



## Characteristics of Positive Outlier Schools:

### Illuminating the Strengths of American Indian/ Alaska Native, Black, Latino/a, and Students Experiencing Poverty

Greg Lobbell • Dr. Janet Gordon • Dr. John Steach • Dr. Gene Sharratt • Cení Myles • Erich Bolz • Roni Rumsey

#### Purpose of Study

This study sought to identify and learn from the schools serving American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), Black, Latino/a, and students experiencing poverty that were most successful on academic and student engagement K–12 indicators over a 3-to-5-year period. It is important to begin by recognizing the traditional knowledge systems across diverse races and ethnicities that have cultivated brilliance and genius well-suited to each unique place. Though these traditional systems have been disrupted and primarily replaced by public K–12, this knowledge is resilient in students and continues to remain relevant in AI/AN, Black, and Latino/a communities. A small number of schools are highly successful in recognizing and multiplying these knowledge systems within the context of the K–12 schooling system. In the book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad writes:

***History from Black communities tells us that educators don't need to empower youth or give them brilliance or genius. Instead, the power and genius are already within them. Genius is the brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across the generations. This cultivation calls for reaching back into students' histories and deeply knowing them and their ancestries to teach in ways that raise, grow, and develop their existing genius.***

***(Muhammad & Love, 2020)***

#### Abstract/Executive Summary

District and building administrators and educators have a responsibility to create the conditions for illuminating and building on students' strengths. Using academic and engagement data over the 2014–15, 2015–16, 2016–17, 2017–18, and 2018–19 school years, this study identified schools in Washington State that have successfully removed barriers and created the conditions that allow for the strengths of Black, Latino/a,<sup>1</sup> American Indian/Alaska Native, and students experiencing poverty to shine. Each day, these schools are generating practice-based evidence showing that when the learning environment is set up for success, students can make steep, continuous academic gains in mathematics and reading, attendance, high school preparation, high school rigor, and post-secondary enrollment.

The positive outlier schools are:

- creating trust and a family-like atmosphere;
- embracing the strengths of diverse students' cultures and ethnicities;
- reaching to integrate relevant and family-engaged education into K–12 schooling;
- repurposing building leadership teams to equity leadership teams;
- empowering diverse students to teach others about racism based on their lived experiences; and
- eliminating deficit-based vocabulary.

***"If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn."***

*-Ignacio Estrada*

<sup>1</sup> Latino/a is a term used to describe the U.S. population of people tracing their roots to Latin America.



The schools described in this study serve as examples and assist in the development of a deeper understanding of the social and cultural systems of shared beliefs and the ways they have been manifested among administrators, teaching staff, and students. The intent of this study was to liberally share these success stories, to provide insight into ways in which all schools can illuminate the genius of and positively affect the lives of AI/AN, Black, Latino/a, and students experiencing poverty. By creating a dynamic, adaptive learning environment, these schools seek to serve every student, rather than forcing all students to conform to one narrow model for success.

The full report can be found online at <https://www.effectiveness.org/s/CEE-Outlier-Study-Final-Report.pdf>

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Education is fundamental to student development and growth. The human mind makes possible all development achievements, from health advances and agricultural innovations to efficient public administration and private sector growth. For communities to reap these benefits fully, they must invest in the potential of each student, encouraging and empowering them to realize their strengths and apply their talents to current and future challenges.

There is no better tool for such investment than education. Today's students are tomorrow's inventors, entrepreneurs, physicians, creative artists, scientists, and leaders. School leaders have demonstrated that they are skilled and capable of pivoting and adapting school structures and learning paradigms to provide equitable opportunity for education during the pandemic. Imagine the possibilities if every school applied these skills and capabilities, this capacity for adaptation, to ensure that their school structures equitably served their student population, providing each student with what they need to be successful.

Schools are at the heart and soul of the quest to defend educational equity for each student. However, inequality of outcomes and inequality of opportunity reinforce each other, and contribute to students never realizing their potential. It is a moral imperative that each student is empowered to realize their equitable opportunities.

***“Education is the foundation upon which we build our future.”***

*-Christine Gregoire, former Governor, Washington State*

## Background/Study Context

This study occurred during a time called the “twin pandemics”—the novel coronavirus and intertwined structural racism in America. As schools closed, the pervasive inequities affecting students of color within our education system became inescapably apparent. For some school leaders and educators, this may have been the first time they became aware of how embedded policies and practices lead to inequitable outcomes for students of color. For the school leaders and educators in this study, the pandemic experience confirmed what they knew already about the qualities of a school environment that illuminate the strengths of diverse students, including the need for an unshakable belief that all students can succeed. Confirmation of this knowledge continued to drive the urgency to dismantle unproductive systemic barriers.

This study would not have been viable in ordinary times, let alone during the twin pandemics, had not the relationship and trust from the districts and schools been in place. Each member of the research team has 20–40 years of experience in education and lives and works in the state. Some team members also volunteer



in the school communities to help during emergencies, including wildfires and the pandemic.

During the study, pandemic school closures mobilized the school districts to pivot, and find new ways to meet families' needs for food, personal care, and social/emotional health—all the services for which school buildings have become a nexus. Students and families faced further challenges with distance learning, including lack of technology and internet connections. School staff were busy distributing laptops and technology to assist students' learning as well as developing ways to connect families to the internet. Being mindful of the added stress and duties the schools assumed, each member of the research team reached out to the schools they knew personally to recognize their efforts and inquire about the possibility of scheduling interviews and/or focus groups to determine how they are achieving positive outlier performance.

To check if this was indeed the right thing to do during a pandemic, after the initial focus group, participants were invited to reflect on their feelings. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed elation to be a part of a study that cultivates understanding and growth to enable K–12 schools to dismantle barriers and create inclusionary and empowering experiences for students and their families. This written document is not intended to be a prescribed approach to school improvement. Rather, it is intended to be a resource for discussion, to firmly contextualize and root the strategies into the unique school districts, leaders, educators, students, and families within the community.

***“All children must be served by schools that are organized to meet their needs.”***

*-Blankstein and Noguera*

## Washington Schools

Public education in Washington State is guided by the State Board of Education (SBE) in partnership with the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The SBE is charged with advocacy and oversight of Washington's education system, provides leadership for a system that personalizes education based on each student's needs, develops policies and structures designed to create an accountability system to improve student achievement, and promotes the achievement of state goals for basic education. The 16-member board consists of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, two students, five members elected by local school boards, one representative of private schools, and seven members appointed by the governor.

The publicly elected state Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) are charged with overseeing public K–12 education in Washington State. They work with the 295 public school districts, nine educational service districts (ESDs), 12 public charter schools, and nine state-tribal compact schools to provide every student a high-quality public education. A strong focus on equity, inclusion, continuous improvement, and whole child development is a priority.

Washington's 295 school districts are comprised of 2,300 public schools that serve more than 1.1 million students (12 percent English language learners, 47 percent low-income, 12 percent with disabilities), and the state is responsible for funding the basic public education for each of those students. Although there are variances across school districts and grade levels, the state spent an average of \$11,500 per student in basic education funding in 2019. In addition to basic education funding, the 295 school districts can apply for state, federal, and local grants, receive targeted funding for specific purposes such as school improvement, or raise levy funds within their local community (OSPI, 2019).

Recent student learning assessments among Washington students found that 60 percent met grade level standards in English/language arts, 49 percent in mathematics, and 47 percent in science. About 73 percent of Washington ninth graders were on track to graduate in four years (OSPI, 2019).



### Organization of School Supports

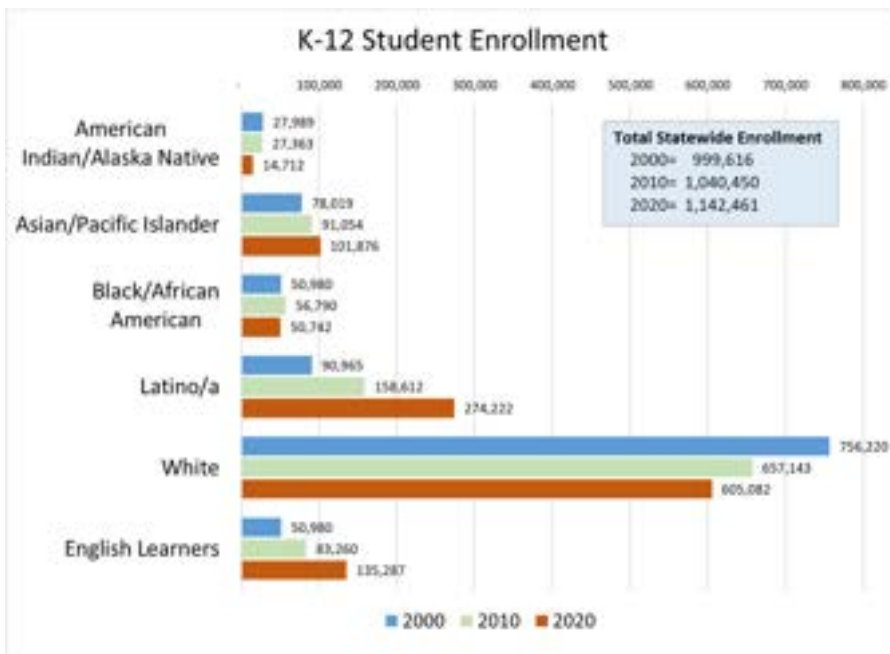
Schools in Washington State are supported by OSPI, the local ESDs, and local resources. OSPI provides overall fiscal management, including federal funding. OSPI also provides extensive supports for curriculum, instruction and assessment, transitional bilingual instructional programs, migrant services, and support for school and system improvements. At the regional level, the state is served by nine regional ESDs that provide fiscal resources, human resources, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and related professional development services to the schools in their regions. The network of ESDs commonly known as the AESD (Association of Educational Service Districts), works in partnership with OSPI to provide comprehensive services in many areas.

### Demographic Trends in Washington K–12 Public Schools

Enrollment trends in Washington State show dramatic changes in the student population over the last 20 years (OSPI, 2020). While overall enrollment in the state’s K–12 public school systems has grown a moderate 14 percent, Latino/a enrollment has tripled from 90,965 in 2000 to 274,222 in 2020 (Figure 1, OSPI, 2020).

The percentage of students learning English statewide has grown by 165 percent over this same 20-year span. The trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a continuation of population movement into Washington State seen in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pennucci & Kavanaugh, 2004; OSPI, 2020).

Figure 1: Washington State Student Demographic Trends



In the 2000–2001 academic year, 1 in 3 students (33%) were eligible for free or reduced-price meal programs. Following the global recession of 2008, the percentage of students experiencing poverty in Washington rose steadily, peaking in the 2013–14 academic year with 50 percent of the students in the state.

As the economy strengthened from 2015 to 2019, the percentage declined modestly to 46.1 percent during the 2019–20 academic year. In summary, the percentage of students qualifying for subsidized meals increased significantly from 32.5 percent to 43.3 percent during the 20-year period.

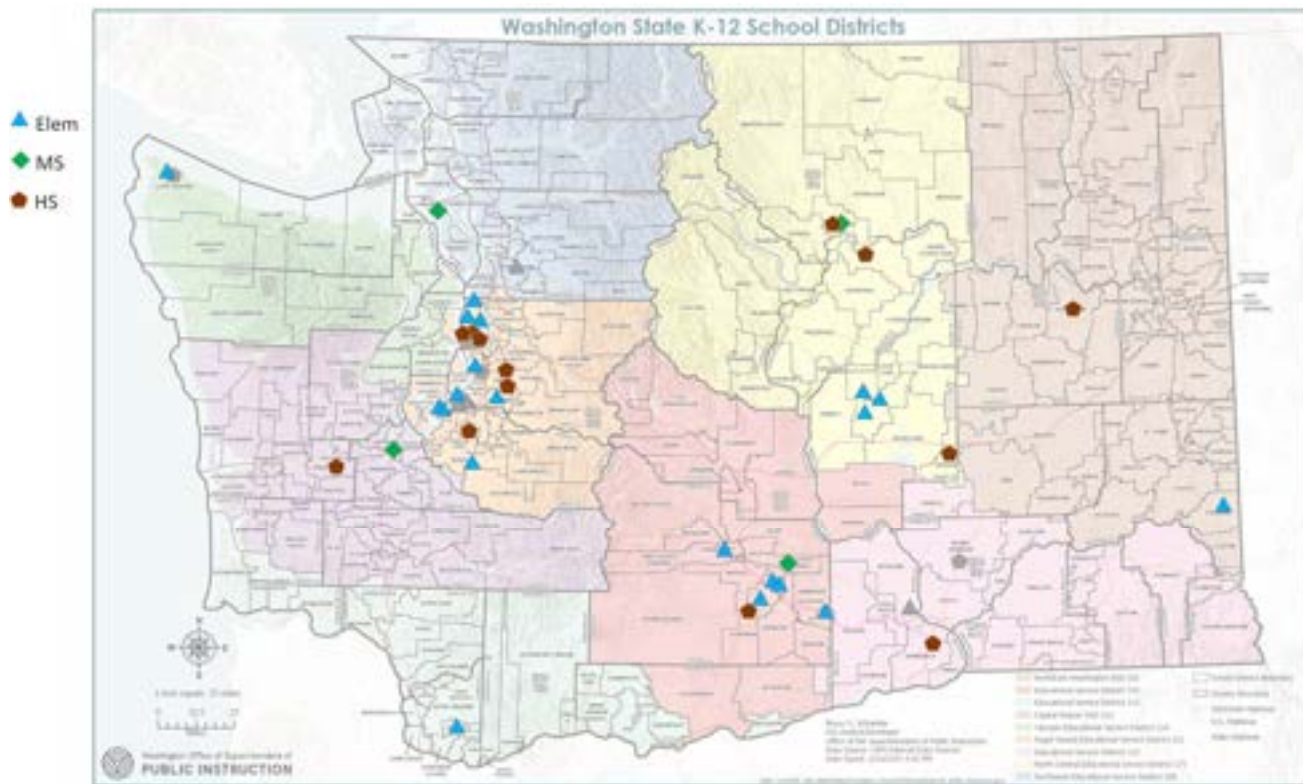
### Finding Positive Outliers in Washington State

Out of the nearly 2,300 public schools in Washington State, this study identified 46 schools (2%) across all levels (elementary, middle, and high schools) and across all geographical areas. Positive outliers were identified using the 5 most recent years of data available (2014-15 to 2018-19) using both academic and student engagement factors including reading and mathematics performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessments, student attendance, English-language acquisition, percentage of ninth graders on track for high school, high school course rigor (participation in college credit bearing courses), graduation rates, and percentage of students enrolling in post-secondary education including career and technical education programs, 2-year programs, and 4-year universities.

For each of the student groups, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Latino/a, and students experiencing poverty, the performance for each group was compared by school based on the historical data relative to poverty. Thus, the performance of each school was compared to a norm reference adjusted for their individual student poverty level as measured with free and reduced lunch eligibility percentage. The 5 years of historical data established a historical prediction of performance for each level of poverty. The positive outliers were those schools who far exceeded the performance of their peers for a student group of interest. In each of the 8 performance measures noted above, the schools had to be positive outliers in ALL of the measures—further demonstrating the excellence these schools exhibit on both academic and non-academic measures.

In total, 46 positive outliers were identified and 38 of these participated in the second phase of the study to determine the characteristics present in these schools. These schools span all 9 of the education regions in Washington State (Educational Service Districts): 24 of these schools are elementary schools, 4 are middle schools, and 18 are high schools. 9 are from large urban settings, 12 are from suburban areas, 5 are from mid-size towns, and 20 are from rural and small-town communities.

Figure 2: Positive Outliers in Washington State



## Study Findings

Surprisingly, many of the outlier schools were previously in the bottom 5% of Washington State schools. Referred to as “struggling schools” in the state accountability framework, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), these schools are testimony that all schools can create an upward trajectory for all students. The upward trajectory began with a catalyst that sparked upward momentum and included: (1) new leadership; (2) an emotional charge; and (3) a strong commitment to the community to begin the difficult work of transformation. This was often accompanied by manifestations of servant leadership philosophy across administrative levels.

School leaders in the outlier schools helped staff recognize and affirm that they could do better. “We are fed up ... we are not a dropout factory,” asserted an administrator who recalled the time they made the commitment to begin the transformative work. Throughout the years, school leaders continued to rally the school staff with

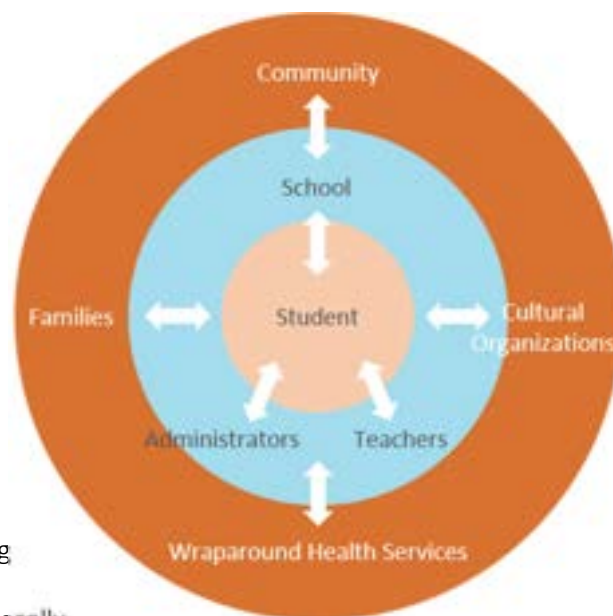


an emotional charge to improve student graduation and attendance rates, staff attrition, and community support for funding.

School leaders and staff made a deliberate decision to improve. They made a commitment to the community and intentionally turned to the knowledge of people who have lived experience or have studied issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and racism.<sup>2</sup> Rather than dismiss an insight or fall into racial arrogance, the administrators set out to learn from experts and challenge assertions historically embedded in their school systems that created barriers.

The study revealed that outlier schools work to serve as brokers between the families/community and the students, providing the human and capital resources that support students who are at the heart of the system (Figure 3). The community, families, and school operate as a “giant school family” prioritizing equitable collaboration, thus departing from traditional power dynamics present in some education systems. This fosters information flowing between the families, community, and the school; key information that helps administrators and teachers create student-centered environments for strong academic and social/emotional health. In practice this means adjusting school schedules to accommodate harvesting schedules in small rural schools and providing year-round wraparound services (e.g., health, education, nutrition) for students. For high schools, keeping students at the heart means expanding perceptions of post-secondary success to include entrepreneurial endeavors and professional trades needed locally. Outlier schools also work to eliminate deficit-based labeling (e.g., “dropout”) if students need an extra year to graduate due to life circumstances.

Figure 3: “Giant School Family” Dynamics



School leaders approached the transformational work to become an equity-based school with a sense of urgency. They worked to communicate, promote, and embody specific values. They took actions that supported the values and, when completed, achieved outcomes that illuminated diverse students’ strengths. Examples of what schools valued and prioritized are:

- Fostering school as an extension of the family and community;
- Supporting student and school staff social/emotional wellness;
- Creating a safe space for staff to take risks and grow professionally;
- Enabling and supporting students to work at their highest cognitive level;
- Prioritizing equity in instruction and grading practices; and
- Building an anti-racist culture.

These values are illustrated using quotes from the focus groups (Table 1). The table shows the through line between the actions that the schools took in support of the value and the outcomes achieved that support the illumination of students’ strengths.

<sup>2</sup>Racism is articulated as a structural phenomenon, as opposed to a “problem that derives from the failure on the part of the individuals and institutions to treat people formally the same.” (Carbado, 2011).



Table 1: Building Level Values, Supportive Action, and Outcomes Illuminating Students’ Strengths

Values (Building Level)	Schools’ Actions in Support of Value	Outcomes That Illuminated Students’ Strengths
“We are a giant school family.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Shift habits and practices to better serve the community.</li> <li>– Prioritize creation of a sense of belonging/connectedness to school.</li> <li>– Effective listening exhibited by all staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increased community trust in school.</li> <li>– Greater participation of families as leaders influencing schools’ actions.</li> <li>– Equitable collaboration with families.</li> <li>– Shared responsibility for all students.</li> </ul>
“Our district has pushed ‘generational wellness’ ... not just for our students, but for teachers as well.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Embedded demonstration of SEL throughout school day.</li> <li>– Establishment of SEL team to advocate for and remind teachers about mindfulness and self-care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Strengthened bonds between school staff.</li> <li>– Collective responsibility to provide SEL support.</li> <li>– Teachers at their best to serve students.</li> <li>– Happy, satisfied school staff.</li> </ul>
“It’s a no judgement zone and people are here to help you process and reflect.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Creation of safe spaces for administrators and teachers to refine skills.</li> <li>– Promote interdependence not independence between teachers.</li> <li>– Continuous vertical and horizontal staff collaboration to improve student outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Trusting nurturing environment for employees.</li> <li>– Eagerness, enthusiasm to continue to learn and grow professionally.</li> <li>– Increased comfort in staff to engage in critical conversations about equity.</li> <li>– Increased willingness of staff to be vulnerable and open to building trusting relationships with peers, administration, students, families and the community.</li> </ul>
“Every grade level has a gifted teacher that is a transitional bilingual teacher.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Critical examination of system-level factors that create barriers.</li> <li>– Instill an “above grade level” mentality in educators.</li> <li>– Offer continuous ways that students can work at their highest cognitive level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Equitable provision of gifted program.</li> <li>– Steep increases in morale and sense of belonging of students and their families.</li> <li>– Reduction of student boredom and diminished difficulties in classroom.</li> <li>– Deeper student understanding of instructional content.</li> </ul>
“Are kids failing because they don’t know the content or because they’re not complying with our expectations of turning work in?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Elimination of the mechanisms that increase the number of students failing classes.</li> <li>– Movement to more equitable and accurate grading practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Fewer students failing classes.</li> <li>– More students engaged in learning and sharing their knowledge.</li> </ul>
“We’ve made a real commitment to becoming an anti-racist organization.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Continuous professional learning on ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.</li> <li>– Implementation of multi-tiered systems of support.</li> <li>– Use of restorative discipline practices.</li> <li>– Elimination of deficit-based language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– An equity-focused school.</li> <li>– School culture is strengths-based, acknowledging that all students bring strengths to schools.</li> <li>– Deepened understanding of anti-racism.</li> <li>– Understanding of diverse perspectives including those from students of sovereign Tribal Nations.</li> <li>– Culturally-relevant curriculum.</li> </ul>



## Student Voice at the Heart

At the student level, administrators, teachers, and support staff promote student voice in everyday processes, curricula, and formal and informal activities. Structures are in place to center students’ voices in the decision-making and needs-identification process to make improvements in their school-day experience. This helps ensure that initiatives can survive changes in leadership.

Adults are not the only equity leaders in these schools. Exemplifying a framework of relational power as opposed to unilateral power (Warren et al., 2001), students take a leadership role in educating their peers and teachers about race. This perspective requires less dependence on institutional agents (e.g., schools) to serve as “gatekeepers” in the quest for equity (Ishimaru, Torres, et al., 2016).

Carrying out the transformational work to become an equity-based school, leaders took actions that supported students’ values that surfaced during the student focus groups. These actions promote outcomes that illuminate diverse students’ strengths. Examples of what students valued and prioritized are:

- Building a school culture focused on equity and anti-racism;
- Fostering school as an extension of their cultural and personal identity;
- Being agents of change, especially to support their peers;
- Exercising student leadership; and
- Learning knowledge, skills and abilities that enable a post-secondary family-living wage.

These values are illustrated using quotes from the student focus groups (Table 2). The table shows the through line between the actions that the schools took in support of the value and the outcomes achieved that support the illumination of students’ strengths.

*Table 2: Student Values, Supportive Actions, and Outcomes Illuminating Students’ Strengths*

Values (Students)	Schools’ Actions	Outcomes That Illuminated Students’ Strengths
“[We have] a club called STARS, that is Students Talking about Race Safely, ... who want to be the social justice warriors for equity.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create ways for students to educate teachers and student peers about race.</li> <li>– Arrange informal learning structures like clubs and student-led events.</li> <li>– Invite students to take on leadership roles to influence school culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Higher comfort of teachers and school staff when talking about issues of race.</li> <li>– Increased staffs’ knowledge about the culture of the community they serve.</li> <li>– Increased cultural proficiency across the student population.</li> </ul>
“We have a lot of learning experiences where we can contribute our differences within ethnicity, culture or even genders.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Center students’ cultural strengths and identity in courses.</li> <li>– Invite students to create a school campus that reflects students’ identity and culture.</li> <li>– Create opportunities for sharing of students’ families’ oral histories.</li> <li>– Invite diverse motivational speakers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Stronger personal identity.</li> <li>– Increased sense of belonging of student and families on school campus.</li> <li>– Increased engagement in content areas.</li> <li>– Higher academic achievement scores.</li> </ul>
“We see a little of our responsibility to get [our peers] on track.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Foster a sense of accountability in students for their peers.</li> <li>– Create a peer-to-peer mentorship program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increased student agency as student leaders.</li> <li>– Increased students’ sense of responsibility.</li> <li>– Increased students’ sense of purpose.</li> </ul>
“A lot of what I’m taking in school now influences my future ... financial literacy ... you already have a pre-mindset of what it will be like before experiencing it.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Dual credit courses offered at high school.</li> <li>– Career connected learning for both 4-year post-secondary education and trades.</li> <li>– Life-skills and financial literacy course offerings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increased post-secondary enrollment.</li> <li>– Increased community trust and engagement.</li> </ul>





Students shared their enthusiasm to help reduce the gaps in school staff members' knowledge about culture and the communities they serve. Outlier schools supported student clubs (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Latino/a Club, etc.) to act as a valued resource, increasing the cultural sensitivity and awareness of the staff. Empowered high school students in the clubs planned and delivered professional development to staff and provided an honest account of race and racism as a social construct. This is an example of an "equity culture" where student voices are honored and they are provided opportunities to confront and change some of the oppressive structures that they may be privileged or harmed by (Fullan & Malloy, 2019).

Students are the agents of change. Empowered students expressed a personal responsibility not only for their academic success but also for their peers' success. They embody the same care and guidance they have received from school staff and extend it to their peers. Cultural strengths and identity are centered at these schools, reducing the need for students to straddle a line between home and school, feeling the need to be a different person in each place which is exhausting.

The schools focused on preparing students for post-secondary endeavors: entrepreneurship, career, and/or college. Many of the administrators and students interviewed described the dual-credit program and its benefits. Schools are responsive to families' desires, including finding opportunities to earn a living wage locally through entrepreneurial and professional trades, as well as providing a jump start for their student to earn a college degree.

## Family and Community

In the focus groups, family members were forthcoming about their positive experiences with the schools and feelings of respect, inclusion, and trust. Their responses can be categorized into three overarching values: (1) a student-centered environment; (2) regular communication; and (3) opportunity to share family voice especially around culture.

Families placed a high value on a student-centered environment and described the school administrators, teachers, and staff as dedicated people who care about and can be trusted with students. Schools provide students with engaging, context-specific learning opportunities, both formal and informal: after-school activities, arts, music, sports, social activism, and culture.

Families prioritized regular communication from the administrators and the teachers. Communication occurred by email, mobile text messages, phone, U.S. post, and video conference calls about upcoming events, announcements, and students' academic progress. Parents expressed appreciation for accessing a web portal to check a student's progress, homework assignments, and grades. Families trust the school to keep them informed.

Lastly, families valued invitations to district-wide events and opportunities to better understand the school planning process. They valued the ability to provide input into curricula choice especially around culture-based instruction. Family members applauded schools for recognizing the urgency to develop a mentor program designed to foster a sense of belonging, identity, and agency so that students remain engaged in school.

## Best Practices

The outlier schools engaged in best practices including: (1) equitable access to high-quality teachers and principals for all students; (2) clear and visible learning objectives for all students; (3) a culture of lifelong learning among school staff; (4) continuous collaboration between staff at all levels; and (5) data-driven decisions within schools. To help classroom teachers provide instructional approaches that illuminate strengths of diverse students, a checklist of strategies used by the outlier schools is offered.



### **Checklist for Instructional Strategies With Students at the Heart**

- ✓ Provide ways for gifted non-English speaking students to work at their highest cognitive level.
- ✓ Identify students' current content knowledge within their own epistemology and worldview.
- ✓ Expand student expectations to include their social context and community in their responses.
- ✓ Self-reflect on language used that could be considered deficit-based and change it to asset-based.
- ✓ Create flexible assignments so students can incorporate their passions.
- ✓ Be a listener and learner of students' races, ethnicities, and cultures and incorporate into content.
- ✓ Grow student leaders and demonstrate the value of their feedback by taking action.
- ✓ Develop a deeper understanding of sovereign Tribal Nations who are advocating for American Indian/Alaska Native students and how that fits into the goal of equity.

### **Call to Action**

The findings suggest that schools must prioritize the development of an “equity culture,” defined by Fullan and Malloy (2019) as “one that centers the voices and experiences of those most underserved in all decisions.” Each school in the study made significant, continuous improvement in student academic and nonacademic outcomes. And while they all rejected historical narratives and put in place structures and supports that illuminate the strengths of AI/AN, Black, Latino/a, and students experiencing poverty, they are all at different places on their equity journey. They all started from a similar place in the public K–12 school system and their stories illustrate what is possible.

Administrators and teachers interviewed acknowledged that this work is difficult, and that it is exhausting to break the mold of what is historically embedded in the public school system. Deliberate and strategic leadership, throughout the system, is needed for steady progress, and as these exemplar schools noted, much work remains to be completed.

Within these schools there are those doing the righteous work to stand up for and encourage student and family agency throughout their school experience and to eliminate the overt and covert institutional racism that exists in the education system (Young, 2011).

As such, school leaders and educators are called to build relational trust, enhance the capacity of teacher efficacy, initiate processes that engage authentic student, teacher, and community voice, consistently interrogate the current system, and realize hope. As cultural strategist, Durrell Cooper states, “that despite all of the historical evidence to the contrary, that one day Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) students, could inhabit a full life of liberation from the structural oppression and violence enacted upon them daily by the very same system meant to lead to their emancipation.”

Illuminating the strengths of diverse students requires systemic change to dismantle unproductive systems put in place when the U.S. public school system began. Replacing unproductive systems with systems that promote a student-centered equity-based culture requires that school leaders, teachers and staff be aware that communities and families have essential knowledge needed to inform school improvements. This effort also requires capacity building of district and school leaders and educators including building parent-school relationships and educator capacity for collaborating with families and communities.

***“Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”***

*-Thurgood Marshall  
Justice of the Supreme  
Court of the United States*