The focus is on creating learning experiences that support positive identity development, cultivate youth agency, and build the competencies every young person needs to thrive. This approach, referred to as *learner-centered ecosystems*, is a more nimble, personalized approach in which the walls between school and community are more porous and the multiple roles school and community educators (broadly defined) play helps replace a culture of scarcity with one of collaboration and abundance.

“...the vision [is] of community-based, learner-centered ecosystems, a public system in which individual communities—and all their unique assets—become the classroom, the lab, the library, and the playground of learning.”

- Kelly Young, President Emeritus, Education Reimagined

There are examples of this approach that we can learn from and be inspired by (e.g. Big Picture Learning, Education Reimagined, Re-make Learning, Transcend’s Innovative Models Exchange, XQ Institute). Yet, the vast majority of young people attend public schools that still retain the design, structures, and mental models of school inherited from the industrial age. And, in traditional public schools young people of color and those living in poverty are the least likely to have access to well-resourced, innovative approaches.

It will require new forms of leadership to transform our outdated education system toward a modern, learner-centered ecosystem approach. We need to develop the capacity to lead these changes in every community.

Designing and building a new vision for public education that ensures excellence and equity for every young person, in every community, will require significant change and coordination across many systems and will require formal and informal leaders, across roles and from all parts of the community, who can see, engage, and act in new ways. Educators in K-12 systems and leaders from community-based educational settings will need to collaborate and co-design together in unprecedented ways. Leaders across systems will need to bring people together to articulate shared visions for their communities and create the enabling conditions needed for deep change including the allocation of time and resources. Young people, families, and community members must be seen as co-designers and engaged from the beginning. And, everyone will need to learn to work together across various forms of real and perceived difference, power, and values - while navigating high degrees of complexity and uncertainty as they go.

To create systems that ensure the learning and well-being of every young person, it is critical that we equip and support leaders with the knowledge, mindsets and skills needed to:
• Embrace a holistic view of learning and development that extends beyond traditional classroom settings and curricula.

• Bring communities together to explore and articulate a shared vision for the education and wellbeing of young people.

• **Embrace co-design** to ensure that new approaches are responsive to the needs and interests of the young people, families, and communities they serve.

• Create cultures and structures for innovation and collaboration among diverse groups across communities.

• Acknowledge and address historic inequities in resource allocation, experience, and outcomes.

• Facilitate open communication, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility for the well-being of young people across different organizations and sectors.

The National Equity Project’s mission is to build the capacity of leaders to lead durable and equitable change so that every young person, in every community, has access to the relationships, resources, and opportunities needed to thrive.

Our **Leading for Equity Framework** grounds our approach and expands traditional definitions of leadership to include people from across communities with and without formal titles and positions, including educators, young people, parents, and community members. This approach to leadership development builds on our work and learning over the last 30 years: that in order to make progress on equity we need to understand how change happens in complex systems and provide support to people to work together to design and lead change in new ways.

The Leading for Equity Framework includes three intersecting domains of leadership, and developing capacity in each of these domains is essential to effective equity leadership.

1. **Equity:** Develop equity consciousness - both one’s external lens on how oppression plays out in our education systems and communities (window) and one’s internal lens and self-awareness (mirror).

2. **Complexity:** Understand how change occurs in complex systems, the importance of emergent strategy and the implications for leadership.

3. **Design:** Everyone is a designer; create the conditions needed for learning, adaptation, and co-design.
While hierarchical leadership may be suitable when clear solutions exist, complex situations demanding learning and adaptation call for a different approach. This is where “host” leadership, as described by Wheatley and Frieze (2011), becomes invaluable. Skilled equity leaders cultivate the ability to discern the nature of the challenge at hand, adjusting their leadership actions accordingly.

Leading change in complex systems requires that we create structures and conditions needed for diverse groups of people to collaborate and design together over time. Effective leaders in complex work are willing to admit when they do not know, skillfully hold the problem space open to generate and try new ideas, and manage the anxiety (their own and that of others) that naturally arises when things are uncertain.

In most systems, this way of leading represents a significant shift. Systems tend to reward leaders who maintain the status quo (reproduce the system) and celebrate leaders who claim to have definitive solutions. Most leaders have not been trained and are not supported or incentivized to lead in more adaptive, complexity informed ways. Yet, transforming our approach to public education will require leaders who:

- **SEE** how inequity operates and is maintained within current structures and see the potential and possibility that lives in all people and communities.

- **ENGAGE** in ways that promotes healing, redistributes power, builds trust and fosters learning and innovation.

- **ACT** with courage to try new approaches and humility to learn from failure and keep going.
How We Lead Change

Is The Change

Leaders committed to designing new approaches to public education will need to prioritize bringing people together in new, more humanizing ways, seeking diverse and divergent perspectives across systems, and supporting communities to articulate and work toward a shared vision. The leadership emphasis shifts from managing the implementation of plans with pre-determined solutions, to direction-setting and creating the conditions needed for change. This includes developing high levels of relational trust, structures for collaboration, and cultures that support co-design and on-going safe-to-fail experimentation and learning.

As Margaret Wheatley (Wheatley, 1999) reminds us, how we lead matters:

“Living systems contain their own solutions. When they are suffering in any way – from divisive relationships, from lack of information, from declining performance – the solution is always to bring the system together so that it can learn more about itself from itself... We need processes to help us reweave connections, to discover shared interests, to listen to one another’s stories and dreams. We need processes that take advantage of our natural ability to network, to communicate when something is meaningful to us. We need processes that invite us to participate, that honor our creativity and commitment to the organization.”

- Margaret Wheatley

The change we seek will require new mindsets and new ways of working together. A key part of NEP’s Leading for Equity Framework is Liberatory Design, which offers an approach to designing for equity within complexity. A core part of this approach are the Liberatory Design Mindsets. The 6 Mindsets that follow have particular relevance for designing learner-centered ecosystems.
In most communities, previous reform efforts have resulted in inequitable outcomes, disappointments and harm that is rarely acknowledged or addressed. The **Attending to Healing** mindset reminds us that we will need to tend to our own distress so that we are ready to create spaces for people to come together, repair, and reconnect in service of a shared vision for young people.

Similarly, **Building Relational Trust** *(Schneider, 2003)* is a foundational and necessary ingredient for any change effort and will be especially important working across roles and institutions within an ecosystem.

**Exercising Creative Courage** will be required to challenge assumptions, question existing ways of doing things, and take risks on new ideas. Likewise, we will need to try many things, **Taking Action to Learn** as we go, and accept that not every idea will yield the results we hope for. Creative courage means learning quickly and moving on from approaches that don’t work.

All of the work that we do sits in a history and a context. In the United States, access to power and opportunity is shaped by race, class, gender, and other social and political factors. In civic life, including education, adults hold most of the power and in schools decisions are often made without the benefit of youth voice or parent and community input. All of this must be examined, and collaborative approaches that intentionally **Work to Transform Power** and redistribute resources are essential.

Moving in this direction will disrupt familiar ways of doing business, and can lead to feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, and resistance. As leaders, we need to **Work With Fear and Discomfort** to manage these feelings in ourselves, so we can be a steadying resource for others. It's the role of leaders to create cultures where feelings are acknowledged, support is abundant, and a shared future vision holds people together through the discomfort of change.

Finally, because we are working in complex adaptive systems, we can’t know exactly what...
will work. We can only Take Action to Learn. The need for change is pressing and we can’t wait until we have it all figured out to get started. Our starting point is creating the conditions needed for people to change, working with these mindsets and testing new ideas together, adapting and learning as we go.

The transformation of public education is not just urgent—it’s imperative. The well-being of our young people and the future of our democracy demand that we transform public education. Learner centered, competency based, and community responsive approaches represent a compelling path forward.

Realizing this vision will require a fundamental shift in how we cultivate and support leaders across our institutions and communities. We must invest heavily in developing a new generation of leaders - leaders with the capacity and skills to bring people together in new ways and the courage to lead through complexity and uncertainty. Only through this deliberate cultivation of leadership capacity can we hope to build an educational ecosystem that truly serves every young person, in every community.

Our collective future hinges on our ability to reimagine not only what and how we teach, but how we will lead this monumental change. We have the opportunity to courageously lead toward an educational system that nurtures every learner’s potential, fosters equity, and prepares young people to thrive in a complex, ever-changing world.
References


About the Author

Kathleen Osta, LCSW, is an educational leader with over 30 years of experience bringing people together to center and meet the developmental needs of young people. She has worked as a teacher, social worker, facilitator, therapist and non-profit leader. She joined the National Equity Project (then BayCES) in 1997 where she most recently co-led the Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network, a national network of educators, researchers, funders, and policy advocates working to improve student experience and advance educational equity. She currently serves as Managing Director of Field Impact.

About the National Equity Project

The National Equity Project is a national nonprofit organization that has supported the development of 25,000 leaders and partnered with 750+ schools and districts since 1995. Our mission is to develop leaders to transform the experiences, outcomes, and life options for children and families who have been historically underserved by our institutions and systems. We envision a future in which every young person, in every community belongs and contributes to learning ecosystems of care, opportunity and human flourishing.

Contact

Learn more about how the National Equity Project can support your efforts to develop the leadership needed in your school district and community through our strategic consulting and design services or contact info@nationalequityproject.org for more information. You can also follow us on LinkedIn or subscribe to our newsletter for our latest updates.