DREAMING AND DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF EQUITABLE, STUDENT-CENTERED SCHOOLS

What we’re learning from the Canopy project

By Chelsea Waite and Janette Avelar

August 2023
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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, it feels like many K-12 schools are still in survival mode. Schools nationwide are facing challenges in managing student attendance, behavior, and mental health. Evidence shows decreases in achievement, especially among the most vulnerable students. Meanwhile, many schools are struggling to hire and retain enough qualified staff, and federal pandemic relief funding is set to expire next year.

However, survival mode isn’t new or unique to the 2020s. Education professor and author Bettina Love defines the “education survival complex” as the effect of long-standing societal and educational structures that enforce inequality, incentivize conformity, and undervalue students’ strengths and potential. These structures are particularly damaging in historically marginalized communities.

But dreams are possible—and powerful—from the depths of survival mode. Love writes, “[Freedom] dreams are not whimsical, unattainable daydreams, they are critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance.” We need these freedom dreams to envision and work towards more equitable systems.

In communities across the country, schools are daring to look beyond day-to-day survival and are dreaming big about what joyful, equitable, and extraordinary schools could look like. Ke Kula ‘o Samuel M. Kamakau, a charter school in Hawaii, envisions “Kumu Honua Mauli Ola, a holistic philosophy of family-based Hawaiian education.” Common Ground High School in Connecticut promises that students will be able to show future employers and college admissions officers “a rich electronic portfolio,” reflecting both their academic and leadership skills. Margarita Muñiz Academy, a public district dual language immersion school in Boston, MA, envisions multilingual learning as an authentic and relevant experience through their “city as campus” model. In most cases, achieving these dreams means questioning some big assumptions about what learning looks like—and what the real purpose of school is.

How the Canopy project works

STEP 1:
We invite a diverse set of education organizations across the country to nominate learning environments that are innovating at a school-wide level towards greater equity and student-centered learning. We define “learning environment” as schools and alternatives to traditional schooling that provide core, not just supplemental, educational experiences.

STEP 2:
We ask leaders from the nominated schools to complete a school design survey, where they share information about how and why they’re reimagining the school experience.

STEP 3:
We layer public data about the schools’ demographics and context onto leaders’ survey responses and publish data online at www.CanopySchools.org in an interactive portal.

Read more detail about Canopy project methodology here.
We know about these schools because they're part of a collaborative research initiative to build collective knowledge about schools working to design more equitable and student-centered approaches. The Canopy project asks diverse education organizations nationwide to nominate innovative learning environments, then asks leaders from the nominated learning environments to share how and why they're innovating.

The results from this national scan are of critical interest to anyone invested in progress towards an equitable, effective, and thriving educational ecosystem. Specifically, people who influence education policy, invest in education, research schools, and lead school systems need to know:

- Where and how are schools implementing creative, promising approaches?
- What are they trying to accomplish?
- Are their efforts positively impacting young people?
- What support do they need to be successful?

This brief aims to answer these questions, building on our annual report from 2022. We're finding that the learning environments in Canopy are vibrantly diverse and focused on the strengths, needs, and potential of students who have been marginalized. While certain approaches like project-based learning and culturally responsive practices appear to be widespread, schools are drawing from a wide range of teaching and learning practices that depart significantly from the status quo. Many of the schools have used these practices for a long time, including before the pandemic. They weave together support from many sources, including charter networks, districts, higher education institutions, external providers, and funders. They prioritize a much broader spectrum of student outcomes than traditional academics, and tend to rely on their own methods of measuring those outcomes. However, this inherently limits their ability to justify their success in comparison to traditional schools.

Our analysis this year includes four explainers that dive a little deeper into select practices that are underway in creative K-12 schools. We've also invited three contributed essays from researchers who investigated how schools support multilingual learners, how schools access external support, and what outcomes schools are demonstrating.
Canopy includes a diverse set of schools across the country. In the 2022-23 school year, leaders from 251 learning environments completed the Canopy survey. Their responses helped inform the following analysis.

**Geography.** Participating schools come from 41 states. States with the most Canopy schools tend to have larger populations: the top six states in Canopy (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, and Arizona) are all large states by population.

### 2022-23 Canopy learning environments in the U.S.

Darker color indicates more schools are found in that state.
Gray indicates no schools are found in that state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WA</th>
<th>ID</th>
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**Urbanicity.** Canopy schools serve students in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The majority of schools that participated this year serve students from urban regions. Just under one in five serve students from rural regions, and just over one in 10 serve students from suburban regions. Additionally, 13% of the schools enroll students from across multiple geographic locales.

![Canopy learning environments by geographic locale of students served](image)

**Sector.** Most schools in Canopy are traditional public schools that are either part of a district or public charter schools. Independent (private) schools—including some microschools and faith-based schools—make up 14% of this year’s dataset. Only about one in five schools enroll students automatically based on their residential district; the remaining majority are schools of choice. About a quarter of the schools admit students selectively based on criteria they define. Most other schools, which require students to apply in some way, either enroll them automatically or select them using a random or weighted lottery.

![Canopy learning environments by type](image)
**Level.** Almost six in 10 Canopy schools serve grades 9-12. Just under half serve elementary and middle school grades, and over two in 10 reported offering pre-kindergarten.

**Canopy learning environments by level**

Note: Some schools serve grades that cross levels, making our total percentage greater than 100%.  
Total Canopy learning environments = 251

School size. Canopy schools tend to enroll fewer students than traditional schools. The median Canopy school serves 270 students, and three-quarters enroll fewer than 500 students. One small independent school enrolls just six students. But, about a quarter of schools enroll more than 500 students, including a virtual charter school that enrolls about 10,000 students. Among the top ten largest schools in Canopy, four are virtual schools—though other virtual schools in Canopy are much smaller. Additionally, all ten of the largest schools in Canopy are high schools, but not all high schools in the dataset are large, with the median Canopy high school enrolling 253 students.

Racial diversity. Canopy schools serve diverse student populations. Nearly 7 in 10 (66%) schools enroll predominantly students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), with the average school serving a population that is 65% BIPOC. Black and Latinx students make up the majority of the BIPOC student populations in these schools, though four Canopy schools serve a student population that is 100% Indigenous. Four in 10 Canopy schools are led by teams where the majority of staff are BIPOC. This is an increase in representation of BIPOC-led schools over last year’s Canopy dataset. This may have been the result of Canopy’s deliberate efforts to encourage more BIPOC-led nominating organizations to recommend schools for this analysis.
The Canopy project uses a tagging system made up of a list of 72 practices that describe a wide range of innovations. In surveys, school leaders could identify which innovative practices they were implementing at a school-wide level (not just in specific departments or classrooms) during the 2022–23 school year. Then, leaders could identify up to five “core” practices that are central to their work.

**Common practices.** Because we asked leaders to report all practices they use, along with those five they consider “core,” we’re able to compare the implementation rates for each to learn how widespread each practice is across all schools, as well as how often those practices are prioritized by the schools that select them. Our analysis of school leaders’ responses showed that ten practices were most often reported as “core.” While most of these ten were fairly widespread across all schools, three were notably less so.

- Project-based learning (PBL), culturally responsive practices, community and business partnerships, and integration of social-emotional learning appear prevalent in Canopy schools. These were among the most frequently selected core practices, and were also frequently reported by schools overall.
- Competency/mastery-based education, career preparation and work-based learning, and individualized learning paths were among the most frequently selected core practices, but they were less often reported as general school-wide practices.

**Frequency of top 10 core practices compared to all selected practices**

When Canopy schools select the practices they use, they may select up to five as ‘core practices’ central to their learning environment.
Ruby Bridges Elementary School, in Woodinville, WA, is designed to be an inclusive learning environment that accounts for the unique strengths and needs of students with different cultural backgrounds and abilities. The school has a racially diverse student population. Additionally, 15% of students have disabilities and 20% of students are categorized as English learners. Ruby Bridges implements three of the 10 most widespread core practices: culturally responsive practices (3-4 years), design to meet the needs of students who have been marginalized (3-4 years), and all courses designed for inclusion (3-4 years).

A. Vito Martinez Middle School is part of Valley View School District in Romeoville, IL. Students at the school learn to self-assess their own learning progress in addition to receiving teacher assessments. Their nominator wrote that the school’s leaders are “advocating for Black and Brown students and students with exceptionalities (learning and otherwise) through equitable instruction.” The school implements two of the 10 most widespread core practices: competency-based education (5+ years), and culturally responsive practices (3-4 years).

Launch High is part of Iron County School District in Cedar City, UT, serving students in mostly rural areas. Teachers help students to develop their own learning plans, and to learn deeply about real-world issues and career options. Students demonstrate their mastery of competencies through public exhibitions, and the school uses a “mastery transcript” to represent students’ learning rather than traditional grades. Launch High implements two of the 10 most widespread core practices: project-based learning (3-4 years), and competency-based education (3-4 years).
**Maturity of practices.** Canopy data challenge the idea that innovative approaches in K-12 schools are a “new” phenomenon. Many of the common practices in schools are relatively mature. “Career preparation and work-based learning” and “community and business partnerships” have been implemented the longest on average among the top-selected core practices. About three-quarters of the schools implementing one of these core practices have been doing so for at least five years.

On the other hand, several common practices appear to be newer. “Culturally responsive practices” and “restorative practices” are the newest among the top-selected core practices. Just over a quarter of schools that cited “culturally responsive practices” as a core practice began implementation within the last two years.

At **Capitol Learning Academy**, an independent microschool in Washington, DC, the school’s 15 students follow individualized learning pathways and make progress at their own pace through their work. Students also work in multi-age groups to investigate questions they’re interested in, and they use community resources like libraries, museums, and public parks. Capitol Learning Academy implements three of the 10 most widespread core practices: community and business partnerships (3-4 years), competency-based education (3-4 years), and individual learning paths (3-4 years).
Overall, most Canopy schools appear relatively well-established, since 59% of Canopy schools indicated that at least three of their five core practices have been implemented for five or more years. Meanwhile, a smaller group (~5%) appear to be new schools or newly-redesigned schools that have been implementing most of their core practices for less than a year.

Themes in school practice. Examining the most common practices in these schools is useful, but doesn’t provide a complete picture of what creative K-12 schools are implementing. To help simplify Canopy’s 72 practices into more digestible themes, we used an inductive approach to reveal relationships between the practices that the schools reported. By looking at all the practices that schools are selecting, we can find patterns that tell us which practices are related to each other, as well as which are more likely to be implemented together.

Most of the schools’ practices can be clustered into four distinct themes. These themes can help researchers, policymakers, educators, and funders to understand the broad trends in these schools’ practices. To help explain what creative K-12 schools are implementing, we’ve developed four explainers that describe these key practices and offer examples. These explainers are especially useful for readers who are less familiar with innovative schools.

Read the explainers here.

1. Educational justice and holistic student supports.
Students learn about and practice social justice. Teachers design instruction and curriculum to support students who have been marginalized by using culturally relevant materials and developing students’ independence as learners.

2. Deeper learning for mastery.
Students show their skills and knowledge through performance assessments rather than traditional tests. Instead of earning credit for learning by finishing a time-based course and getting a passing grade, they earn credit by demonstrating that they’ve mastered specific skills or content.

3. Postsecondary pathways and the world outside school.
Students participate in career-related learning, such as internships or apprenticeships, and the school encourages and guides them through career exploration. Students can often begin earning college credit in high school through early-college models, and can receive credit for learning experiences outside traditional classrooms.

4. Individualized and blended learning.
Students move through learning activities at their own pace, advance when they’re ready, and follow an individual learning path rather than progressing at the same pace as the entire class. Many pursue their studies partly through online learning and partly in-person.

1 This approach is called exploratory factor analysis. This analysis clusters practices, not schools. Schools may be implementing practices from many clusters, but the rate of co-occurrence of practices in schools’ survey data is what determines the cluster. The best way to understand these clusters is by thinking of them as a set of practices that are likely related to each other, not as a certain “type” of school—most schools reported practices from different clusters. But when a school reports practices from one particular cluster, other practices from that cluster are more likely to be reported as well. However, some schools selected more of the practices in one cluster than in another, which is what allows us to investigate how clusters of practices relate to the student experiences that the schools are trying to design.

2 Our exploratory factor analysis produced groupings of up to eight clusters; we found the four-cluster groupings the most intuitive to categorize, which is why we chose to present them here. Last year, we focused our analysis of SY2021-22 data on a five-cluster classification, three of which are very similar to SY2022-23 clusters.
One of Canopy’s goals is to highlight learning environments that are designing ways to make schools more equitable. Understanding their efforts can help illustrate new possibilities—as well as draw attention to old but undervalued wisdom—for how schools can help every student reach their full potential.

**Designing to meet the needs of students who have been marginalized.** 76% of Canopy schools reported designing their approaches to meet the needs of students who have been marginalized. Of these, the vast majority reported they were designed specifically for students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and/or BIPOC students. 73% of schools also reported that their classrooms are designed to include all learners, with intentional support for students with disabilities and students classified as English learners—students who are often segregated or excluded from some general education classrooms in traditional school environments.

**Robert F. Smith STEAM Academy** in Denver, CO is a public district high school founded on the principles of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Grounded in liberatory design and restorative practices, their goal is to “establish an environment where the whole-child—all parts of their identity—are considered with intentional empathy and rigor to help them grow academically and as leaders.” Robert F. Smith STEAM Academy centers the identities and histories of their Black and Latinx learners and their economically disadvantaged learners, recognizing that “these elements of their person are typically isolated or erased from curricula, and/or taken out of consideration when developing instructional programming.

**Vista Grande Charter High School (VGHS)** in Taos, NM, is a public charter high school utilizing a holistic approach to learning that is culturally relevant and planned around both student interest and community expertise. Social-emotional learning is used alongside self-direction to create experiences for students that “develop skills of creativity, inquiry, collaboration, and joy in learning,” VGHS was nominated because they “actively embrace student and community identity and seek to heal the trauma that colonization and the Indian Boarding School era still have on Indigenous students and families today.”

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3 In the Canopy nomination process, we explicitly ask nominators to highlight learning environments that are reimagining systems, structures, and instructional approaches to create more equitable and student-centered learning environments. In light of this framing, it’s unsurprising to see a high proportion of schools focused on designing to meet the needs of students who have been marginalized.
Common practices in inclusive schools. A total of 39 schools indicated that ‘designing for the needs of marginalized students’ and/or ‘all courses designed for full inclusion’ are central to their design. These 39 schools tended to select other practices that focused on individualization and support, like multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)\(^4\), universal design for learning\(^5\), and 1:1 mentoring at much higher rates than schools who did not consider these practices as part of their core design.

### Largest differences in selected practices between schools that are focused on inclusion and schools that are not

Schools designing for inclusion (N = 39) were those that selected ‘design to meet the needs of students who have been marginalized’ or ‘all courses designed for inclusion’ as one of the top five core practices that are central to their approach. The remainder (N = 212) did not select either of those practices as a core practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Schools focused on inclusion as a core practice</th>
<th>Schools not focused on inclusion as a core practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) in academics</td>
<td><img src="61" alt="61% Δ = 19%" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>1:1 mentoring</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design thinking process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers as co-leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessments for agency &amp; self-directed learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grading policies focus on mastery</td>
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<td>Co-leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community &amp; business partnerships</td>
<td><img src="62" alt="62% Δ = 15%" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Competency framework</td>
<td><img src="28" alt="28% Δ = 23%" /></td>
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\(\Delta = \text{Difference}\)

\(^4\)We define schools using MTSS as a space where the learning environment has an explicit multi-tiered system of support wherein students progress is monitored for all students, and students who are progressing at a slower pace are provided with structured academic interventions aligned to their academic needs with varying tiers of intensity. Progress is tracked in an ongoing manner for all students to inform fluid intervention decisions.

\(^5\)We define schools using universal design for learning as a space where the learning environment is designed to proactively meet the needs of all learners by identifying barriers to learning in the design of the environment, not in the student. This helps educators differentiate to effectively instruct a diverse group of students, regardless of whether students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
Design focused on multilingual learners. Among schools that reported focusing on the needs of marginalized students or prioritizing inclusive classrooms, some reported that they were specifically concerned with supporting multilingual learners and/or students classified as English learners. However, innovative practices specifically focused on language instruction or support—for example, dual language programs, bilingual assessments, heritage language programs, and translanguaging—were uncommon in the data (15% or fewer schools reporting).

To better understand how schools are designing inclusive environments for multilingual learners, Janette Avelar, Karen Zyskind, and Tony Daza interviewed 13 leaders whose schools see this as part of their core mission. These schools were united by a dedication to honor and leverage their students’ linguistic resources, and to mitigate the harm that multilingual students experience in the traditional schooling system. They sought to foster supportive multilingual environments that bolster overall language proficiency, and have additional social benefits as students’ full identities are welcomed and valued in their schools. The full essay will be available in fall 2023 on the Canopy website.

Tapestry is a public charter school in Doraville, GA founded by parents of children on the autism spectrum. In this school, students with disabilities and their neurotypical peers learn side-by-side in a fully inclusive model. The school uses technology alongside universal design for learning to create an individualized education for each student.

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How do schools’ environments affect their work?

This year’s Canopy survey asked leaders about conditions outside their schools that affected their innovation efforts.

System-wide innovation initiatives. Only 29% of public schools reported that their schools are part of a system-wide innovation initiative at a district or charter network level. This suggests that the majority of schools surveyed are undertaking innovation work more independently, without alignment to or support from a larger strategic vision endorsed by the district or charter central office.

Responses to “Is your learning environment part of a larger innovation initiative within your district or charter network?”

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Among the schools that reported being part of a system-wide innovation initiative in their district or charter network, three out of four reported that this initiative is very important to their work. Moreover, these schools were more likely to say they receive support for their work from their central office (compared to public schools that are not part of a system-wide innovation initiative). At face value, this suggests that educators using unconventional approaches in schools can benefit from being part of districts or charter networks that are aligned with their schools’ innovation efforts.

Because we wanted to understand if and how schools might benefit from being a part of system-wide innovation initiatives, Steven Weiner, a researcher on our team, interviewed six school leaders who reported that their schools were a part of a larger initiative at the district or charter network level. His interviews revealed that districts and charter networks can benefit innovative schools in several distinct ways, but can also make school leaders’ work more complex. The full essay will be available in fall 2023 on the Canopy website.

**Policy waivers.** One in five Canopy schools have applied for a waiver from a local or state policy or regulation, which means their approaches require an exemption or flexibility from traditional school policies like seat-time requirements or certain accountability metrics. Schools serving students in rural areas or from a mix of geographic regions applied and received waivers more often than schools in urban areas.

### Waiver status of public schools in Canopy by geographic locale

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Received</th>
<th>Applied, but not received</th>
<th>Considered, but not applied</th>
<th>Not considered</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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**Political debates.** About one-third of Canopy school leaders agreed that political debates outside of their schools were affecting their ability to deliver on their educational mission. Canopy schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas all reported some degree of political interference with their work. Urban school leaders were the most likely to “strongly agree” that politics are impacting educational delivery. However, about two-thirds of Canopy school leaders disagreed, or neither agreed or disagreed, that political debates are detracting from their ability to focus on their mission. Rural leaders were least likely to expressly disagree.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>9%</td>
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<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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By comparison, a nationally representative survey of American school district leaders in fall 2022 found that roughly half of district leaders believed political debates were interfering with their ability to educate students. School leaders in Canopy may be less impacted by politics, their circumstances may have changed by Spring 2023, or they may experience political pressures to a lesser degree than leaders at the district level.
What outcomes are schools prioritizing?

From policymakers to parents, many are eager to know how creative schooling approaches are impacting young people. Assessment is an area of tension for Canopy schools: in the 2022 Canopy survey, school leaders reported that assessment and accountability legislation was a key policy issue, as it affects their ability to innovate.

Several new questions on the Canopy survey sought to shed light on the student outcomes that innovative schools prioritize and the evidence they’re able to share about progress toward those outcomes.

Assessments for non-traditional outcomes. The Canopy tagging system allows leaders to indicate whether they offer assessments for four kinds of non-traditional outcomes: deeper learning, social and emotional skills, agency and self-direction, and career readiness. Over two-thirds of school leaders reported offering assessments for deeper learning and social-emotional skills. Fewer offered assessments for career readiness (38%) and agency and self-direction (21%).
In terms of assessment methods, most schools (69%) also reported using performance assessment, where students demonstrate a skill or apply knowledge through portfolios, projects, and other displays of progress instead of traditional tests. Few schools (15%) reported offering bilingual assessments, which are designed and administered to build on students’ bilingual abilities.

**In-house assessment materials.** Not all schools reported how they assess non-traditional outcomes, but of the schools that did, most use materials they create themselves. Among schools that reported how they assess deeper learning, nearly three-quarters create assessment materials in-house. And among schools that reported how they assess SEL, about half create their own assessment materials.

**Evidence of impact.** Canopy surveys invited school leaders to upload or share evidence of student impact. Among the few leaders (less than one in five) who chose to share evidence, most shared traditional academic outcome data or testimonials from families, students, or teachers. Very few schools offered empirical evidence of the outcomes they reported assessing, like deeper learning and SEL. Some indicated that the evidence they have may not be public—one leader wrote, “I have lots of student work but we should probably talk about the best way to share that,” suggesting that the evidence wasn’t readily available in a sharable format.

To make sense of the evidence that schools shared, as well as publicly available academic performance data, the Canopy project engaged a group of external researchers to investigate the outcomes schools are prioritizing, how they measure student progress, and how they perform on traditional academic measures. The findings from that research, available on the Canopy website in fall 2023, will contain additional findings and implications for understanding the impact of innovative schools.
CONCLUSION

Today more than ever, we need to identify and study examples of schools that are boldly pursuing equitable, student-centered learning—and in doing so, challenging assumptions about what “school” should be. The Canopy project offers education leaders, policymakers, funders, and researchers a resource to more deeply understand these schools and to cite evidence for how creative approaches are underway to create learning environments that unleash the potential of children and young people.

Our analysis over the last two years also makes clear that education leaders outside of schools have critical roles to play if the seeds of a more student-centered, equitable system are to bear fruit. They need to support current and would-be innovators, produce evidence of what's working, and till the soil for more K-12 institutions to adopt or design transformative solutions. The Canopy project’s recommendations for policy influencers, funders, and researchers suggest ways to take action.

School communities across the U.S. are working to transcend survival mode and make educational dreams—and freedom dreams—reality. Educators and others invested in the future of our children can look to these schools and the practices they embrace for inspiration about other possible paths. These schools didn't stop dreaming in the depths of survival mode, and neither should the rest of us.
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