

# unboxed

A JOURNAL OF ADULT  
LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Issue 30  
Spring 2026



# unboxed



*Above: First grade students lead a fire drill as part of the “Better Together” project*

*Cover: Teacher Tess Murray and sixth-grade student weld as part of the Changes in Matter project at High Tech Middle Mesa*

*Alec Patton*    **4**    WELCOME

*Jim May*    **6**    insight  
SYSTEM & SOUL: WHAT DEEPER  
LEARNING AND CONTINUOUS  
IMPROVEMENT OWE ONE  
ANOTHER

*Ben Daley*    **12**    comment  
WHY DEEPER LEARNING NEEDS  
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

*Jeff Boxill*    **18**    reflection  
THE CYPHER, THE STOOP, THE  
SYSTEM

*Chandler Miranda*    **24**    strategy  
MINDSETS FOR RADICALLY  
WELCOMING NEWCOMER  
STUDENTS INTO YOUR SCHOOL

*Michellea Millis* **34** strategy  
*Rucker* USING IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE TO  
INCREASE CLASS PARTICIPATION  
FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

*Milena Carmona and* **42** project-based learning  
*Ingrid Puche* HOW WE CO-DESIGNED A PROJECT  
WITH FIRST GRADERS

*Eduardo Lomba* **50** insight  
LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION  
IN OEIRAS

*Ramiro Séré* **56** professional learning communities  
HOW PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES TRANSFORM  
TEACHING

## **62** PROJECT CARDS

*Jon Green* **82** chronic absenteeism  
THE BUTTERFLY STRATEGY:  
A POWERFUL APPROACH TO  
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

*Amanda Meyer &* **94** chronic absenteeism  
*Sofi Frankowski* PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS, NOT  
REWARDS TO RAISE ATTENDANCE

*Ashley Goetz &* **106** strategy  
*Bill Eagle* REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM  
THROUGH STRATEGIC  
COMMUNICATION

*Alec Patton* **112** strategy  
THREE NOISE LEVELS FOR A CALM  
AND PRODUCTIVE CLASSROOM

*Ben Daley* **116** strategy  
TWO TIPS FOR IMPROVEMENT  
REVIEWS: LISTEN TO EXPERTS  
AND MAKE SENIOR LEADERS  
UNCOMFORTABLE

## **122** CONTRIBUTORS

# Welcome

**I**n April, I had the great pleasure of moderating a “crossover” panel that spanned the Deeper Learning Conference and the National Summit on Improvement in Education.

The title of the panel was “Continuous Improvement or Deeper Learning: Why Not Both?” and on the panel were Hewlett Foundation education director Ash Vasudeva, New Tech Network CEO Jim May, and High Tech High GSE president Ben Daley.

I keep returning to the conversation (and you can too—we released it on the High Tech High *Unboxed* podcast) and there are an absurd number of passages I want to share with you, but I’m just going to share one. It comes from Jim May—he was talking about how continuous improvement can serve the cause of deeper learning:

You need a method for constructing shared meaning. And shared meaning (even if it’s coming from a set of values and ideas that I believe in deeply, like deeper learning) can’t be a set of normative practices that I hand down as the formal leader of the organization—shared meaning has to be cultivated communally over time.

Continuous Improvement gives you a set of tools to do that right, whether it is a fishbone diagram or a driver diagram, or a PDSA cycle or a run chart. Those tools are not a substitute for judgment, but they create the conditions within which collective wisdom can emerge.

There’s so much here, but I want to point out one thing: the idea that “shared meaning has to be cultivated communally over time, is the central premise of constructivism, the educational philosophy that underpins “deeper learning” as a concept.

When an attempt at constructivist pedagogy fails to lead to deeper learning, it's normally because a teacher expected learning to emerge without enabling structures. So although Jim is talking about continuous improvement when he describes tools "that are not a substitute for judgment [...] but create the conditions within which collective wisdom can emerge," he could just as well be talking about deeper learning.

In other words, continuous improvement is an enabling structure for deeper learning.

I think this is a helpful frame for experiencing the articles in this issue.

We start with Jim May himself on "what deeper learning and continuous improvement owe one another," followed by Ben Daley on what deeper learning can get from continuous improvement, then Jeff Boxill reflects on coming to improvement as a skeptic.

Next we have two articles on student "belonging": Chandler Patton Miranda draws on her extensive research into the work of New York's International High School on supporting immigrant students, and Michellea Millis Rucker provides insights from an improvement project on building belonging for multilingual learners.

We also have three articles about continuous improvement and deeper learning internationally: Milena Carmona and Ingrid Puche tell the story of a co-designed first grade project in Brazil, Eduardo Lomba relates what happened when a Portuguese school district took student voice seriously, and Ramiro Séré shares how a school district in Argentina has created an international professional learning community.

Want help with chronic absenteeism? We've got you. Learn about the "butterfly strategy" from Jon Green, find out how to design a full year cadence of family communication from Ashley Goetz and Bill Eagle, and let Amanda Meyer and Sofi Frankowski challenge your assumptions about the role of "incentives" in attendance.

And finally, we have a tried-and-true strategy for managing classroom noise levels, and a second article from Ben Daley: this one, appropriately, about why it's important to make senior leadership a little uncomfortable in improvement reviews.

Stay curious, my friends

Alec Patton  
Editor, *Unboxed*



*Above: A student carves a woodblock for printing*

# System & Soul: What Deeper Learning and Continuous Improvement Owe One Another

*Jim May*  
*New Tech Network*

Deeper learning and continuous improvement are often presented as belonging to different communities. Different conferences, different vocabularies, different temperaments. Deeper learning is the language of vision, of human flourishing, of what schools are for. Continuous improvement is the language of method, measurement, and disciplined iteration. The two camps do not always recognize themselves in each other.

Deeper learning, as articulated by the Hewlett Foundation, names a set of competencies young people need to thrive in a complex world. These include mastery of academic content, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, learning how to learn, and academic mindset. Although grounded in the economic conversations of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the framework reaches for something larger than economic preparation. It points toward agency and adaptability—toward young people with the relational intelligence and adaptive capacity to thrive not only as economic agents but as civic and social ones. Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine's book, *In Search of Deeper Learning*, adds to the Hewlett framework by locating the experiential core of deeper learning at the intersection of mastery, identity, and creativity. Where the competency framework gives us outcomes, Mehta and Fine give us the experience of what it is to be immersed in discovering and becoming oneself through the process of deep learning. Without the

competency frame, deeper learning floats free of accountability. Without the experiential frame, the practices that animate deeper learning contract into another facile checklist item for teachers.

Continuous improvement names a discipline for getting better at getting better. It houses a robust toolkit—fishbone diagrams, driver diagrams, plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles, run charts—but I have come to understand it less as a toolkit and more as an orientation: a way of treating our daily work as a meaningful frontier for inquiry. W. Edwards Deming, one of the founders of improvement as a discipline, quipped that “a goal without a method is nonsense.” The improvement orientation addresses that critique by insisting on three questions: What is your goal? What will you change? How will you know whether the change is an improvement? The tools give us a method for answering those questions in public, with colleagues, over time.

I have spent enough time in both camps to be convinced that it is a mistake to treat them as separate, self-contained ideas. Neither on its own is sufficient for the transformation our students deserve. Each provides something critical to the other. Without one another, both fall short of their intent—systemic transformation at scale. Together, they have a chance.

## Using Improvement to Go Deeper

The persistent challenge for deeper learning as a vision of educational transformation has been that it has proven difficult to scale both the outcomes and the experience of deeper learning.

The question of how it gets to every student—equitably, reliably, across systems that were not designed for it—is precisely the question deeper learning has struggled to answer on its own. Continuous improvement offers deeper learning a method to examine and advance the challenge of scale. And this method offers more than a simple understanding of whether a change is an improvement. It offers a method to construct shared meaning. This is critically important.

In the pursuit of organizational change and system transformation, we must have a method for constructing shared meaning. Even when the values driving a school come from a tradition I believe in deeply, like deeper learning, shared meaning cannot be handed down as a fixed set of normative practices by the formal leader of an organization. Shared meaning must be cultivated communally over time. Continuous improvement provides a set of tools for doing exactly that—and it is important to understand the process is not reducible to just its tools. The fishbone diagram, the PDSA cycle, the run chart—these are not substitutes for judgment, and they are not ends unto themselves. Rather, they create the conditions within which collective wisdom can emerge. They are instruments for making thinking



public, so that individual observation, intuition, and experimentation can travel toward shared meaning, common purpose, and collective action. Great schools, like great organizations of any kind, are not simply a product of individual brilliance. They are a function of what a community holds in common. Continuous improvement gives us a disciplined way to cultivate that commons.

The clearest example I have seen of this in mature form comes from a networked improvement community led by my organization, New Tech Network. From 2019 to 2023, New Tech Network ran the College Access Network, an improvement community of 49 schools across Texas, California, and Arkansas focused on closing postsecondary enrollment gaps for Black, Latino, and low-income students. One of those schools was Mission Early College High School in El Paso, Texas. I want to dwell on their work for a moment, because what their team produced together captures something the formal language of continuous improvement struggles to convey.

The Mission team was doing rigorous improvement work. They held themselves to disaggregated, equity-specific aims alongside their general aims. They tested change ideas at a small scale and rated each one on its readiness to become standard work. They tracked FAFSA completion year over year and watched it climb from 24 percent to 91 percent. They named progress that was worth celebrating and what they still needed to improve. All the improvement tools were there. What is most striking about their story is not the use of such tools, but rather how the team took ownership of them. Their change ideas had names like “Supa Hot SuperMatch Fire,” “Operation Believe It Or Not, George Isn’t at Home,” and “MECHS Goes to Hollywood II: The Revenge.” Their team biography cast each member as a character—Grand Vizier, Royal Counselor, Knight of the GO Center. Their sustainability poster was titled “Riding Our Future Together” and rendered in marker on chart paper. Their stated core values were collaboration, innovation, and humor.

None of this is what a casual observer expects from a continuous improvement artifact. And that is precisely the point. The tools of improvement—the PDSA cycle, the disaggregated aim, the standard work rubric—were not substitutes for the team’s culture, identity, and judgment. They were the scaffolding within which that culture could become public, durable, and improvable. The Mission team’s vision of equity, written in their own words, describes wanting students to feel “as if they are not an other who has snuck into education, but that it was made with them in mind.” That is not a goal you can hand down from above. It is shared meaning, cultivated communally over time, made visible through the disciplined practice of improving together. The tools of continuous improvement are the scaffolding for the culture and practice of constructing shared meaning.

## Using Deeper Learning to Anchor Improvement

The reverse case gets less attention, but I think it is just as important. To make it, I want to borrow a distinction from organizational theory between first-order and second-order learning. My wife is a cardiologist. As such, she often has conversations with patients about the relationship between their cardiovascular health and their lifestyle. After seeing her, patients often leave with both a prescription for a statin to help treat their cholesterol or heart condition, and a list of things they must consider changing about their lifestyle. Some patients will take the statin and, after seeing improvement in their cholesterol numbers, conclude there is absolutely nothing wrong with their lifestyle. Other patients will take the statin and make systematic changes to their diet, exercise, sleep, and the management of stress.

Both categories of patients engage in learning and change, but these are different categories of learning. The first category of patients, who only took the medication, engage in what organizational theorists would refer to as first-order learning. While there are different types of first-order learning, what they all have in common is that they leave the prevailing system intact. The medication makes the existing pattern marginally more sustainable; thus, they conclude there really is no need for system change. The second category of patients, who also change their lifestyle, engage in second-order learning, which fundamentally transforms the system (their lifestyle) that produced poor cardiovascular health to begin with.

Deeper learning and continuous improvement both have an orientation toward transformation. But they hold that orientation differently. In deeper learning, the need for transformation is an assumption you argue from, not towards. The starting premise is that our schools, as currently designed, are not built to consistently produce the relational, adaptive, identity-rich outcomes we say we want—and that no amount of tuning the existing system will get us there. In continuous improvement, by contrast, transformation tends to be an assumption you argue towards, not from. The implicit bet is that if you incrementally improve enough of the surrounding pieces, a transformed system will eventually emerge.

That distinction matters greatly. Improvement, by its nature, reduces dissonance. It makes the prevailing system feel a little better, a little more humane, a little more functional. The metaphor I find useful is a pot of water. Water does not transform into steam unless the heat stays high enough to release it as a gas. Improvement, applied within a system that is not having an explicit conversation about the need for transformation, can quietly turn down the heat. The system feels less broken. The pressure for fundamental change recedes. And improvement begins to function as validation—proof that there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the system in the first place.

This is what deeper learning offers continuous improvement: a way to front-load the conversation about transformation, so that the discipline of incremental work does not collapse into a quiet defense of the status quo. Continuous improvement can tell us whether things are getting better. It cannot, by itself, tell us what “better” means. Deeper learning can. Without clarity about the transformational intent, the rigor of improvement methods can be turned, quite efficiently, toward improvement goals that are not worthy of our efforts.

Deeper learning also offers a counter-argument to an oft-cited critique of continuous improvement: that improvement science is just incrementalism dressed up in better clothes. I take that critique seriously, and I believe the improvement community should too. But I think it confuses two different things: small steps and small ideas. Continuous improvement, properly understood, is not about pursuing modest ambitions. It is about testing big ideas at a small scale, so that we do not burn community will and trust by spreading something that does not yet work. Or as Tony Bryk advises, “learn fast so you can implement better.” In the presence of a transformational vision, increments are how a transformed future actually arrives.

Transformation is the result of disciplined, rigorous, incremental work, sustained over time, in service of an aspirational marker on the horizon. Deeper learning gives us that navigational bearing on the horizon.

## **System and Soul**

Deeper learning makes an argument for the type of humans that schools must strive to develop. Continuous improvement gives us the discipline by which that vision can become communal, equitable, and sustainable. Deeper learning, alone, describes a destination. Continuous improvement, alone, tells us whether we are moving. We need both—the destination and the path, the meaning and the method, the why and the how—to get anywhere worth going.

Deeper learning and continuous improvement are answers to different halves of the same question. And if we zoom out from the specific question about continuous improvement and deeper learning, I believe there is a larger lesson for us about integration. The future of schooling, and the future of our communities, depends on our willingness to reintegrate things we have allowed to drift apart. Stories and spreadsheets. Strategies and relationships. Evidence and meaning. Improvement and transformation. System and soul.



*Above: students in a project-based learning classroom.*

# Why Deeper Learning Needs Continuous Improvement: Spreading Practices with Quality

*Ben Daley*

*High Tech High Graduate School of Education*

A ninth grade student is wrapping up her presentation to her classmates. The teacher scans the room. “Does anyone have a question for Monica?” he asks. Three seconds of uncomfortable silence elapse. “OK, I have a question!” the teacher cheerfully announces. “What was the hardest part of completing this project?” Monica responds. The teacher asks, “Any other questions?” in a tone of voice that suggests that no questions are actually expected. This time two seconds go by. The teacher starts clapping. The class half heartedly joins in. Monica sits down. The next student stands up. The process repeats. The year was 2000, the setting was the first year of High Tech High, and the teacher was me.

Fortunately, a colleague who was observing gave me feedback on how I could increase audience engagement. He advised that I do three things:

1. Before the next presentations, ask students to think about what strikes them, and what questions they have.
2. Turn to their neighbor to share.
3. Then, and only then, ask the students for questions.

When I next asked the class for questions and comments, almost every hand in the room shot into the air.



*Above: A math teacher works with a student at High Tech High Media Arts.*

Fast forward 25 years. High Tech High has grown to encompass 16 schools. I frequently observe student presentations, and the good news is that we have successfully spread this practice across our organization. The bad news, however, is that sometimes presentations play out just the way they did back in 2000 when I was a young teacher. We know a better way to give students feedback at the end of their presentations, but we do not consistently implement it. We have spread a practice, but have not spread it with consistent quality. And audience feedback on student presentations is but one of many practices where there is important nuance to share.

This brings me to the first reason that deeper learning needs continuous improvement.

### **Reason 1: Teaching is a complex task that demands a rigorous improvement method**

The practices that lead to deeper learning are nuanced and complex. It's not just, "Have students present their work." How we prepare students to present, what we ask them to present, how we assess their work, how we provide feedback—these are a series of teacher moves that can be undertaken with higher or lower quality. And how to spread this craft knowledge across a system of schools, let alone a state or country, is not obvious, at least not to me.

Edwards Deming, a founder of continuous improvement methods, once brutally summarized the field of education as "miracle goals and no methods." Having spent the past 30 years trying to spread deeper learning to more students more often, I recognize myself in this sentence. I agree that we deeper learners have not always had clear plans or disciplined methods. In fact, if we want to implement deeper learning practices at scale and with quality, then the methods of continuous improvement—such as knowing if the change is actually an improvement, seeing the system, and trying small tests of change—are those that we would do well to learn and apply. And this brings me to the second reason that deeper learning needs continuous improvement.

### **Reason 2: Instruction is the thing, but not the only thing**

Camila, a Latina, first generation college student from a low-income family, got good grades and was accepted to a California State University. She was a High Tech High success story. But then, over the summer, she got a letter from her college. She had apparently taken the wrong math class in high school, so she needed to take a college class over the summer that cost \$2,000. Well, Camila didn't have \$2,000. So she thought, "That's OK, I'll go to community college instead and then transfer to the university."



But what she didn't know is that when she went to community college instead of directly to a four-year university, her odds of graduating from college dropped by a factor of at least 6. Because for students who start at a community college, particularly students in remedial math, fewer than 1 in 10 ever earn a college degree.

But that wasn't the worst part of this story: The worst part was that Camila did not take the wrong math class. The university just misinterpreted the name of the class she took. So her chances of earning a college degree dropped to under 10 percent because a high school math class had a name that a university administrator found confusing.

When I heard this story, I was shaken. Here we are, knocking ourselves out, trying to enact project-based learning across a system of schools, which is hard work. But I realized, no matter the quality of our projects, if a student can get put on the wrong path in college because of a mistake in the handoff, then what are we doing here?

And so I realized that as much as I want every student to have rich deeper learning experiences, in order for students like Camila to be set up for success, we needed to attend to mundane details like how we describe our math classes on our transcripts. And look at data on which students are getting into which colleges. And systematically look for failure points, and correct them. Which is not as exciting as innovative project-based learning. But it's important.

This is the second reason that deeper learning needs continuous improvement. Of course good schools pay attention to instruction, but to be a successful school system, they need to pay attention to other things, too. In our enthusiasm for implementing more innovative and engaging learning environments, we must still attend to details that can interfere with our students' success. And this brings me to the third reason that deeper learning needs continuous improvement.

### **Reason 3: We need to know if our innovations are working**

The three improvement questions are:

1. What is your goal?
2. What will you change?
3. How will you know if the change has led to an improvement?

While these questions are simple, consistently answering them is profound. That last question, "How will you know?" bedevils educators seeking deeper learning. We deeper learning advocates are often clear about what we don't want to measure. We are often skeptical of the value of standardized testing.



We worry that accountability metrics interfere with authentic learning. We point out that not everything that can be counted counts. There are good reasons for this: The most widely-used standardized tests measure an extremely narrow slice of the learning that most people want to make sure is taking place in schools. This is especially unfortunate since standardized test scores have too often been used as a means of rewarding and punishing teachers and schools, and this has left its mark on the profession. And yet, if we are trying to enact deeper learning at any kind of scale, how will we know if our efforts are actually leading to deeper learning? Are students developing as better communicators? As more critical thinkers? As better collaborators? How would we know?

This is the third reason that deeper learning needs continuous improvement. If we are serious about spreading deeper learning to more students more often, then we have to take the measurement question seriously. It is a maxim in continuous improvement that we cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure. Just being opposed to current, simplistic measures is insufficient. How can we build our capacity to measure deeper learning, in good enough ways, to guide us towards better practice?

From this perspective, deeper learning needs continuous improvement because to scale practices with quality requires disciplined methods, so that other new teachers can quickly build upon the best work of others, rather than having to learn everything on their own. Deeper learning also needs continuous improvement so students like Camila can benefit from high quality, student-centered instruction, but also from school systems that attend to all the details that can interfere with or ensure their success.

Finally, deeper learning needs continuous improvement because we need measurements that capture a wider range of student outcomes if we are to be serious about how we know if our efforts for change are succeeding.



# The Cypher, The Stoop, The System: Reclaiming improvement as culture, not just method

*Jeff Boxhill*  
*High Tech High Graduate School of Education*

I came into improvement work as a skeptic.

I don't know...something about it felt rigid. Stuffy. Like a language that didn't belong to me.

It lived in dense books and conference rooms, clean, square, controlled, and disconnected from the way I understood people, culture, and growth.

I pushed against it for years. Against the jargon. The frameworks. The packaging. Trying to reconcile my responsibility to implement something that didn't feel natural.

Until I realized something:

**Improvement isn't just a method. It's culture.**

It's rhythm. It's people figuring out how to move better together.

And once I saw it that way, everything started to shift.

Because the truth is what we now call "continuous improvement" has been alive in the DNA and lived experience of African and Indigenous diasporic

communities long before it was ever named, studied, or Columbusized.

## **Before It Was Named, It Was Lived**

Think East Flatbush. Crown Heights. Brooklyn in the '80s and '90s.

On any given block, improvement was happening in real time.

When an elder called a meeting because the front door lock was broken, and they couldn't rely on the landlord to fix it, that was a diagnostic review. People rallied together, named the problem, and figured out what to do next.

When your neighbor Ms. Beverly started a SuSu, everyone putting in \$50 to build collective financial momentum that could fund a furniture set or a down payment, that was a strategy for resource allocation and shared investment.

When the block association tested new ideas for community engagement, adjusted what didn't work, and came back together to reflect, that was iteration.

And when they celebrated wins with a block party or a BBQ, that was accountability and reflection wrapped in joy.

No one called it a PDSA cycle.

**But that's exactly what it was.**

## **The Cypher Was Always a Lab**

Hip-hop taught the same lessons—just with more style.

The cypher was a sacred space for improvement.

Everyone brought their 16. You tested your flow. Adjusted your cadence. Listened, responded, sharpened.

Feedback was immediate. Sometimes brutal. Always honest.

But it was rooted in love—for the craft and for each other.

Crews didn't move as individuals. They moved as a unit. One person's growth elevated everyone.

That was alignment.  
That was accountability.  
That was collective measurement of progress.

We didn't need a framework to tell us how to get better.

We were already doing it.

## **When This Shows Up in Professional Spaces**

This isn't just theory. I've seen what happens when this way of improving is made intentional in professional spaces.

At Deeper Learning, I facilitated a session where we used games and shared experiences to help educators understand the process of improvement. We didn't start with frameworks, we started with people. Their instincts. Their collaboration. Their ability to test and learn in real time.

What emerged wasn't confusion. It was clarity.

People realized they already knew how to do this work.

I saw it again while serving as a back-to-back advisor for a chronic absenteeism problem of practice at the Summit on Improvement in Education. We brought together educators from across the world to grapple with the same challenge.

What moved the work forward wasn't just tools or protocols, it was the community. The willingness to be honest, to share, to test ideas together, and to stay committed to the problem as a collective.

In both spaces, the breakthrough wasn't learning something entirely new.

It was recognizing what was already there, and building on it together.

## **So Why Does It Feel So Rigid Now?**

Somewhere along the way, improvement got packaged.

It became something you had to learn instead of something you could recognize, something as familiar as a head nod when passing someone on the street.

It started to feel like you had to choose:

- Between joy and rigor
- Between culture and measurement
- Between being human and being effective

But that's a false choice.

Teams don't have to sacrifice humanity to get results. They don't have to deny or downplay who they are.

In fact, the opposite is true.

**The best improvement happens when people feel seen, valued, and connected to the work.**

When they understand not just what they're doing, but why it matters, and who it impacts.

Belonging isn't separate from improvement.

**It's what makes it work.**

## **Research Confirms This, But Didn't Invent It**

The field of improvement science tells us that:

- People learn best when they learn together
- Small tests of change lead to meaningful results
- Systems improve when problems are shared, not isolated

Scholars like Bryk, Gomez, and Wenger have studied this for years.

But for many of us, this isn't new information.

It's familiar.

Because we've lived it.

## **Improvement Is the Work of Community**

At its core, improvement is about how people come together to solve problems.

It's about:

- Trust
- Shared responsibility
- Collective learning
- And the belief that we can get better, together

It's the same energy that lives in a Crew circle.  
The same energy at a Sunday brunch over Spades and Dominoes.  
The same energy in a cypher.

It's not separate from culture.

**It is culture.**

## **It Never Did**

If we want real, lasting change in our schools, organizations, and systems, we don't need to invent something entirely new.

We need to recognize what already exists.

We need to expand our understanding of what "counts" as improvement, and make space for the many ways it shows up across communities, languages, and lived experiences.

Because improvement doesn't belong to one field, one framework, or one way of knowing.

Improvement isn't owned by institutions.

It lives in the way people:

- Take care of each other
- Solve problems together
- Test what works
- And keep going

Long before it was written down, it was practiced.

Long before it was studied, it was lived.

**Improvement was never new.**  
**We just started calling it something else.**



*Above: Students at International High School.*



# Mindsets for Radically Welcoming Newcomer Students into Your School

*Chandler Patton Miranda  
Molloy University*

**L**uz walked into an International High School (IHS) in New York City in October 2001, at the age of 16. She spoke no English, had no high school record, and badly needed a winter coat.

Milagros had crossed the border near Reynosa, Mexico, to outside McAllen, Texas, in the summer of 2014. She was taken to a detention center and eventually relocated with an abusive uncle in New York City. She had finished fourth grade in Guatemala, but the secondary school was too far from her rural village to attend. She enrolled at IHS as a 16-year-old ninth grader in the fall of 2014.

Gonzalo came to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in the sixth grade, but told me that the only English he had learned was curse words. He had watched knife fights in his middle school bathroom, and was not sure school was for him. He also enrolled in IHS in 2012 as a ninth grader.

Luz, Milagros, and Gonzalo would not be considered high-achieving students, and none of them graduated in four years. Luz was labeled as a student who was over-age and under-credited. Milagros was a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE), and Gonzalo was a long-term English learner (EL) who also received special education services (SPED).

The three of them had the good fortune to come to International High School, which changed their life. It changed mine as well: When I first walked into IHS in 2015 as a doctoral student at New York University (NYU), I knew, as a novice educational anthropologist, that I had found a unique setting in which to conduct my research. After teaching high school science for seven years, first in San Benito, Texas, and then in Barranquilla and Bogota, Colombia, I had questions about leadership, school design, and how my students were crossing borders for educational purposes. When I walked into IHS, I felt something I'd never experienced as an educator and couldn't quite put my finger on.

IHS is one of sixteen schools in the International Network for Public Schools in New York City. I have continued to study the network year after year because these schools are epicenters of educational innovation, deeper learning, and whole-child educational approaches that center on love, care, deep learning, linguistic and cultural affirmation, and what I have come to think of as “radical welcoming.”

I have written extensively about my research on International Network schools for academic journals, as well as in my 2025 book, *Sanctuary School: Innovating to Empower Immigrant Youth*. In it, I take a deep dive into one school's culture to tangibly impart the feeling of radical welcome to educators and help them imagine a truly welcoming and empowering school for their most marginalized students. This school, like others in the network, only serves recently arrived newcomer immigrant youth, all of whom are classified as English learners. As such, these schools have been forced to maneuver and adapt as immigrant communities navigate the nation's ever-changing sociopolitical landscape. While they are a unique network of schools, understanding how they have evolved, their current practices, and how they are preparing for the future can be instructive to all educators who want to better serve their most marginalized students.

I've written this four-part series to explore the four radical mindset shifts I have identified in my research, which educators and school leaders can adopt in order to create radically welcoming schools. They are:

- Rethinking the roles immigrant students play in schools
- Valuing stability over urgency
- Centering knowing and caring for students
- Recognizing flaws in the social contract and failures of the state

Drawing from *Sanctuary School*, each article focuses on one mindset shift and translates it into practical strategies for educators, leaders, and innovators. Through reflection, questioning, and leadership actions, the series will support practitioners who are already engaged in the work of building radically welcoming schools where students can thrive. This article focuses

on rethinking the roles immigrant students play in schools.

## **How International High Schools Reimagine the Roles Played by Immigrant Students**

In many schools, students like Luz, Milagros, and Gonzalo often face social and academic isolation. For example, in a recent study conducted by one of my doctoral students, third graders described how, from their perspective, the “Spanish kids” in their classroom sat alone in a corner and had special teachers who told them the answers. Teachers in the study described not speaking English as a “disability” that they were not equipped to navigate. Research shows that this type of isolation is common for recently arrived immigrant students in classrooms where immigrant youth are seen as needing help, remediation, or rescue. Structures and practices in classrooms that limit engagement and inclusion of students who are learning English may be one reason that only 29 to 58 percent of ELs who arrived in the United States during grades 10–12 will graduate from high school within four or five years, although this data is hard to come by since we have no nationally accepted definition or designation for newcomer students.

Fortunately, Luz, Milagros, and Gonzalo had a very different experience at IHS. From the first day, students were placed in small ninth and tenth-grade cohorts with whom they attended every class. They spent their first two years of high school with the same interdisciplinary team of teachers who learned about their lives and migration stories, and who designed projects that drew on their full range of experiences, languages, and expertise. Classrooms were project-based, multilingual, and collaborative, with teachers circulating to facilitate learning rather than instructing from the front of the classroom. A typical day involves interdisciplinary project work, presentations, and small-group support. The instructional model also makes time and space for an advisory focused on social-emotional learning, one-on-one mentorship on an academic project, oral defenses of work, and opportunities to engage in an internship outside of school, earn college credit, or gain work experience.

Because of these intentional practices, Luz, Milagros, and Gonzalo learned complex content in rigorous classes, where they drew on all their language skills and modalities. Nevertheless, none of them were ready to graduate high school after four years. After her fourth year, Luz’s teachers asked her to stay an additional year instead of joining the Army, and created an internship for her to work alongside the assistant principal. When she graduated after five years, her teachers dropped her off at college and helped her decorate her dorm room. After graduating from college, Luz became a math teacher at IHS and is now an assistant principal. When Milagros needed to start working after attending school for four years, the school created a modified schedule that allowed her to work while she completed her education.

After a little more than seven years, she graduated in 2019; she now has an associate's degree and is pursuing a degree in social work. After becoming frustrated with school and not graduating with his cousin, Gonzalo returned to the Dominican Republic. Despite weeks of effort, the school was unable to reach him to ask him to return for a fifth year. The assistant principal began asking his friends to text him and encourage him to come back. He eventually returned to the U.S. and to school, graduating in 2019 after five years, and has built a life in Pennsylvania.

My research at IHS provided me with enough insights about teaching and learning to fill a book (literally), but there are three elements of this mindset shift that any educator can introduce at their school right away:

1. Recognize student expertise and agency in learning.
2. Honor collaboration and contributions to the community.
3. Expand opportunities for leadership in school and beyond.

I'll go into each of these in more detail, as well as share some advice about barriers that derail efforts to improve the schooling experience for immigrant youth.

## **Element 1: Recognize Student Expertise in Learning**

Rethinking the roles immigrant students play in schools is not about adding another program or initiative. It's a mindset shift; a deliberate move away from seeing such students as burdens and toward seeing them as essential contributors and experts, in both their own learning needs and the particular skills and knowledge they have gained from their lives so far.

To illustrate what this looks like in practice, consider a project that Luz created when she became a math teacher at IHS. She tasked her students with determining the fairest place to build a hospital in their home country. To achieve this, they needed to employ a system of linear equations while also addressing larger moral, ethical, and political questions, beginning with, "How do we determine what is fair?" and, "Is equality always fair?"

The project begins with students text-coding and analyzing the following prompt:

There are three non-collinear towns in your home country. There is a plan to build a [students choose a needed resource] somewhere in the area of these three towns. The mayor of one town says that the [resource] should be located in their town because it is the shortest distance from the other two towns. As an active citizen, you disagree, stating that another place might be better. The mayor responds by saying, "You MUST prove it!"

This project engaged ninth- and tenth-graders to solve a real-world civic problem—determining the most fair location for a shared community resource—by applying core algebraic and geometric concepts such as distance, midpoints, slope, systems of equations, and triangle centers. Under Luz’s guidance, students moved beyond abstract exercises and created maps, generated equations, tested hypotheses, and justified their reasoning through multiple solution methods. The project gave students agency by encouraging them to situate their project in a geographic region they had personally lived in and select a public resource (such as a hospital, water station, grocery store, or bank) that they felt was most important, based on their own experience in that place.

The project’s culminating performance-based assessment required students to synthesize their mathematical work in a structured essay that integrated calculations, diagrams, and evidence-based arguments, strengthening both their mathematical fluency and communication skills. At the same time, the project situated mathematics within broader questions of fairness and equity, inviting students to consider whether equal distance was always just and how different models of fairness could privilege or disadvantage particular communities. By choosing what kind of resource to build and defending their own position against the mayor’s claim, students took on the role of active citizens, exercising agency in shaping both the problem and its solution. In this way, the project connected rigorous math learning with social justice inquiry, empowering students to see mathematics as a tool for critical thinking, decision-making, and civic participation. Luz honored students’ knowledge by asking them to share their expertise about their home country, a community in which they lived, and a public resource they believed would have improved the quality of life of their family, neighbors, and friends. Weaving students’ knowledge and experiences into the project gave them agency and ownership over their learning, positioning them as experts about where they are from, yet still requiring them to engage in rigorous math learning and performance assessment.

This project illustrates how student voices and lived experiences keep the curriculum dynamic and meaningful. When students bring their own knowledge, cultures, and perspectives into the classroom, the work itself becomes more dynamic and engaging. The projects evolve because they are shaped by students’ realities, creating space for authentic exploration, inclusion, and dialogue.

In another project, “American Dream, American Reality,” students examined what the American Dream meant to them before they arrived and how their understanding of it has changed over time. In a social movement project, students determined which movement should be honored with a federal holiday, grounding their choices in their values and experiences. A Model UN project allowed them to advocate from the perspective of their home

countries. Other projects invited personal and cultural expression, such as designing a dream home through scale modeling, creating identity boxes, publishing magazines with articles about revolutions, painting parable murals, or producing a folk tale puppet show. In each case, students' cultural knowledge was central, making the curriculum rigorous, culturally relevant, and personally meaningful.

## **Element 2: Honor Collaboration and Contributions to the Community**

Collaboration is at the heart of how IHS educators recognize and honor the contributions of immigrant students to their school and the broader community. Their skills as cultural brokers, translators, and peer supporters allow them to share knowledge in ways that extend far beyond individual achievement. In classrooms, this collaboration is explicitly taught and valued. For example, sentence stems posted on desks encouraged students to ask their peers clarifying questions ("What do you mean by \_\_\_\_\_? Can you explain more?"); support one another ("Can I help you with anything?"); and build on peers' ideas ("I have a similar idea. I think..." or "I have a different idea. I think..."). These structures positioned students not only as learners but also as collaborators whose contributions sustained the collective learning environment.

As an observer in the school, I continually saw students translating for peers and teachers, explaining assignments in multiple languages, and bridging cultural differences through shared meals or group projects. Portfolio-based assessments reinforced this communal approach by asking students to defend their ideas before authentic audiences, respond to questions, and teach others through their work. Rather than seeing knowledge as something individuals hold privately, these practices affirm that learning is built together through dialogue, questioning, and mutual support.

## **Element 3: Expand Opportunities for Leadership in School Life and Beyond**

Students are given multiple avenues to exercise leadership in school life, with opportunities structured to highlight their cultural knowledge and experiences. For example, in Peer Group Connections, students are paired with newer classmates to act as youth leaders, helping them adjust academically and socially. Others serve as bridge coaches or provide support for graduating seniors, including through a fifth-year senior panel and alumni panel, where they offer guidance and encouragement to students who might not graduate in four years on why they should stay in school. These leadership structures affirm that immigrant and multilingual youth are not passive recipients of support, but active leaders and guides within the school

community.

In eleventh grade, students apply what they have learned to the professional world via the school's internship program. In the spring, students spend three days a week at an internship site of their choice or area of their professional interest. In their on-campus internship seminar, students keep vocabulary logs and observation journals that push them to notice the subtleties of workplace culture.

Teachers describe the internship year as transformative. Students navigate language differences, adapt to new environments, and contribute in ways that matter to their sites, such as translating for colleagues, assisting with technology, or sharing cultural insights. Seminars provide a space for students to process these experiences together and connect them to academic content. In this way, leadership is reframed as contribution: Rather than holding formal titles, students demonstrate their capacity through observation, support, and participation. They are not only preparing for future careers but also giving back to their host organizations in the present.

Expanding opportunities for leadership beyond the school makes the internship a powerful extension of project-based learning. Just as classroom projects have students apply academic skills to civic and cultural contexts, internships require them to utilize their multilingualism, cultural knowledge, and interpersonal skills to contribute to the workplaces they joined.

Leadership opportunities also extend into external programs that expand students' horizons and professional identities. For example, the Women in STEM Leadership program at the New York Hall of Science, and NYU's ARISE program, give students access to hands-on lab experiences, research mentorship, and leadership development in STEM fields. The NYC Summer Youth Employment Program and Leaders for Ladders emphasize financial literacy, career exploration, and professional development, allowing students to apply their cultural knowledge and creativity to public-facing roles.

These layered opportunities reinforce the idea that leadership is not dependent on English proficiency or familiarity with U.S. school norms. Students are invited to lead through multimodal forms, including mentorship, art, civic dialogue, research, and translation that honors their strengths. This approach shifts the mindset from viewing immigrant students as "not ready" to recognizing that they are already leading, contributing, and shaping the school's culture in profound ways.

### Common Barriers and How to Overcome Them

One thing I often see in my research is that when educators are new to working with newcomer and immigrant students, they often feel an urgency to teach them English first and quickly, because English fluency is often

treated as a prerequisite for learning, participation, or leadership. In some cases, teachers avoid getting to know students deeply—where they come from, how they arrived, what their lives are like outside of the classroom, what they love, and who they miss—because they feel pressed for time, uncertain about how to connect across cultural differences, or uneasy without seamless communication. These barriers create distance and inadvertently reinforce exclusion, limiting opportunities for immigrant youth to be seen as leaders, knowledge holders, and contributors within the school community.

The most impactful educators I have observed at International High School all share an intentional reflective practice in which they continually question their assumptions, instructional strategies, and classroom structures. I've learned from countless interviews with teachers that this process requires asking oneself critical questions, such as:

- When I hear the terms “newcomer” or “English learner,” who do I picture?
- How are immigrant students, their languages, and their cultures represented in my classroom and school environment?
- Do I position myself as the expert delivering knowledge, or do I create space for other ways of knowing?
- Who makes the decisions in the classroom, and in what ways are students allowed to lead?
- Am I more concerned with compliance or with what is best for my students?
- Am I open to getting to know my students, or am I avoiding getting to know them because of what I imagine they might tell me or because I feel like I lack the time?

Such reflection helps uncover deficit-based thinking and structural inequities that may be otherwise invisible to educators. By asking these questions honestly, educators begin to reframe immigrant youth not as passive recipients of support but as active contributors with valuable knowledge and leadership potential.

The educators I write about in my book all share similar mindsets and believe they have a responsibility to get to know their immigrant students deeply. They believe they can learn alongside their immigrant students, and welcome negotiation in the curriculum so that together, educators and students can collaboratively decide on the focus of their learning. For example, instead of assuming that students must be fluent in English to learn or lead, teachers create projects and choose texts that honor immigrant experiences, provide avenues for immigrant students to contribute transnational knowledge in meaningful ways, and draw on students' experiences and expertise. Teachers in these schools commit to learning from their students, inviting them to be co-creators of knowledge in the classroom.



My research shows that schools can become more welcoming places for immigrant students by acknowledging their immigrant community in school documents and communications and rethinking their intake process to ensure it is culturally appropriate, welcoming, and appropriately acknowledges lived experiences and knowledge. This can involve facilitating clubs, starting a culturally relevant sports team, or opening peer support roles that center on the voices of newcomers. The International High Schools I write about also find ways to provide stipends or credits to compensate students for their leadership, acknowledging that it is a form of labor and addressing potential barriers to participation in extracurricular activities. These seemingly small shifts in mindsets and practices signal to recently arrived immigrant students that belonging is not language-dependent; that their cultural knowledge enriches the classroom; and that schools become more just and inclusive when all immigrant students are recognized as having the full rights and responsibilities of all other community members.

Part of what I felt that first day at International High School was what I have started calling “sanctuary schooling.” This is a culture of shared leadership and reciprocal learning that blurs the lines between experts and newcomers, as well as between teachers and students. International High School offers a school model grounded in trust and collaboration, where immigrant students and their teachers truly belong and thrive. Rethinking the roles immigrant students play in schools is part of the mindset shift that educators at this school have embodied. In the upcoming articles in this series, I will explore the remaining three mindset shifts I discuss in my book and believe are essential in sanctuary schools, or any school serving marginalized youth. These include valuing stability over urgency, centering knowing and caring for students, and recognizing flaws in the social contract and failures of the state.



# Mining for Gold: Using Improvement Science to Increase Class Participation For Multilingual Learners

*Dr. Michellea “Redbird” Millis Rucker  
Transforming Our Practice*

The shift began on a Tuesday morning in October. Our school, which runs from pre-kindergarten 3 to twelfth grade, had just finished a routine walkthrough when a kindergarten teacher pulled me aside. “My multilingual learners never volunteer during morning meetings,” she said. “I know they have ideas. I just don’t think they feel safe enough to share.”

In my years of working with teachers and school leaders as an improvement coach, I’ve learned to listen closely to what is unsaid. Variation is data. Silence is data. And an entire group of kindergarteners consistently being silent in class? That is *definitely* data.

That moment became our entry point into a year-long journey of cultivating an improvement science culture grounded in belonging and inclusive teaching. We didn’t start with a strategic plan. We started with a question: What would it look like if we mined for gold in our own community? To put that in more concrete terms, “How do we make it so that multilingual learners are more willing to participate in class, and how will we know if we have succeeded?”

## Cultivating an Improvement Science Culture

### Step 1: Conduct empathy interviews.

Once we had our question, we began by conducting a series of empathy interviews with multilingual learners (and their families) from a range of grade levels in order to better understand the barriers that were preventing them from participating in class.

From these interviews, we learned the following:

- Many multilingual learners feared making language mistakes in front of peers.
- Students reported a “quiet exclusion” where, despite being physically present in the building, they felt invisible in the curriculum. For example, one student explained that while they saw people who looked like them in the hallways, the only time their culture was mentioned in a textbook was in the context of struggle, victimhood, or a single tacked-on holiday, making their identity feel like a footnote to the real history being taught.
- African American male students felt like they were “always seen as troublemakers.”
- There was a misalignment between school structures and the reality of students’ lives. For example, one student explained that their grades dropped when the district moved to a paperless model. While the school provided a laptop, the student’s home lacked high-speed internet, and their parents, who worked evening shifts in delivery services, often needed the student to ride along in the car to help with navigation. The school structure assumed a stable, stationary home environment with a 1:1 internet connection that simply didn’t exist.

### Step 2: Test different interventions for different ages.

#### *PK3–Grade 2: Reimagining Morning Meeting*

After empathy interviews with multilingual learners and their families, we learned that students feared making language mistakes in front of peers. So we tested three changes:

- Providing sentence stems at the front of the classroom when students are asked to speak in full-class discussion.
- Modeling responses by sharing examples of possible responses before students were asked to speak.
- Asking students to share with a single peer or a small group before whole-group sharing.

Teachers introduced these three changes at the same time. Within two weeks, participation increased. Students told us they felt “braver.” Teachers said the room felt different, lighter, and more inclusive.

### *Grades 3–5: Making Group Work Equitable*

Teachers noticed that some students, often those with IEPs or emerging language skills, rarely took leadership roles during group work. Using a process map, we identified the issue: roles were unclear, and norms were inconsistent.

We tested:

- Structured roles with icons
- Rotating responsibilities
- Sentence frames for collaboration

Students who had previously withdrawn began stepping into facilitator roles. One student said, “I didn’t know I could lead until we practiced it this way.”

### *Middle School: Rethinking Transitions*

Discipline data revealed disproportionate referrals to the principal’s office for African American boys during hallway transitions. Instead of blaming behavior, we mapped the transition process. The variation was glaring: Different teachers had different expectations.

For example, while one teacher might view a student stopping to give a high-five as a positive social connection, another may view it as “willful defiance” or a “failure to comply with hallway flow.”

The result was that some teachers were regularly flagging students, often African American boys, for subjective infractions like disrespect or loitering.

We also learned that some teachers expected students to be absolutely silent in the hallways, while others encouraged students to keep the volume level to that of a quiet conversation. This meant that two students walking down a hallway had to know when to end their conversations, or risk getting a referral from one of the teachers who enforced silence.

These variations in expectations revealed something deeper: Some teachers used transition time between classes as an opportunity to interact with students, while others focused on surveillance.

Students helped us co-design hallway norms to ensure the rules felt fair and communal rather than imposed. Using these norms, we implemented a “warm-strict” routine; a leadership posture that pairs unconditional care (the warm) with unapologetic high expectations (the strict).

In practice, this meant:

**The Warm:** Every transition began with high-touch engagement, eye contact,

individual greetings, and “checking the pulse” of students as they moved.

**The Strict:** We utilized precise praise and least-invasive interventions to correct off-track behavior immediately and consistently.

By using predictable cues and identical language across all staff, we eliminated the gray areas where bias typically thrives. Students no longer had to guess which version of a rule applied to which teacher; the boundary was firm, but the environment was safe (Bondy & Ross, 2023; Scott & Cooper, 2025).

Referrals dropped. Students said they felt more respected. Teachers said transitions felt less chaotic and “more human.”

### *High School: Scaling Belonging Through Advisory*

A ninth-grade advisory team piloted a belonging routine that included identity-mapping, weekly check-ins, and student-led circles. The routine spread, not because we mandated it, but because teachers saw the impact.

When a ninth-grade team shifts from managing students to cultivating belonging, the impact isn’t just a feeling; it’s a measurable shift in the school’s social and academic ecosystem.

By using identity-mapping, students felt seen as multifaceted individuals rather than just “referral risks.” The weekly check-ins acted as an early-warning system. Student-led circles shifted the power dynamic. The reason it spread without a mandate is what researchers call “social proof.” When teachers, who are often exhausted by initiative fatigue, witness a colleague having a 90 percent reduction in hallway friction, the routine becomes a solution rather than a task (Liou & Daly, 2021; Lyon et al., 2024).

We formed a cross-grade improvement network to adapt the routine for different developmental stages. Seniors redesigned it for younger students. Middle schoolers added visual tools. PK3 teachers, a specialized developmental and structural bracket that spans from pre-kindergarten 3 through third grade, created a picture-based version. Improvement became a networked learning ecosystem rather than a top-down initiative.

## **What We Learned: Improvement Is a Cultural Practice**

By the end of the year, we realized we hadn’t just implemented improvement science, we had become an improvement science school. Teachers described the culture as “curious,” “collaborative,” and “student-centered.” Students said they felt “seen,” “safe,” and “part of something.” This shift reflects the understanding that true school improvement is not a technical checklist, but a cultural practice rooted in shared vulnerability and a relentless commitment to collective learning. By embedding inquiry into our daily interactions, we have transformed the work of improvement into the way we work, ensuring

that our systems are as responsive and dynamic as the students they serve (Bryk, 2021; Hinnant-Crawford, 2024).

## Where We Go from Here

Moving forward, we will focus on deepening our plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles to ensure that the barriers identified by our multilingual learners are not just named, but systematically dismantled. As documented by Hinnant-Crawford (2024), the strength of this methodology lies in its ability to turn “marginalized voices into the primary architects of school change,” ensuring that equity is a lived experience rather than a bureaucratic goal. This commitment requires a shift from viewing data as a tool for accountability to seeing it as a catalyst for iterative, teacher-led innovation that directly responds to student needs. By standardizing these reflective practices, we ensure that the curious and collaborative culture we have built remains resilient against the shifting pressures of external policy (Bryk, 2021; Lewis & Perry, 2023).

Furthermore, the evolution of our school culture necessitates a shift from individual classroom successes to a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) model. By fostering a “learn-fast” environment where data is used for learning rather than for judgment, we empower our staff to engage in cross-disciplinary problem-solving that targets the root causes of chronic absenteeism among our multilingual populations. According to Bryk (2021), the sustainability of such institutional change relies on the relational trust built during the empathy phase, which allows for the honest critique of existing systems. Our next phase is about sustainability. Through the lens of continuous improvement, we will transform our recent wins in student agency into lasting pillars of our ecosystem, ensuring every student feels safe and empowered by design, rather than by chance.

Ultimately, the journey that began on a quiet Tuesday morning in October, sparked by a kindergarten teacher’s observation of her silent multilingual learners, proved that the system is always speaking to us if we are willing to listen. What initially appeared to be a simple lack of participation was, in reality, a complex data point reflecting deep-seated barriers like language anxiety, quiet exclusion in the curriculum, and a misalignment between school structures and students’ lived realities. By shifting our leadership posture to view silence and variation as vital information, we moved away from technical checklists and toward a cultural practice rooted in shared vulnerability and collective learning.

By mining for gold within our own community, we uncovered the latent brilliance of our students, from the kindergarteners who now feel “braver” to the middle schoolers co-designing hallway norms. This process of improvement science transformed marginalized voices into the primary



architects of school change, ensuring that equity is a lived experience rather than a bureaucratic goal. As we continue to iterate through our learning cycles, we remain committed to this networked ecosystem, ensuring that the gold we discovered remains a permanent pillar of a school where every student feels safe and empowered by design.

## References

Bondy, E., & Ross, D. D. (2023). *The resilient teacher: Moving beyond survival to thrive*. Routledge.

Bryk, A. S. (2021). *Improvement in action: Advancing quality in schools and systems*. Harvard Education Press.

Hinnant-Crawford, B. N. (2024). *Improvement science in education: A primer* (2nd ed.). Myers Education Press.

Legette, K. B., Garner, P. W., & Halberstadt, A. G. (2026). Classroom discipline experiences and Black youth student-teacher relationships and classroom engagement. *Cultural diversity & ethnic minority psychology*, 10.1037/cdp0000784. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000784>

Lewis, C., & Perry, R. (2023). Building a knowledge base for school improvement: The role of lesson study and improvement science. *Journal of Educational Change*, 24(3), 411–435. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-022-09462-w>

Liou, P. Y., & Daly, A. J. (2021). Diffusion of innovation in school social networks: The role of teacher leaders and social capital. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 103, 103364.

Lyon, A. R., Cook, C. R., Locke, J., Davis, C., Powell, B. J., & Waltz, T. J. (2024). Importance and feasibility of strategies for implementing evidence-based practices in schools. *Journal of School Psychology*, 102, 101267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.101267>

Scott, T. M., & Cooper, J. T. (2025). *Functional behavior assessment and intervention in schools*. Pearson.





*Above: Students learning to use a sewing machine.*



*Above: A first grader helps to stop traffic in order to conduct a fire drill.*

# How We Co-Designed a Project on Community with First Graders

*Ingrid Puche and Milena Carmona  
Avenues the World School*

**A**t Avenues The World School in São Paulo, Brazil, every project cycle begins with a key concept that sparks curiosity and guides inquiry. Founded in New York in 2012, Avenues was created with a mission to redefine schooling for a fast-changing world. From this global mindset, the São Paulo campus opened its doors in August 2018, offering a truly transformative educational experience. Today, the campus welcomes a vibrant community of over 1,200 students from 18 months old through twelfth grade, and is energized by a culture of innovation, creativity, and state-of-the-art technology.

Our school curriculum is designed around interdisciplinary project-based learning. For first graders, the first big idea is *community*—the perfect theme as children transition from kindergarten into elementary school, forming new friendships, adapting to challenges, and building a stronger sense of identity.

With this in mind, all four first grade classes launched into a shared project called Better Together, guided by the essential question: *What makes up a community?*

While all classes shared the same big idea, each group followed its own inquiry shaped by children's interests. Teachers collaborated in weekly planning

sessions to design common learning experiences while allowing each class to chart its unique path. Together, they aligned on core goals: that every student would explore how communities function, practice collaboration and respect, and ultimately demonstrate the impact of their own contributions.

The project was designed to enable every student in every class to meet the following learning outcomes:

- Understand the impact of one's actions on a community
- Respect differences among people and groups
- Be aware of what they want/need to find out and ask questions to drive their inquiries
- Write a specific text type (fiction and non-fiction) using appropriate structure and characteristics
- Read grade-level texts demonstrating comprehension
- Consider input and constructive feedback when creating or refining work
- Follow a multi-step plan to achieve a short-term learning goal

## Project Launch and Early Provocations

On the first day, rather than defining community, teachers filled the classroom with photos and videos of people working together—athletes, musicians, and builders. Students observed and discussed the following questions:

“What are they doing together?”

“Do people have different roles?”

At first, answers were simple: “They’re cooking.” “They’re playing basketball.” But soon, students began noticing details. “She’s not dancing—she’s playing the piano so they can dance,” or “That man isn’t playing, he’s the coach.”

Students captured these using graphic organizers to identify who the group was, what they were doing, and the roles involved. Over time, words and phrases like *responsibility*, *respect*, and *helping each other* appeared in their notes. As second language learners, students also reflected on vocabulary. They could describe actions but not always name the collective (e.g., “orchestra”). Naming these groups became a powerful step toward understanding that people belong to something larger.

By the end of this phase, curiosity was running high. Together, students unpacked the essential questions:

- What makes up a community?
- How do people's roles and actions impact it?
- What makes a community successful?

These observations led them to the first act for framing the inquiry. They voted on which communities they wanted to study more deeply: builders, firefighters, cooks, or scientists.

Once their communities were chosen, students generated questions to guide their research. Teachers facilitated a lesson on how to ask effective questions. Because many students at this age are just beginning to learn to write, at times they practiced asking questions orally while teachers documented their ideas through shared writing. In other moments, students had more autonomy and used scaffolds to write their own questions independently.

It was interesting to observe that students often needed teacher support to move from broad, general questions to more specific ones. Since Avenues is an English-language school in a Portuguese-speaking country, most students are second language learners, and this process also provided a valuable opportunity to explore language structures for expressing curiosity—such as *wh-* questions, auxiliary verbs, and word order.

## **Developing Questions**

Once their communities were chosen, students generated questions to guide their research. Teachers facilitated a lesson on how to ask effective questions. Because many students at this age are just beginning to learn to write, at times they practiced asking questions orally while teachers documented their ideas through shared writing. In other moments, students had more autonomy and used scaffolds to write their own questions independently.

It was interesting to observe that students often needed teacher support to move from broad, general questions to more specific ones. Since Avenues is an English-language school in a Portuguese-speaking country, most students are second language learners, and this process also provided a valuable opportunity to explore language structures for expressing curiosity—such as *wh-* questions, auxiliary verbs, and word order.

## **Planning the Research**

Next, students co-planned how to find answers to the questions, identifying a variety of ways to explore—through books, guest speakers, and fieldwork. Teachers modeled how to plan research using think-alouds and collaborative discussions. Prompts like, “If we want to learn more about cooks, what should we do next?” invited students to think critically and organize their steps. It was interesting to observe students realizing that there are different ways to answer a question. They can talk to people and experts, visit places, read articles, etc. Ideas quickly grew. Students proposed that they interview the kitchen team, visit the school kitchen, or even tour a restaurant. With the help of families and community members, these ideas came to life,





*Above: Visiting a construction site.*

transforming learning into an active, authentic process.

Responding to students' suggestions on interviewing experts and visiting places connected to their questions, each class carried out its own fieldwork:

- **Scientists:** Met with two scientists—parents who shared about their work in neuroscience and vaccine research. One family invited students to a real lab, where they observed experiments and teamwork in action. They wore professional attire like lab coats and used different technological tools from the lab.
- **Builders:** Met with the school's maintenance team to learn about architects, engineers, and construction workers, then visited a construction site to see collaboration firsthand.
- **Firefighters:** Collaborated with the school's fire safety team and visited a local fire station, where they explored tools, learned roles, and ended with a joyful "hose shower."
- **Cooks:** Explored the importance of teamwork in kitchens, learning how crucial organization and timing are to preparing, cooking, and serving food. They decided to plan a special breakfast to honor the school kitchen team. "Let's cook for the people who cook for us every day," one student said.

These experiences connected classroom learning to the real world and



*Above: Embodying the community of scientists by studying plants.*

strengthened relationships among students, teachers, and the wider community.

## **From Inquiry to Action**

As the project deepened, students co-planned research steps, conducted interviews, and synthesized findings. The focus gradually shifted toward taking action—creating something tangible that reflected what they had learned about teamwork and responsibility.

In their final piece of work, each class decided to embody the community they studied:

- **Scientists:** Divided into small groups to investigate plants, animals, and humans, hosting a science fair to share discoveries. Students from other grade levels and families visited the fair.
- **Builders:** Noticed a real problem in the playground—a sinking wooden toy—and designed a prototype to stabilize it.
- **Firefighters:** Organized a mini fire drill for all first graders. They planned logistics, designed exit posters, scheduled steps, and even practiced using a megaphone to communicate. Each student had a defined role and checklist of tasks.
- **Cooks:** Hosted a thank-you breakfast to celebrate the school kitchen team.

These culminating experiences reflected the outcome, “Understand the impact of one’s actions on a community.” Students were not just learning about collaboration—they were living it.

## What We Learned

Beyond just studying vocabulary, the project’s overriding goal was to allow children to build understanding through experience—by observing, questioning, playing, and acting. Students learned that communities are more than just groups of people; they are systems connected by shared goals, respect, and a sense of belonging.

Through studying scientists, builders, firefighters, and cooks, they discovered that communities thrive when each member contributes their unique skills while supporting others. They also realized how much one person’s actions matter—a mistake, an act of care, or a job well done can shape the entire group’s outcome.

Ultimately, students began to see themselves as essential members of their classroom community. They learned that being “better together” isn’t just a project name—it’s a mindset. Collaboration, empathy, and responsibility are not abstract values but lived experiences that make a community thrive.

As teachers, we observed just how powerful intentionally scaffolded student agency can be. When we say students *co-planned* the project, it wasn’t simply a circle of students raising their hands and sharing ideas—it involved the use of instructional and thinking routines that ensured everyone’s participation and made their thinking visible. Scaffolding happened at different levels—individually, in pairs, in small groups, and during whole-class discussions. Learning unfolded across all disciplines—from literacy, as students learned to write key words connected to the project, to science, as they conducted experiments to discover the perfect lemonade recipe for the cooks’ final product.

## Project Reflections from Teachers

*The Better Together project was a very special experience for our students. What stood out the most was how much ownership they had. Being able to ask questions that guided the inquiry and make decisions alongside us gave them a true sense of agency and purpose. They also discovered the importance of working together and valuing each other’s strengths. My class decided to dive deeper into the community of scientists ... They divided themselves into groups to research each question. The highlight of the project for me was watching them step into the role of scientists that they naturally are. They asked questions, formed hypotheses, investigated, reflected, and found some answers—truly living as scientists throughout the journey. It was beautiful to see how much confidence, empathy, and sense of belonging they gained*



*by experiencing what it really means to be part of a community.”*

—Stephanie Halpern, first grade teacher

*I think the Better Together project was especially meaningful for first graders. Even though the project already has a set theme, students have the opportunity to actively participate in each stage. For me, it strikes a nice balance between the teacher's voice and the students' voices, and it's also a wonderful project for developing social-emotional skills. By choosing one group of people to focus on, students can deeply explore what it means to be a community and to be part of one. Last year, my class chose to learn more about construction workers. They discovered how important it is for each worker to do their part, and how they plan and execute construction projects. The students were fascinated, some even visited construction sites outside of school to learn more and sent us pictures of workers they observed in their neighborhoods.*

—Cassia Baldez, first grade teacher

## **Acknowledgements**

We want to thank all teachers at Avenues The World School, São Paulo, who are part of this project: Aline Aguiar, Carollina Lacerda, Cassia Baldez, Cyane Fleck, Juliana Correa, Luis Larocca, Maria Antonia Ayres, Mariana Nogueira, Marina Braga, and Stephanie Halpern.



*Above: Oeiras students and staff (and two folks from the High Tech High Graduate School of Education!)*

# Lessons from Oeiras: Learner-Centered Education

*Eduardo Lomba*

*Associação Aprender XXI – Promoção e Desenvolvimento Educativo*

Let me begin personally. To gauge the significance of my work, I occasionally pause, close my eyes, and think of a student connected to that work. Let's consider Luísa, a seventh grader at one of the Oeiras schools involved in the ongoing school redesign movement I'll discuss here. I bring her to mind, feel the affection, and let emotion sharpen my clarity, focus, and sense of purpose. Then I ask myself: "Is this work truly learner-centered? Will it influence Luísa's learning and growth in any meaningful way—even indirectly?" If not, I reconsider what I'm doing. Sometimes we lose focus—or are forced to—spending valuable time on work that does not meaningfully impact students' lives and learning.

Schooling is among the world's greatest collective enterprises and has driven profound social transformation. With vast investments, countless regulations, and an army of teachers, it is one of the organized human activities that involves the largest number of people on a daily basis across the planet. The world would be worse off without it, yet the recipients of this tremendous collective effort often do not experience the impact on their learning, development, and identity that they otherwise might. For nearly two centuries, millions of children have remained passive, silent, and overlooked, unable to express their unique identities through their learning journeys. We may debate what best serves students, but although schools exist for them, it is clear that the prevailing school model is not, in many respects, student-

centered. Rather, it is teacher-centered, curriculum-centered, test-centered, grades-centered.

Across Portugal and in Oeiras—a municipality in the Lisbon metropolitan area with the country's highest literacy rate, and strong business, scientific, and technological development—many school leaders are acutely aware that the traditional model perpetuates practices that are ineffective for many students. It fails to develop essential skills, and coexists with—and resigns itself to—high levels of student dissatisfaction and disengagement.

These leaders recognize that the prevailing model is characterized by the isolation of teachers and students, rather than collaboration and cooperative construction; by inaction, listening, and passivity, rather than dialogue and creative action; and by the disconnection of schools from local learning opportunities, rather than meaningful engagement with the surrounding communities. They know this model is more about prioritizing testing, memorization, replication, grading, and ranking students, and less about deep, higher-order learning that fosters inquisitive and engaged minds and a lasting connection with knowledge. They are also acutely aware that this model is transforming motivated and creative professionals into worn-out, mechanical replicators and evaluators.

Worldwide, a growing number of schools are rethinking their educational approaches (Lomba, Alves & Cabral, 2022), and a consensus is emerging: We must move beyond the old industrial, mechanized, impersonal, one-size-fits-all model. We need more personalized, humanized, relational schools; vibrant and joyful learner-centered environments that foster authentic work, deep knowledge, and support students in shaping their own lives with identity and purpose.

The progressive and collective deepening of understanding about the obsolescence of the traditional school model, alongside the possibilities for improvement, sparked a desire for transformation that gave rise to the community-rooted school redesign movement in Oeiras' public schools. With the strong support of the Oeiras Municipal Department of Education, it began with three courageous women—Rita Rolo, Isabel Marques, and Alice Simões—visionary principals of three school clusters encompassing 11 schools and more than 4,500 K-12 students, within a broader municipal educational system of ten school clusters, 46 schools, and approximately 20,000 K-12 students. This movement is now advised by the Center for Love & Justice at High Tech High Graduate School of Education (HTH GSE) and the Learner-Centered Collaborative.

I asked Rita if there was a particular moment that convinced her she needed to make a radical change. Here's what she said:

There wasn't a moment of sudden revelation, but rather an accumulation of experiences, questions, and small frustrations that made it impossible to continue doing "more of the same." Seeking to transform the educational model was, above all, an act of responsibility and hope in the potential of students and teachers.

Isabel adds:

After so many years of hearing about putting the student at the center and about pedagogical differentiation, the realization that these principles have yet to translate into effective pedagogical and classroom changes demands the audacity to seek and embrace challenges that allow us to fulfill these objectives. We will only achieve this when we have the courage to change practices, giving professionals the necessary tools so that they feel comfortable implementing a true transformation of education.

And Alice observes:

This desire for transformation was not triggered by a single moment of inspiration, but by a continuous process of questioning and listening. As we recognized the gap between the school we have and the school our students need, it became clear that it was necessary to act with courage and imagine new ways to learn, teach, and lead.

The educational community of Oeiras aims to transform more than just a few schools. They want to build a vibrant, student-centered learning ecosystem across the municipality—one capable of inspiring communities throughout Portugal and beyond. Political leaders in Oeiras strongly support this vision.

Following discovery visits in March, the HTH GSE and the Learner-Centered Collaborative—organizations with which I now collaborate in implementing this vision—carefully designed a project spanning the next two years, framed within a long-term perspective. The project is contextualized to the local reality and envisions a sustained and progressive transformation. It begins on a small scale, with the hope of being extended to the entire municipal educational system, and with the vision of creating a community-based, learner-centered ecosystem in Oeiras.

After a Leadership Summit in July that brought together 28 teachers and three municipal leaders, we began working in November with the three school clusters led by Alice, Isabel, and Rita. These three school leaders trust one another, embody love- and learner-centered leadership, and share a bold vision for collective community transformation. During our visits, dozens of students passed by—students they knew personally, along with their stories, joys, and challenges. In every school we visited, there was a group of

changemakers with a strong collaborative spirit already engaged. There is a clear opportunity to accelerate what's already underway.

The Center for Love & Justice and the Learner-Centered Collaborative crafted experiences to center student voices, strengthen community ties, and develop leadership capacity. In a community gathering, parents, principals, teachers, the education councilor and his team came together to reflect on how a learner-centered vision for schools could be fostered. By valuing parents' insights, this moment marked a first step in building the trust between schools and families that is essential for transformation.

Teachers, coordinators, and the three principals who make up the change-leadership teams began developing leadership capacity, a shared vision, and the systemic conditions needed for lasting change. While envisioning a learner-centered school with more connected teachers, they explored project-based learning as a pathway to deeper learning.

In November, we brought students into the work—40 of them, from grades five to ten—placing their voices at the heart of the process and later sharing their ideas with parents and teachers. One guiding question shaped our work: How might we listen to and empower students to actively participate in reshaping the way we do school? Their eyes shone with anticipation, filled with hope for richer and more engaging school days.

The students' message was clear and resounding: They want to be co-designers, to have a say in how their learning and school life unfold. They want to learn deeply, in new and meaningful ways. They want their individuality and identities to be acknowledged, along with their interests. They shared dozens of personal interests that they may never have voiced at school before, interests we now hold dear and cherish. They want projects, authentic work, and opportunities to actively engage with the world, putting their ideas into practice. They seek more creation, more exploration, hands-on learning, experimentation, and field trips. They long for greater agency, deeper collaboration, richer relationships, and a stronger sense of purpose and meaning throughout their school journeys.

Among the many insightful comments shared by students, a few stood out for being strikingly direct:

- “More projects where we do what we enjoy”
- “More hands-on classes”
- “More activities and practical lessons”
- “More outdoor classes and experiments”
- “We can all learn from each other—teachers and students.”
- “I do not like when teachers... speak too much”
- “I like when teachers play with us”

- “Today I was able to share all the ideas I had inside me”
- “I discovered that there were more ways to teach”

We did not frame the discussion as a call for change, nor did we dwell on the shortcomings of the traditional school model. Yet on the very first day, Luísa penned this note on a Post-it:

“I wonder... is the broken school system actually going to fix itself for us? :(”

What more compelling plea could there be than Luísa’s question? And now? Now, Luísa, as you can see, the community of Oeiras has a plan to transform your school. For you, for your classmates, for your entire community. For this, we need your help, and that of your peers. Our work will not be finished until your school journey, and that of your classmates, is truly transformed for the better—with you, your learning, your growth, your identity, at the very heart of everything we do.

## References

Lomba, E. A., Alves, J. M., & Cabral, I. (2022). Systematic Literature Review of Innovative Schools: A Map and a Characterization from Which We Learn. *Education Sciences*, 12(10), 700. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12100700>





*Above: A PLC group poses for a selfie.*

# Learning from Practice: How Professional Learning Communities Transform Teaching

*Ramiro Seré*

*Escuela Técnica Roberto Rocca, Argentina*

On a Tuesday afternoon in the spring of 2019, a group of teachers stayed after the final bell rang. There was no external consultant in the room, no slideshow prepared by an expert. Instead, there were lesson plans spread across tables, notebooks filled with questions, and a shared concern: Why were some of our best ideas not translating into better learning for students?

One teacher who had just finished a project-based learning unit raised a stack of student reports. “I thought this project would work,” she said, flipping through the pages, “but most students just followed the steps without really understanding.” Another teacher nodded. “The same thing happened to me—they completed the task, but they didn’t take ownership.”

At the time, we had begun to notice a recurring pattern across our schools. Teachers regularly participated in courses, workshops, and conferences. These experiences were often inspiring—but once teachers returned to their classrooms, the impact rarely lasted. Daily routines, time pressure, and the isolation of individual practice made it difficult to achieve sustained change.

Not everyone was convinced that meeting after school to talk about practice would make a difference. Some teachers questioned the value of “just talking with colleagues” instead of receiving input from experts. Others were simply



*Above: A PLC group fills out a graphic organizer.*

exhausted. As one teacher put it: “I already have too much to do—how is this going to help me tomorrow in my class?”

Instead of searching for another external solution, we asked a different question: What if teacher learning started in our own classrooms?

## **Cultivating Our Professional Learning Community**

That question led us to experiment with professional learning communities (PLCs) across the Roberto Rocca Technical Schools Network.

Our first PLC meetings were simple—and sometimes messy. Teachers gathered after school with lesson plans, student work, and unresolved questions. There was no expert leading the session, and at times, that absence felt uncomfortable. Some meetings drifted into general comments or polite agreement. In others, teachers hesitated to share what had not worked.

We quickly realized that having time together was not enough—we needed to use that time differently.

Over time, these meetings developed a rhythm. Teachers came prepared to share evidence, rather than polished success stories. One math teacher brought a set of assessments and admitted, “I don’t understand why half the

class failed this question; I thought I explained it clearly.” Instead of offering quick advice, colleagues began asking questions: What exactly were students struggling with? What did their answers reveal? What could be tried next?

Together, they analyzed student work, discussed alternatives, and committed to small changes they would test in their classrooms. Reflection became collective rather than individual. The conversation shifted from what went wrong to what we could try next week.

This shift was not only methodological—it was deeply cultural. Teaching, which we had often experienced as a private act, started to become a shared practice. Teachers began to see themselves not only as instructors but as learners engaged in ongoing cycles of inquiry grounded in their own classrooms.

## **From Private Act to Shared Practice**

One of the most powerful—and challenging—changes was to make practice visible. Sharing unfinished work required trust, and that trust was not built overnight. In early meetings, some teachers brought only their “best” examples. Others stayed mostly silent. But over time, vulnerability became more common. A teacher would say, “This didn’t work at all—I need help thinking it through,” and that opened the door for deeper learning.

Not everything worked at first. Some meetings continued to drift into logistics. Others lacked focus or ended without clear next steps. We had to make explicit decisions to protect PLC time for learning—not administration—and to prioritize depth over speed. PLCs needed consistency, stable groups, and time to mature.

As the work strengthened locally, it expanded globally. Teachers from Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil began meeting around shared themes such as project-based learning, self-directed learning, and digital education. Despite different contexts, the conversations sounded surprisingly similar: concerns about student autonomy, questions about assessment, and the challenge of moving from activity to learning. Teachers often shared examples of students who completed projects successfully—building, presenting, or delivering final products—but showed limited understanding when asked to explain their reasoning, make connections, or transfer their learning to new situations. These cross-site exchanges reinforced a powerful idea—that teachers were not alone in their struggles.

Today, PLCs are a core practice in our schools. Teachers share a common pedagogical language, innovations spread more easily, and professional learning is embedded in daily work. Most importantly, students benefit from classrooms shaped by teachers who continuously learn with others.



*Above: A hybrid PLC session.*

## How Our PLC Works

PLCs are part of our regular school structure, not an extra initiative. In our schools, teachers meet at least four times a year, during the school day. Meeting times are coordinated based on teachers' schedules, but they always take place during class hours—never after the school day ends. Protecting this time within the workday reinforces the idea that professional learning is part of teaching, not an additional task.

Each PLC is made up of a small, consistent group of teachers—typically between four and eight—who share a common focus. Sometimes they teach the same subject or grade level; other times, they are connected by a shared pedagogical interest, such as project-based learning or student autonomy. Keeping groups small and stable helps build trust and allows conversations to deepen over time.

While there is no rigid script, our meetings tend to follow a simple and predictable structure:

- Opening (5–10 minutes): The group briefly reconnects and sets the focus for the session. One or two teachers introduce a specific problem of practice they want to explore.
- Examination of practice (40–50 minutes): During the core of the

meeting, teachers share concrete evidence—student work, assessment results, lesson plans, or classroom dilemmas. The group analyzes this evidence together, asking questions before offering suggestions.

- **Planning next actions (10–20 minutes):** Teachers identify one or two small changes to test in their classroom. These are intentionally manageable so they can be tried in the following weeks.
- **Closing (5–10 minutes):** The group reflects briefly on what was learned and, when relevant, connects it to ongoing work from previous meetings.

Each PLC is guided by a teacher who leads the community throughout the year. The role of this facilitator is not to provide answers, but to sustain the focus on learning, support productive dialogue, and ensure that conversations remain grounded in classroom evidence.

## Lessons We’ve Learned

**Start with real problems of practice.** PLCs work best when conversations begin with authentic classroom challenges, not abstract theory or generic goals.

**Make practice visible early.** Student work, lesson plans, and assessment tools anchor discussions in reality and prevent conversations from staying superficial.

**Protect the focus.** When PLC time turns into logistics or announcements, learning disappears. Clear norms help keep the work pedagogical.

**Go slow to go deep.** Trust, reflection, and improvement take time. PLCs cannot be rushed or compressed into occasional meetings.

**Accept discomfort as part of learning.** Sharing unfinished or unsuccessful work feels risky, but it is often where the most powerful learning happens.

**Think beyond one school.** Global or cross-site PLCs expand perspectives and remind teachers they are part of a larger professional community.

**Treat PLCs as a practice, not a program.** Their strength lies not in a prescribed structure, but in sustained habits of collaboration and inquiry.





*Above: First graders host a thank-you breakfast for their school's kitchen team as part of the Better Together project*



# Project Cards

*Teachers and Students  
High Tech High Schools  
and other Innovative Schools*

*Project Cards provide quick glimpses of inspiring projects designed by teachers and realized in collaboration with students.*

*Our full collection of Project Cards is available to download for free on our website, [hthgse.edu/unboxed](http://hthgse.edu/unboxed)*



**DINNER PARTY**  
Dan Allen, Art  
Stefan Soriano, Humanities  
Eleventh Grade  
High Tech High Media Arts

Students in eleventh grade Humanities and Art explored members of the San Diego community and researched their individual contributions to the greater San Diego region. Students created expressive dinner sets that visually communicated those initiatives or themes that these community members are known for. Finally, the exhibition found students hosting a dinner party where their dinner settings and individual menu creations were presented to the honored guests. The exhibition also built connections between these guests, all of whom have been identified by our students as significant “change makers” of our community.

**Teacher Reflection**

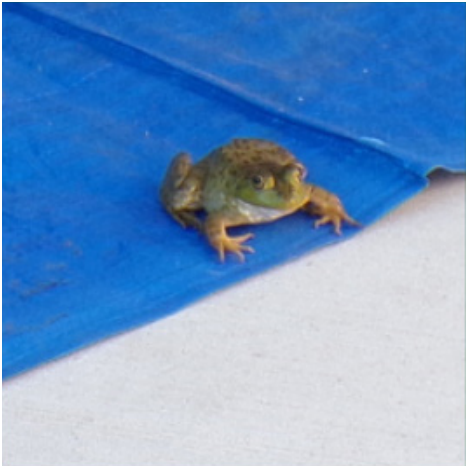
I learned how important it is to give students authentic audiences. Knowing that their honorees would eventually sit at a table and use the pieces they created raised the level of care, intention, and ownership throughout the entire process. The dinner-party exhibition format worked remarkably well—it created a genuine sense of community and gave students a memorable end goal. The combination of functional ceramics, food design, and storytelling proved to be a powerful moment. In future versions, I would build in more time for skill development before students begin their final dinner sets. While many students rose to the challenge, I could see that a longer period for experimenting with form, glaze, and construction techniques would allow them to develop more confidence and push their designs further. Overall, this project reaffirmed my belief that students thrive when they are asked to create work with purpose, context, and personal resonance. The semester showed me how learning becomes deeper and more joyful when it is rooted in real relationships and community.

*—Dan Allen*

**Student Reflection**

This project gave me the opportunity to explore a topic more deeply through collaboration. During the research phase, my group learned how to divide responsibilities, evaluate sources, and combine our ideas into a stronger collective vision. Although reaching agreement sometimes took time, the process helped us practice communication and problem-solving skills. The interview portion pushed us out of our comfort zones and made our learning feel more personal as we worked on asking meaningful questions and listening actively. Transforming our research into a physical artwork was challenging but rewarding, requiring flexibility and intentional decision-making. Seeing our finished pieces displayed alongside other groups’ work made the experience feel truly meaningful and showed how much we had grown both creatively and academically.

*—Santiago M.L.*



## **Frog Hopping Jubilee**

Katie Donovan

Dylan Cronin

Sixth Grade

Willows Intermediate

Students were tasked with calculating the total distance a live frog jumped over the course of three jumps. After collecting and recording their measurements, the data was shared with the entire class. Working in groups, students analyzed the class data and developed a statistical question that could be answered using the information collected. Each group then chose an appropriate type of statistical graph to represent the data and clearly display their findings. The completed graphs were assembled onto posters, which were displayed in the hallway outside the front office to showcase the students' work and understanding of data collection, analysis, and presentation.

In order to analyze the frog-jump data, students learned to calculate mode, medium, mean, and range of the data they collected as well as accurately showcase the data on a bar graph, histogram, box and whiskers, dot plot, or stem and leaf graph.

### **Teachers Reflection**

We had a great deal of fun with this project, and we believe the students did as well. Throughout the entire experience, students remained engaged and enthusiastic about each part of the project. Working with live frogs added an extra level of excitement and curiosity that kept students motivated and eager to participate. The students especially enjoyed analyzing and comparing the data collected from the different classes, which helped deepen their understanding of statistics and data interpretation. Based on the success of this project, next year we plan to take it a step further by having students formally present their posters to another grade level, giving them an opportunity to practice communication skills while sharing their learning with a broader audience.

*—Katie Donovan & Dylan Cronin*

### **Student Reflection**

This project was a lot of work but we had fun completing the challenge.

*—Josiah C.*





**Candy Election**  
Jason Haber  
Jared Leveson  
History  
Seventh Grade  
Princeton Day School

In the fall of 2025, five sections of seventh grade students at Princeton Day School created a Middle School Candy Election to find the best candy bar. Each student was assigned a role in a candy campaign, newspaper, or government. They set out to learn about the United States Government and elections and to share their knowledge with the rest of the middle school through the mock election. Five campaigns jockeyed to earn votes; they raised funds from donors which allowed them to advertise in the hallways, at school meetings, and online. Government officials regulated the election and created the voting infrastructure. Newspapers reported on the campaigns and latest events, and conducted and shared polling. At the end, students shared the election results with school, reflected on their experiences, and compared their election to real-world elections.

**Teacher Reflection**

I was lucky enough to attend the High Tech High PBL Design Camp, which is where I crafted this project. I enjoyed the freedom that this project gave students, allowing them to use their interests and strengths to help them benefit their team or group. The winning campaign focused on using fun activities to engage voters, which created a positive environment around the entire project. The election also required a lot of communication between groups and classes—often motivating students to collaborate during their study hall and other unstructured time. Questions and engagement from other grade levels were frequent and enthusiastic, contributing to the depth of the project.

*—Jason Haber*

**Students Reflection**

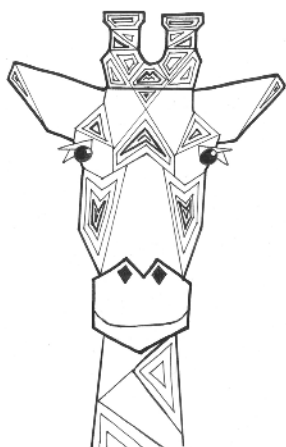
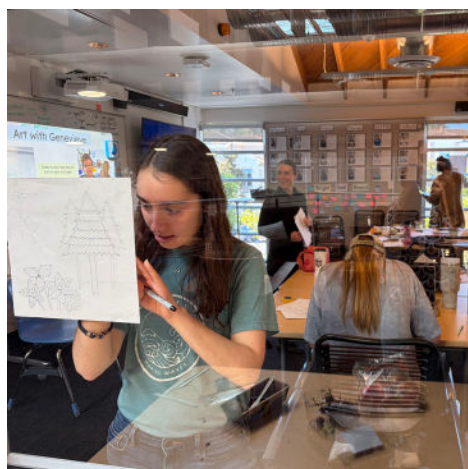
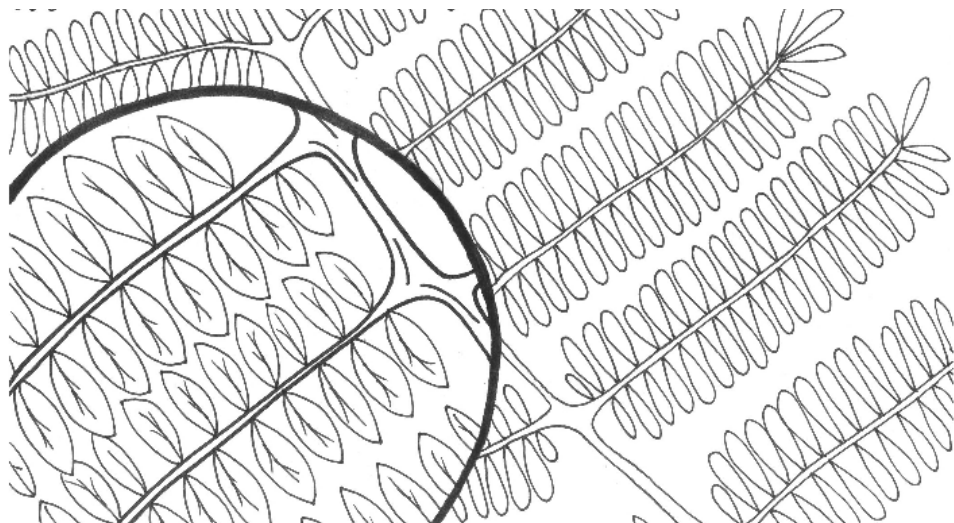
It almost felt real. It was cool getting to have the experience of actually thinking about our audience and all the little things.

*—Charlotte*

This project really changed my way of thinking about ways to work with different people and being open minded. It changed my thinking because I learned to look at everybody's perspective and I had to be willing to change my ideas.

*—Jennifer*





## **The Shape of Nature**

Michelle Jaconette  
San Diego Teacher Residency

This book is the culmination of a 12-week experiential learning project completed by Multiple Subjects Residents in the High Tech High San Diego Teacher Residency program. Designed to model interdisciplinary project-based learning, residents investigated how a grade-level geometry concept appears in the natural world and to represent those connections through a creative, informative coloring page for K-8 students. Each spread features an original illustration of a geometry concept paired with an explanatory paragraph that integrates Common Core Geometry Standards, NGSS cross-cutting concepts, and an acknowledgment of the Indigenous people whose land the natural element comes from. Together, these pages aim to spark curiosity in young learners while also inspiring teachers to design rich, interdisciplinary projects that connect ideas across subjects in meaningful and creative ways.

### **Teacher Reflection**

This project was transformational because it was the first time I have planned a project for graduate students. Designing an experience that residents could unpack as both students and teachers was a wonderful way to blend theory and practice. They got to experience all aspects of a project (launch, community partnership, core content, feedback and critique, exhibition) while simultaneously thinking about how their own teaching practice can be deepened through what they learned.

—Michelle Jaconette

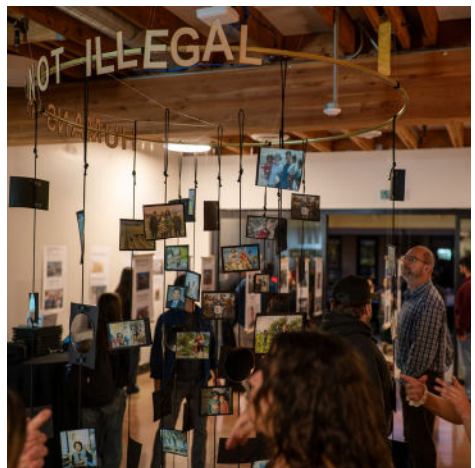
### **Student Reflections**

This learning experience really taught me the value in perseverance and choosing to represent my work in ways that truly reflect my own ideas. Over the course of this project, I cycled through 4 different ideas for what my art piece would look like, with each one being completely different from the other. At first, I tried to stick through what I felt was the “safe” option, and was ultimately unhappy with my design. However, after receiving feedback from my peers and other students, I decided to go with my gut, and ended up with a much more detailed art piece that I was proud of.

—Aaron Nguyen

I learned so much about the power of relationship building with students because I was the student who needed a strong relationship in order to succeed in this course. I found co-creating a rubric to be a new tool that really excited and engaged me in the work. This work gave me a unique sense of ownership but also a sense that I knew exactly what was expected of me for this project.

—Gina Barba





## **Borders and Belonging**

Elyce Jenkins

Ninth Grade

High Tech High Mesa

Borders and Belonging explores the history and present-day realities of immigration policy in the United States in order to better understand immigration enforcement practices shaping the country today. Students investigated five key topics: immigration enforcement and ICE, mass detention and deportation, border crossing and deterrence policies, DACA and Dreamers, and refugees and asylum seekers. Each topic followed a repeated inquiry structure: students first examined policy intentions by analyzing speeches, legislation, and official statements, and then explored the human impact of those policies through reporting and personal narratives. The project also included a family migration oral history unit, service learning with local immigrant support organizations including World Relief and Somali Bantu Association of America, and multiple forms of authentic civic writing such as letters to the editor, grant support letters, and advocacy letters to elected officials. The project culminated in a public exhibition where students designed interactive stations to share their learning with the community and invite visitors to engage with the history, policies, and human stories at the center of immigration in the United States.

### **Teacher Reflection**

One of the strongest aspects of this project was the role of community partnerships in helping students understand immigration as a human experience. Through their work with our partners, students spent time in ESL classes and helping with food distribution, and it was amazing to watch them see immigrants not just as subjects of policy or headlines, but as real people with stories, struggles, and strengths. That human connection made everything we were studying in class feel urgent and meaningful. Another thing that worked really well was the focus on civic engagement. Writing letters to the editor, advocacy letters to elected officials, and grant support letters for our partners gave students a real audience and purpose for their work. They had the tools and confidence to take action on issues they care about, instead of feeling helpless in the face of something as big as immigration policy.

*—Elyce Jenkins*

### **Student Reflection**

After Shawn Vandiver's visit, it became clear that asylum seekers face serious challenges like having their legal status and financial support suddenly stopped once they arrive in the U.S. Afghan Evac works to fight these injustices by advocating in courts and Congress to protect these vulnerable people and push back against policies that abandon them. This conversation shows that service and advocacy can mean standing up for others rights and pushing for government accountability, inspiring a person to be more aware and active in defending those who are marginalized and need help the most.

*—Donnell H.*



# Brick by Brick

## Shaping Spaces



**Brick by Brick**  
Alicia Trout, Engineering  
Guy MacLaury, Humanities  
Sierra Gillingham, Science  
Sixth Grade  
High Tech Middle North County

Sixth graders at High Tech Middle North County partnered with eight local, small businesses in North County. Small groups of students interviewed these partners, made documentaries about/for them. In Engineering they created mini-lego sets that were modeled after the businesses storefront and in Science made topographical maps that illustrated a change over time. Throughout the project, students dove deep into topics about population growth, city expansion, gentrification, the inevitability of change, and how to work together as a team to stay within a deadline. While designing their models, students focused on the architectural design, engineered build instructions, and 3D modeled and printed unique LEGO parts.

### Teacher Reflection

I've always wanted to create a project that's focused on the community. After I connected with and established eight different community partners, I saw instant buy-in with the students. They felt invested when they were tasked to work with their specific partner. There was no one else that could pull the weight of the products they were asked to make, so they bore the task and completed the work skillfully. I learned, through this project, how important community partners are, and how motivating they can be for students.

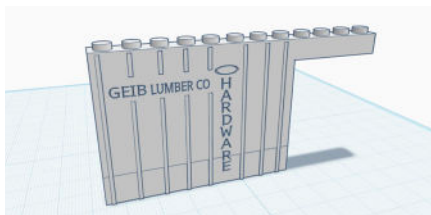
For teachers, I recommend finding multiple community partners that students can work with for the project. It can be a logistical nightmare creating all of the schedules, but in the end, students feel more invested with the project and find meaning much easier when they are out and about in their community.

*—Guy MacLaury*

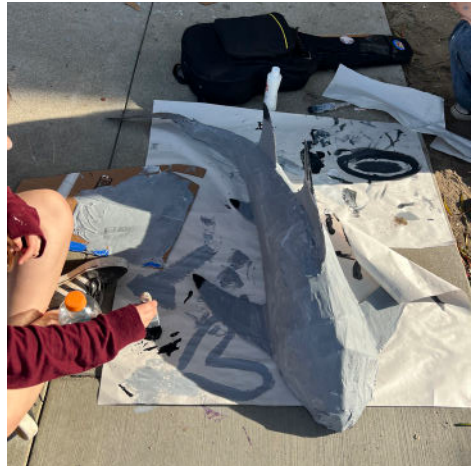
### Student Reflection

When we interviewed Lola's Mexican restaurant, I learned about change over time and that change can be good or bad for the business. While working on our Lego design, it was really important to have a good relationship with my team to be successful with our build. I had never designed a lego set before so it was new for me.

*—Evan*







## Oceans of Mystery

Caitlin Keane

Katie Pond

Science

Seventh Grade

High Tech Middle

During this project, students became marine scientists and designers as they explored extreme ecosystems like the deep sea and tide pools. They researched unusual organisms and applied proportional reasoning and scale factors to build accurate, scaled papier-mâché models of their species. Throughout the project, students engaged in hands-on labs, scientific writing, and interdisciplinary work across math, science, and art to investigate how organisms survive in harsh environments. They also wrote scientific reports explaining adaptations and ecosystem interactions while examining how changes to one part of a system can impact the whole. At our exhibition, students shared their models and learning with an authentic audience, helping others understand ecosystems as dynamic systems shaped by scale, structure, and interactions.

### Teacher Reflection

I loved watching students step into the role of marine scientists, mathematicians, and artists. This project gave me the chance to see my students' strengths and challenges in new ways, while also offering them meaningful choices in their work. One of the biggest wins was having students create smaller prototype models before jumping into their final builds. This gave them space to test what was doable, what was challenging, and how to problem-solve before committing to a larger scale. Modeling this process myself by creating prototypes in advance was also incredibly helpful.

Giving students choice in their final organism led to high engagement, though a few definitely bit off more than they could chew. One group even created a 13-foot goblin shark, which required some extra time after school to complete. Between that, the tidepool field trip to La Jolla Shores, and the squid dissection early in the unit, there were so many moments that sparked curiosity and excitement.

This project was also deeply collaborative. I worked closely with my content partner, Katie Pond, and we spent hours planning, prototyping, and learning together. I truly could not have done this without her.

If I were to do this again, I would build in more structured opportunities for critique and revision, especially during the modeling phase. I would also set clearer size parameters and guide students toward organisms with more manageable shapes. Overall, this project reinforced the power of combining fieldwork, creativity, and real-world application.

—Caitlin Keane





**Western Films**  
Western Films  
Chris Mutter, Multimedia  
Jacob Erickson, English  
Twelfth Grade  
High Tech High International

Over the course of a semester, students took a deep dive into the Western genre. In English students learned about western expansion, the barbed wire wars, read “No Country for Old Men,” and each student wrote their own western scripts. Simultaneously in Digital Video Communications students watched a wide variety of western films and practiced filming stylized western mini-scenes so that they could better understand the genre. The top three scripts were selected and production teams were created of seven to eight students. Groups filmed in Old Town San Diego, Sunset Cliffs, and Lone Pine’s Historic Alabama Hills.

While each student learned the direct content from the western genre and the production process, some of the more valuable moments came from the development of the soft skills, and life skills, needed to complete such an in-depth project. Real world connections were made with businesses hundreds of miles away that would eventually let us film on site for free. Large student groups led to interpersonal problems which were solved through honest, productive, and sometimes uncomfortable conversations. Students who had never camped survived near freezing temperatures, sustained wind gusts, and a large snake roaming the campground. All in all it was a project that the students, educators, and volunteers who were involved will soon not forget.

**Teacher Reflection**

I was terrified to commit to a project that spans an entire semester, especially one where the groups were so large (up to eight students). While I don’t think a semester-long project is something that I want to do every year, I do feel that there is value in having such an immersive theme to focus on. Additionally, my fear with the large groups was the interpersonal issues that I knew would arise between students. While those issues caused some stress they also provided safe and guided opportunities for students to learn how honesty and kind conversations can lead to conflict resolution and project success.

*—Chris Mutter*

**Student Reflection**

Best project throughout all of my high school years. It felt like we were actually producers making a big film. We took it seriously and had to plan a lot of the details that we wouldn’t normally think about. It didn’t feel like a high school project.

*—Junior M.*





**Better Together**  
Ingrid Puche  
Milena Carmona  
First Grade  
Avenues The World School, São Paulo

Four first grade classes launched a shared project guided by the question, “What makes up a community?” Rather than defining the word for students, teachers filled the room with photos and videos of people working together and asked what they noticed. From there, students identified groups they wanted to know more about. They decided on builders, firefighters, cooks, and scientists. Each class chose a group to focus on, generated their own research questions, planned how to find answers, and carried out fieldwork (for example, classes visited a neuroscience lab, a construction site, a fire station, and the school kitchen). Each class then took action in the role they had studied: the scientists hosted a science fair, the builders designed a prototype to stabilize a sinking playground toy, the firefighters organized a mini fire drill for all first graders, and the cooks hosted a thank-you breakfast for the school kitchen team.

### **Teacher Reflection**

What stood out the most was how much ownership students had. Being able to ask questions that guided the inquiry and make decisions alongside us gave them a sense of agency and purpose. My class decided to dive deeper into the community of scientists. The highlight of the project for me was watching them step into the role of scientists that they naturally are. They asked questions, formed hypotheses, investigated, reflected, and found some answers—truly living as scientists throughout the journey.

*—Stephanie Halpern, Head Teacher*

### **Student Reflection**

One special memory was when we visited Instituto Butantã. It was really fun. I was with my friends and my class, and I saw lots of animals and scientists. They help everyone there, and they help each other. They also helped answer our questions. Being there as a group was special because we were learning as a group, as a community.

*— B.Fetter*

I really liked it when we cooked for our school cooking team. This was our final product. We, the kids, cooked for the people who cook for us. I remember that I brought a picnic towel from home, and we also made pink lemonade. We worked as a community to plan everything, make the cake and the lemonade, and bring things for the picnic. I think this was really important.

*— E. Rezende*





*Above: A 1:1 check-in in a hallway.*

# The Butterfly Strategy: A Powerful Approach to Chronic Absenteeism

*Jon Green  
New Visions for Public Schools*

**D**awn Berry was the new kid. She had just transferred to a small high school in the Bronx. Don't even ask about her experience at her former school. But here she was, in the hallway between periods, meeting with Assistant Principal (AP) Ian, who was carrying some official looking document. "Dawn Berry?" asked Ian. "Yup that's me," Dawn said.

Ian handed her the document. On the front was a sea of red colored tables and numbers documenting Dawn's spectacularly poor attendance since starting high school in Brooklyn a year and a half ago. "Let's talk about your attendance," said Ian. "Were you absent last Thursday?" Dawn flipped the document over to reveal a calendar with each month of the school year and all her absences highlighted with a little red x. "Wait, I was here last Thursday," Dawn said, suddenly remembering. Ian thanked her, circled the date, and told her that once corroborated, her absence would be reversed.

So began a weekly meet up, usually in the hallway, between Dawn and AP Ian. Ian always had the piece of paper and was always surprisingly curious about Dawn, eager to help her improve her attendance. Dawn started to notice she looked forward to these check-ins. No one at any of her former schools had ever seemed to notice her.

## The Framework

The Bronx school of 320 students where Dawn and Ian have their check-ins is part of a New Visions Network pilot implementing the “butterfly strategy.” At the heart of this strategy is a consistent, weekly, 1:1 attendance meeting between a chronically absent student and their attendance point person.

Using this strategy, New Visions for Public Schools, based in New York City, has lowered chronic absenteeism for a subset of students who have contributed to the increase in absenteeism since the pandemic. These students, known as “butterflies,” accrue at least 1 absence per week for the majority of any 10-week period. In the fall of 2023, an attendance team in the Bronx discovered that these students responded surprisingly well to weekly, data-driven, 1:1 check-ins with the same adult. The learning from this team spread to 4 sister schools, and by the fall of 2024, 12 pilot schools signed up to implement the strategy.

In 2025 the project scaled to 25 schools, representing 12,388 students across 4 boroughs. In 2024 the strategy yielded promising results, which included:

- 83% of the pilot schools met or exceeded their chronic absenteeism reduction Consolidated Education Plan (CEP) target (10 of 12 schools).
- The 5 pilot schools located in the Bronx averaged a 15% year-over-year reduction in chronic absenteeism. This has resulted in a 32% average chronic absenteeism rate for the 2024-25 school year compared to the 46% rate for non-pilot schools in the Bronx.
- Bronx Academy for Health Careers, 1 of the 5 Bronx pilot schools, achieved a 28.4% chronic absenteeism rate. This rate is lower than any other Bronx network school.

The 1:1 check-ins work because they ground a conversation about absenteeism in data. The discourse is localized, specific, and tethered to the reality of weekly changes in attendance. Moreover, the act of sitting with a student weekly and analyzing their recurrent patterns unlocks the stories behind their absenteeism. In this structure, any agreement or intervention is responsive to a shared understanding of the root problem.

In many schools, attendance incentives like pizza parties are based on assumptions about why students are not coming to school. These assumptions, however well-intended, are often not grounded in the insights gleaned from a weekly conversation with a student about their attendance struggles.

Dawn Berry presents a good case study. When Dawn entered her current school in March 2025, she had a 35% attendance average and only a few summer school credits to her name. Now, she is an “off-track” 11th grader who is hovering around an 85% attendance average. That is, by January 30,

2026, she had missed 13 days of school out of a total of 89.

Dawn's current and former attendance rate put her in the category of "chronically absent." To get out of this category, she would need 90% attendance. Prioritized outreach is typically based on these blanket designations (e.g., chronically absent = < 90% YTD), and these designations typically group students like Dawn into intervention lanes (e.g., letters home, incentives, family conferences) that focus on re-engagement. But here's the thing: Dawn does not have an engagement problem. She has an extremely tenuous home situation that is not going to get less complicated. A pizza party is not going to work.

Dawn continues to exhibit chronically absent behavior, but underneath this bleak designation is a student who has turned a corner academically and found belonging at her new school. Initial high school years, marked by extreme levels of absenteeism, relegated Dawn to a cycle of multi-term failure and non-matriculation. Last year, Dawn's absences interrupted 19 or more of the school's 37 instructional weeks. This year, her absences have affected fewer than 9 of the 18 instructional weeks that have transpired to date. That means Dawn is banking more complete weeks of instruction this year. These blocks of week-on-week uninterrupted learning have helped Dawn achieve her most successful high school term to date.

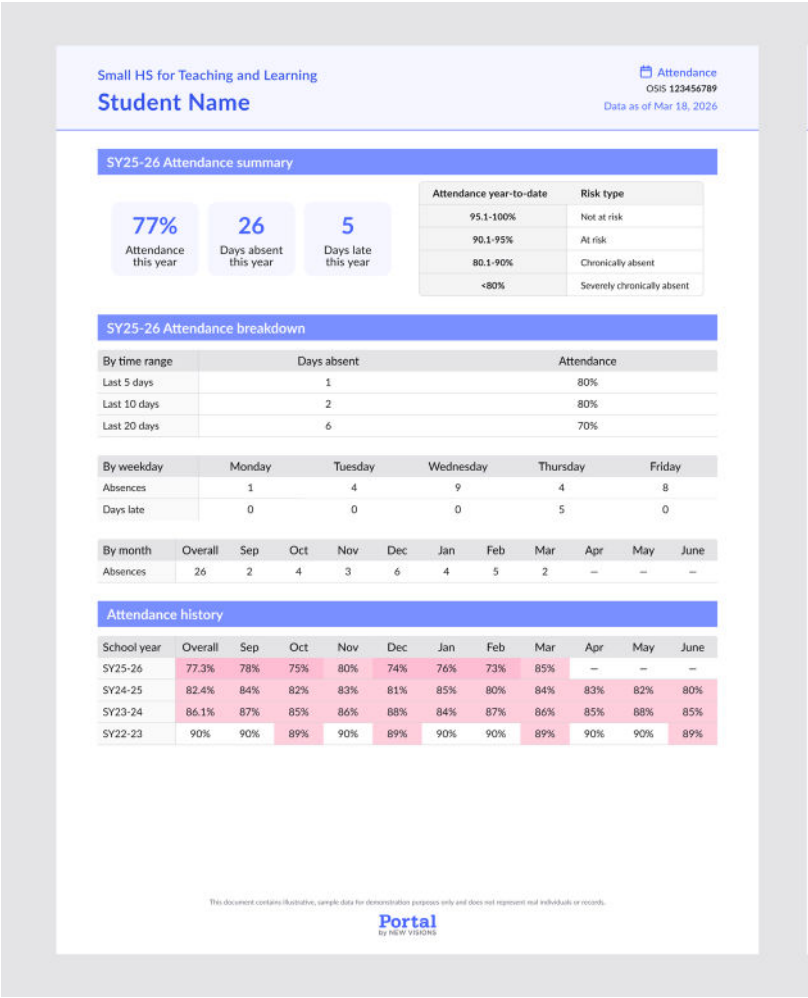
## **Data Routines to Identify Butterflies**

Using an established routine, New Visions coaches pull all active students' data within a criteria band prior to each interval. The criteria is somewhat situational. For example, New York City experienced a massive snow storm that spiked chronic absenteeism rates the week of February 23, 2026. The weather event required coaches to adjust the criteria in order to rule out students who were suddenly deemed chronically absent because of the storm.

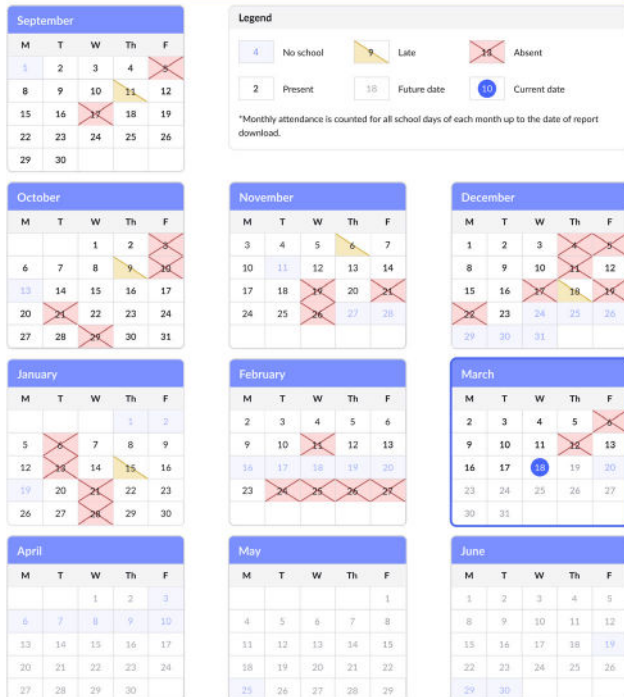
Spring 2026 data pull criteria look like this:

Students within the 8–13 year-to-date (YTD) absence band who also have 1 or more absences in 5 of the last 9 school weeks. These absences occurred within the 9 significant weeks of instruction from 12/01–02/23, excluding a week of testing in January and the two-day week before Christmas break.

These students are the butterflies.



## SY25-26 Attendance breakdown by month



This document contains illustrative, sample data for demonstration purposes only and does not represent real individuals or records.

Portal  
by NEW VISIONS

*Above: Weekly Attendance Snapshot, Page 2.*

plans and monitor actions.

AP Ian became Dawn's point person because he was charged with adding late admitted chronically absent students to his caseload that spring. The logic of assignments is governed by the school site. Many pilot schools assign the adult closest to the student in terms of role (e.g., their section teacher, their grade's school aide, their school counselor, etc). Typically the admin picks up the slack and takes butterfly students like Dawn who aren't obviously connected to an attendance point person.

### Step 1: Clerical Prep

The attendance point person prints out a weekly attendance snapshot from



the New Visions portal. The snapshot displays attendance trends in 5, 10, and 20-day intervals, patterns of absences by day of week, a table showing historical monthly averages that reaches back to middle school, and a highly visible monthly calendar graphic with red X marks for dates absent and yellow slash lines for dates with lateness.

### **Step 2: Data Prep**

The adult reviews the data before meeting the student, noting areas to celebrate (how many absences, marginal comparative gains), and patterns to investigate. For example, the attendance point person might jot down a note to ask the student: “Your absence last Thursday, does this have anything to do with what you were dealing with in November when you (x, y, or z)? Do we need a new solution or is the old plan working?”

Data pulls, completed by the New Visions School Support Team coaches, allow school teams to set goals against a baseline and prioritize check-ins for students who are sliding away from this end of the interval goal. Coaches track 0, 1, 2, or 3+ absences over multiple 10-day blocks within the interval so the point person has sightlines into where they need to focus efforts for the coming week.

### **Step 3: Anticipating the When and Where**

Equipped with these notes, the point person checks to see if the student has been marked present that morning. If yes, the point person also checks the student’s bell schedule and finds the student in between classes or during a free period. Meeting the student where they are makes this exchange less officious and increases the likelihood the conversation happens.

### **Step 4: The Check-in**

If the point person’s prep work reveals that the student’s attendance is excellent, the check-in can happen in the hallway. On the other hand, if a student is struggling with absenteeism, the butterfly check-in will require a private office, classroom, or empty stairwell space.

The following guidelines for a butterfly check-in are based on observing shared strategies employed by the most effective point people in the pilot last year. These point people held a caseload of 10–15 students under the threshold of 18 total absences by the end of the school year.

Check-ins work like this: The student holds the attendance snapshot and reviews the data while the point person asks the student to check its accuracy, acknowledging that sometimes it can be fallible. Being open to the record being wrong is an excellent way to build trust. It is also helpful for the point person to resist letting the conversation get bogged down by discrepancies. Otherwise, students can get stuck on the inaccuracies and fail to see the bigger picture. Then the point person opens the conversation with a caring,

asset-based prompt that is grounded in data from the attendance snapshot (“You didn’t miss any school last week!”). There is always a silver lining to be found in attendance data. This could look like acknowledging the student’s history of strong attendance from middle school, or that they were absent fewer Fridays this month than last.

Next, the point person leads a dialogue. They verify accuracy (“Were you absent last Tuesday or is this a mistake?”), probe root causes (“Is the headache that made you absent a one-time thing or a recurring problem?”), and forecast the week ahead (“Remember, you have a mid-term exam on Friday, and it might be extremely cold that morning. So wear a coat because you usually don’t come to school when it’s this cold.”). They summarize a concrete plan, which the student restates to confirm their commitment (“Yup, I will remember a coat for Friday.”). Intentionally shifting agency to the student during the conversation is a throughline of the practice.

On the following page is a pacing guide that helps direct the initial series of check-ins. The sequence is designed to develop trust over time. Veteran point people combine many of the steps below into a single check-in.

### **Step 5: Documentation**

Documenting the essential elements of a 1:1 check-in is a key part of the process but comes with its own set of challenges. The good news is that attendance point people sit on attendance teams that convene weekly for 30–45 mins. The first 10 minutes of these meetings is spent jotting notes into the New Visions Portal so that the check-in data is organized by date under the student’s name and ID. Caseloads vary but point people typically have between 2 and 12 students max. Students are assigned to point people based on a range of criteria, including relationship and schedule.

## **Intervals and Strategy**

There are two 8–10 week interval windows, and several rationales for this. First, it takes 4–6 weeks of attendance data to spot the weekly trends needed to select the right students. Second, constant check-ins are too hard for pilot schools to sustain for more than 8–10 weeks, and morale is critical to the success of this model. Finally, having two intervals allows schools to adjust which students receive the intervention, based on the changing nature of need across the school year.

Pilot schools strategically situate the intervals to ensure that there is still time to correct sliding performance before final grades. Therefore, the two intervals take place from mid-November through January and then again from mid-March through June. When you factor in the holidays, these two windows amount to roughly 8–10 instructional weeks, one in the fall and the other in the spring.

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 1 Topic:</b>        | <b>Action Goal:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Communication Goal</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Check for Accuracy          | Student reviews the data and identifies any inaccuracies in the attendance record                                                                                                                                       | We take you seriously. We want to correct the record and identify our errors. The data we review weekly needs to be a true and trusted record.                                                                                                             |
| <b>Week 2 Topic:</b>        | <b>Action Goal:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Communication Goal</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Uncover Reasons for Absence | Point person elevates patterns of absenteeism in the data, and asks probing questions that arise from the data in order to uncover specific barriers                                                                    | We are concerned about these absences and want to start whatever plan we develop from a shared understanding of the problem.                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Week 3 Topic:</b>        | <b>Action Goal:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Communication Goal</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Forecast                    | Point person and student anticipate potential pitfalls in a calendar review of the coming week of school (ex. doc appts, weather, trips, responsibilities)                                                              | We take your challenges (however small) seriously and want to make a detailed plan that is transparent, specific, and realistically trusted.                                                                                                               |
| <b>Week 4 Topic:</b>        | <b>Action Goal:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Communication Goal</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Mitigate & Monitor          | Student and point person engage in a curious shared interrogation of why absences did or didn't happen the week prior. Absences are puzzles to be solved and non-absences need to be equally understood and championed. | We want to solve (not judge) for the setbacks and champion the hard won gains when a week, and then a set of weeks. are completed without absence. Regardless, we want to understand the story behind the data and support you in building on small gains. |

*Above: Check-in pacing guide*

**Pro tip:** It is almost impossible to launch a sustained 1:1 check-in if your school is carrying dozens of non-attending active students on register. These students need to be addressed early in the year to free up space for the 1:1 check-ins to flourish. This is yet another reason to delay the fall interval until mid-November.

It's also worth prioritizing students in the middle of the spectrum, rather than those who are long-term absent. Doing so leads to more sustainable action. Staff can get deflated trying to do check-ins with students who are severely or persistently absent, which can undermine the whole initiative.

## **Student Selection**

Only a subset of chronically absent students are responsive to weekly 1:1 check-ins. Any chronically absent data set includes both acutely and consistently absent students. Acutely absent students are out periodically but do not need a weekly check-in to address the suspension, illness, or holiday that kept them out of school. Also in this group are a small subset of students who are commonly referred to as school-phobic or avoidant. School-phobic students do not benefit from weekly check-ins because, as they themselves report, they do not want to be at their current school. These students often need a different set of support conversations to re-engage with school or find a new school setting.

But it is the consistently absent students—those who are absent at least once per week for the majority of any 10-week period—that are more receptive to this intervention. They are the “right fit” candidate for this intervention, or what the Attendance Playbook identifies as students with “minor barriers.” These students are not opposed to school, but forces outside of school consistently undermine their ability to bank a week of uninterrupted learning.

1:1 check-ins offer a space to forge a supportive relationship with an adult that holds high expectations and follows up consistently and supportively. Baked into this structure are layers of sustained attention, accountability, and relational caring. For students like Dawn, the 1:1 check-in is a shocking revelation. Or, as AP Ian shared, “It never occurred to Dawn that someone cared that much if she came to school or not.”

## **Conclusion**

The butterfly strategy is not a neutral clerical effort of inputs and tallied outreach logs, but rather an approach that communicates a stance about attendance. It sends the following messages:

- We take attendance seriously.
- We go to great lengths to ensure students are coming to school.
- We pay attention and care enough to check in when an absence occurs.
- We are building strong adult-student relationships.

Week after week, Dawn sees the relationship between her solid weeks of attendance with her higher credit earn rate and likelihood for on-time graduation. When students like Dawn receive interventions rooted in specificity and observation, they are met with the targeted support necessary to address the true barriers to their attendance, which improves their presence in school and enables them to learn and thrive.



*Above: Students in the hallway.*





# Want to Raise Attendance?

## Prioritize Relationships, Not Rewards

Amanda Meyer  
CORE Districts

Sofi Frankowski  
RAISE Network

**I** *Imagine a fourth grader rushing to get ready for school in the morning. “Please, Mama, we have to go,” Roberto implores as he zips his backpack. He and his mother are staying with a family friend miles from his elementary school, with no access to a bus route. His mother has been working nights, sometimes too tired to drive him safely to school in the morning. Roberto knows his class is trying to earn a perfect attendance pizza party, and he is eager to do his part. On this day, his mother’s friend drops him off mid-morning. When he walks into the classroom, a few students glare at him. Someone whispers that the class across the hall won because Roberto wasn’t there. Roberto slides into his seat, cheeks flushed, unsure whether he should explain what happened or just stay quiet.*

Roberto is not alone in struggling to make it to school. Across the U.S., more than one in five students ended the 2024–25 school year chronically absent (Malkus, 2025). For some student groups, such as homeless and foster youth, the number is closer to one in three (Lambert et al., 2025). Chronic absenteeism, typically defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days, has well-documented long-term consequences, including lower academic achievement, reduced engagement, and increased risk of dropout (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2019; Ready, 2010). Although absenteeism has declined from pandemic-era highs, rates remain far above pre-pandemic levels and progress has slowed (Lambert et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2025). Many schools and districts have responded to this challenge by ramping up

attendance incentives such as prizes, parties, or special privileges intended to draw students to school. These approaches often withhold a positive experience until an absent student behaves differently, reflecting a common belief that the right reward will motivate students to attend more consistently. Unfortunately, research points to a mismatch between this solution and the nature of the problem. The most frequent drivers of absenteeism include illness, transportation gaps, housing instability, economic hardship, and immigration-related concerns, often in combination (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Shankar et al., 2025; Schreiber, 2024). When schools treat attendance as a behavior to reward rather than as a signal to investigate, they limit their ability to learn why students are absent and how to respond.

Some districts are beginning to take a more relational approach to attendance, focusing on building trust with students and families in order to better address systemic barriers. For example, in the Raising Attendance and Improving Student Engagement (RAISE) Network, a multi-district improvement network in California, schools use data-driven outreach routines to identify which barriers most affect their students. While schools cannot eliminate all of the conditions that impact attendance, they can build trusting relationships that make effective responses possible. Incentives are not a pillar of this approach; in some cases, they may even undermine it. This article examines why attendance incentives can be so appealing, why research suggests they should largely be avoided, and why relationship-centered approaches better support lasting and equitable improvements in attendance.

## **Why We Like Incentives... And Why They Fall Short**

Incentives are a common response to absenteeism because they feel practical and positive in the face of a complex challenge. They offer educators a tangible action step that feels caring rather than punitive. Yet this intuitive appeal can obscure a key question: Do incentives actually work as intended? Research across multiple fields suggests incentives often fail to produce sustained change in complex behaviors. For example, an analysis of recent evidence on incentives and children's food choices found that while rewards increased consumption in the short term, children's eating patterns returned to baseline once incentives were removed (Belot & James, 2022). Attendance research shows similar patterns. Robinson et al. (2021) found that pre-announced attendance awards had no impact, and that students with strong attendance who received surprise awards actually attended less afterward. Even setting aside the question of whether incentives reliably produce sustained changes in behavior, there are additional reasons incentive-based approaches can undermine relationships and hinder schools' attendance improvement efforts. The following table explains why:

| WHY INCENTIVES ARE APPEALING                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | WHY THEY SHOULD BE AVOIDED                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Incentives are intuitive...</b><br/> Rewarding desired behavior aligns with common assumptions about motivation and familiar traditions in schooling. Many educators themselves received those perfect attendance certificates or “my child made honor roll” bumper stickers and understandably carry those traditions forward.</p>                        | <p><b>... but they don’t uncover or address systemic barriers.</b><br/> Students facing systemic barriers don’t come to school for a prize; they come when their families’ needs are met and school feels valuable. The mismatch between root causes and incentives as a solution is most evident in elementary schools, where students have little control over how and when they get to school.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>Incentives feel good...</b><br/> Educators trying to address attendance with compassion would much rather rely on praise than punishment. Seeing students smile when they get a treat or earn a privilege provides instant positive feedback for caring adults. In the face of a complex, demoralizing problem, those joyful moments can feel hopeful.</p> | <p><b>...but only for those who get to participate.</b><br/> Incentives typically reward students facing fewer systemic barriers while undermining belonging for the most vulnerable. This matters as rates of chronic health conditions rise: Nearly 30 percent of U.S. youth now live with a chronic condition such as asthma, diabetes, or lupus, with higher prevalence among families facing economic hardship (Wisk &amp; Sharma, 2025). Classwide-incentives can publicly shame students who miss school for health reasons or external barriers beyond their control. Holding fun activities only for some students undermines efforts to make school a place where all kids can feel they belong.</p> |

| WHY INCENTIVES ARE APPEALING                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | WHY THEY SHOULD BE AVOIDED                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Incentives are intended to target individual motivation...</b></p> <p>Schools often believe absences stem from students not wanting to attend school. While illness is the most frequently recorded reason for absence, educators sometimes suspect families are not being fully honest. Without strong relationships, it is difficult to distinguish between a lack of desire to attend and unspoken needs. When the problem is viewed as a motivational one, incentives seem to be a reasonable way to entice students to school.</p> | <p><b>...but they send problematic messages and erode norms.</b></p> <p>Motivation researchers have found that students are more motivated when they see school as meaningful, relevant, or connected to their lives and goals (Lazowski &amp; Hulleman, 2016). When schools offer rewards for showing up, students learn that the reason to attend school is the reward, not the learning or relationships school provides. At the secondary level, when students have more agency over getting to school, incentives can backfire by unintentionally signaling that consistent attendance is exceptional rather than expected (Robinson et al. 2021).</p> |
| <p><b>Incentives are affordable and easy...</b></p> <p>For schools with limited capacity, it is far easier to offer a small reward than to meet students' material needs or address the deeper issues with instruction, school culture, and belonging that can lead to disconnection.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p><b>...but they consume our most precious resources: time and attention.</b></p> <p>Administrators and attendance teams often spend significant time planning and managing the logistical details of incentive initiatives—time that could instead be used to understand and address students' circumstances. When teams are lucky to meet for an hour per week, investing that time in low-impact incentive strategies is costly. What other, more effective strategies are they not leaving energy for?</p>                                                                                                                                             |

Some educators, including those in networks like RAISE, are already questioning whether incentives are worth the effort. During a recent RAISE convening, teams noted that reward programs are complicated to manage, produce uneven results, or lose momentum over time. Some schools quietly phase them out after a few cycles when participation drops, the impact is unclear, or other initiatives take priority. Even when incentives do produce short-term compliance, they rarely deepen understanding of why students were absent or improve conditions shaping future attendance. The skepticism educators express toward incentives is a sign that they are paying attention to results and looking for approaches that produce more meaningful and lasting change. If incentives fall short, the question becomes: What does a more effective approach look like in practice?

## Cultivating Attendance through Relationships, Not Rewards

The first step toward reducing reliance on incentives is to shift from asking, “How do we incentivize students to come?” to “How do we build the trust and understanding needed to help students be here?” Research consistently links attendance to school climate, belonging, and relationships, and a recent study from the University of Chicago found attendance is now even more strongly associated with school climate than before the pandemic (Allensworth et al., 2026). Rethinking attendance incentives shifts the focus away from individual student motivation and toward the environment created by school practice. Students are more likely to want to be at school when they feel safe, seen, and connected, and when learning feels meaningful. Strong relationships with students and families also give educators the insight and access needed to identify and address material barriers such as transportation, health needs, or housing instability. Engagement and trust are not just outcomes of good attendance work; they are fundamental to schools’ ability to detect needs and respond effectively.

These approaches are not theoretical. Schools across contexts are already testing ways to make their attendance improvement strategy more relational and responsive.

### Case Study: Using Resources to Address Systemic Barriers

*A week before the start of the 2025–26 school year, Reef-Sunset Unified held a Back to School Extravaganza where all families were offered free resources targeted to specific barriers to attendance. Resources included:*

- *Immunizations, which cleared students to enroll and prevented illness during the year.*
- *Haircuts, which built confidence students needed to meet their new classmates.*
- *Backpacks and school supplies, which equipped students for learning.*
- *Physicals, which enabled students to join sports teams.*
- *Gas cards and bus passes, which expanded families’ transportation options.*



*Instead of offering incentives to a select few, this district created a relational community experience that also made vital resources accessible to all families who needed them, addressing some of the material, logistical, and social barriers students face in getting to school.*

Below are four strategies that support attendance through relationships, rather than incentives:

## **1. Create Joy and Purpose through School and Classroom Rituals**

### **Examples:**

- Fun morning meeting or circle time traditions (e.g., Monday Shares or Friday Shout-Outs)
- Personalized handshakes with each student at the classroom door
- Spontaneous class- or school-wide dance parties
- Inviting every adult in the building to teach an expanded learning course around their personal interests, connecting students with adults in new ways, and giving them a fun reason to come to school
- Offering clubs or other gathering times during the day for unexpected activities like nail painting, basketball, or gaming with adults
- Daily leadership opportunities where each child has a valued role (line leader, tech helper, classroom greeter).

**Why it works:** Rituals create joy, predictability, and shared responsibility, without relying on extrinsic rewards. Everyday fun experiences make being at school its own reward. This strategy differs from the way schools commonly use attendance incentives by making positive experiences accessible to every student who is at school, not just those who have achieved a particular attendance threshold or won a competition. While fun rituals themselves do not necessarily uncover or address barriers to attendance, they do help build the trusting relationships with adults that chronically absent students need.

### **Case Study: Making Learning the Reward**

*Chico Country Day School created “Wonder Hour,” a schoolwide twist on the more widely known Genius Hour model often used in high school settings (Krebs & Zvi, 2025). On designated days, students choose from a menu of hands-on, curiosity-driven projects guided by teachers, with older students supporting younger peers. Students choose from activities throughout the building, working across grade levels and even visiting their prior teachers. Importantly, the school schedules Wonder Hour on days with historically lower attendance, such as Mondays, Fridays, and days near school breaks. Rather than offering prizes for attendance, Chico Country Day redesigned the learning experience itself, creating a routine that students eagerly anticipate and making school a place students want to be.*

## 2. Assign a Trusted Adult “Anchor”

### Example:

- Pair every focal student with a go-to adult (teacher, counselor, aide, coach) for daily or weekly 2–5 minute check-ins. Use check-ins to celebrate small wins and note absences in a warm, non-punitive way (“We missed you yesterday!”)

**Why it works:** Trusted relationships increase belonging and surface attendance barriers. A rigorous evaluation of the Check & Connect program within the Chicago Public Schools showed that sustained mentoring relationships reduced absenteeism for students in grades 5–7, suggesting mentoring can be effective for older students (Guyran et al., 2020).

### Case Study: Data-based weekly check-ins in the hallway

*New Visions for Public Schools identified a segment of moderately chronically absent students with a particular pattern of sporadic attendance (Green, 2026). They developed a protocol to assign each of these students a “point person” from the school staff who tracks their attendance and checks in with them each week. Check-ins are quick and informal, normally taking place in the hallway between classes, but this informality conceals careful planning: the point person prepares for each check-in by reviewing the student’s attendance data and comes prepared to celebrate bright spots as well as to strategize with the student about areas of concern. Even the location is planned—the point person checks the student’s schedule to figure out which hallway they will be walking through, so the student doesn’t need to remember to make it to a meeting! (read more about this on page 82).*

## 3. Maintain Regular Family–School Touchpoints

### Examples:

- Weekly positive check-ins (“Here’s something your child did this week”).
- Warm, curious, and helpful texts when a child is out.
- Home visits or welcome calls at the start of the year.

**Why it works:** Warm, personal contact encourages two-way communication between families and school. When systemic barriers emerge, an existing trusting relationship allows families to feel more comfortable telling school personnel what is happening.

### Case Study: Investing in Relationships with Families

*School administrator Claudia Trout had a pack of gift cards from a local cafe set aside for attendance rewards, but none had been earned—students simply weren’t motivated by them! Claudia had done her research—the cafe was a popular spot*

*for students—and yet there they sat, untouched. She instead invited the mother of a chronically absent student to meet for coffee at the school. Claudia used a gift card to pick up the mother’s favorite drink, and unlike prior attempts to hold a meeting, the mother came to the school at the appointed time. Over the course of a wide-ranging conversation, she learned more about the family’s systemic barriers and prior experiences that had eroded their trust in institutions. The free coffee mattered not as a reward, but as a kind gesture that opened the door to a completely different mode of interaction. The money that had been allocated to motivate kids instead was used to put a parent at ease and build the foundation of a trusting relationship between that family and the school.*

## 4. Cultivate Peer Connections

### Examples:

- Pair students as learning buddies.
- Create small peer groups that collaborate on class projects.
- Let students lead parts of routines (greeting peers, sharing announcements, selecting the music for the day).
- Proactively support students to enroll in clubs or sports.
- Facilitate community-building circles to help students get to know each other better.

**Why it works:** Students don’t want to miss time with their peers. Strong friendships, especially those cultivated through shared purpose or experiences, are a powerful draw for attending school.

### Case Study: Making Peer Relationships the Core Strategy

*In Tacoma School District, efforts to reduce absenteeism began with a clear message from students: the main reason they come to school is to see their friends. Acting on this, the district invested in relationships as the core strategy, expanding clubs and creating affinity groups for students, especially those who felt less seen, while partnering with community mentors who meet regularly with students during the school day. Schools also launched attendance clubs and a “Walking School Bus,” where high school students lead younger peers safely to school, building cross-age connections along the way. By grounding their approach in peer and adult relationships, Tacoma is making school a place students want to be and where they feel they belong.*

## Conclusion: Seeing Absences as Opportunities to Learn

As schools work to improve attendance, incentives cannot replace the learning stance needed to understand and address the root causes of absenteeism. Reward systems tend to produce limited long-term impact, can alienate the very students schools most hope to reach, and often shift

responsibility for change onto students and families rather than prompting critical reflection on school practice. Removing the time-consuming work of managing incentive programs from a team's plate can create space for more impactful approaches.

The central challenge is not how to motivate students to show up, but how to build the relationships and routines that help educators understand and respond to what students need. An absence is not just a behavior to correct. It is a signal to investigate and act on. When schools invest in relationships, belonging, and responsive support, they both reduce barriers to attendance and create environments students want to be part of. This work calls for fewer prizes and more listening, fewer competitions and more connection, and a commitment to treating every absence as an opportunity to learn.

*Roberto zips his backpack closed, careful not to catch the edges of the photo tucked inside. He steps outside to meet the district van that has picked him up each morning since school staff learned his family no longer had reliable transportation. "Have a good day," his mother calls after him. "I hope I get another message from your teacher this week about how well you're doing!"*

*When the van pulls up to school, Roberto hops down and gives a high five to the principal, who greets students by name every morning at the front gate. Roberto's teacher has invited students to bring objects from home as part of a daily opening practice meant to help students learn about each other. Roberto gingerly places the photo of his grandparents on the table in the center of the classroom and joins the sharing circle as class begins.*

### **Prompts for Discussion:**

- What role have incentives typically played in our attendance improvement strategy? What barriers to attendance do our incentives address, if any?
- How do we know if/how well incentives are working, and for whom? What might be the unintended consequences of the incentives we offer?
- If we stopped giving attendance incentives and rewards starting next week or next month, what would we predict might happen? What data would tell us if our predictions were correct?
- How much time do we spend talking about, planning for, and obtaining and executing incentive plans? What is something more impactful that we could do if we invested this energy elsewhere?
- Which of the relationship-based approaches recommended by this article resonate most? What new or different ideas do these suggestions spark?

## References

- Allensworth, E. M., Antony, M., Delgado, W., & de la Torre, M. (2026, January). *Connection, Trust, and Learning Student Attendance in the Middle and High School Grades Following the COVID-19 Pandemic*. UChicago Consortium Research Brief.
- Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.
- Belot, M., & James, J. (2022). Incentivizing dietary choices among children: Review of experimental evidence. *Food Policy*, 111(2022). 10.1016/j.foodpol.2022.102319.
- Chang, H. N., Chavez, B., & Hough, H. J. (2025). *Unpacking California's chronic absence crisis through 2023–24: Seven key facts* [Infographic]. Policy Analysis for California Education. Retrieved November 24, 2025, from [edpolicyinca.org/publications/unpacking-californias-chronic-absence-crisis-through-2023-24](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/unpacking-californias-chronic-absence-crisis-through-2023-24)
- Gottfried, M. A. (2019). Chronic Absenteeism in the Classroom Context: Effects on Achievement. *Urban Education*, 54(1), 3-34.
- Gottfried, M. A., & Hutt, E. L. (2019). *Absent from School: Understanding and Addressing Student Absenteeism*. Harvard Education Press.
- Green, J. (2026, May 18). The butterfly strategy: A powerful approach to chronic absenteeism. *Unboxed*. <https://hthgse.edu/the-butterfly-strategy-a-powerful-approach-to-chronic-absenteeism/>
- Guyran, J., Christenson, S., Cureton, A., Lai, I., Ludwig, J., Schwarz, C., Shirey, E., & Turner, M. C. (2020). The Effect of Mentoring on School Attendance and Academic Outcomes: A Randomized Evaluation of the Check & Connect Program. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 40(3), 841-882.
- Krebs, D., & Zvi, G. (2025, November 7). Here's Our Short Definition of "Genius Hour". *The Genius Hour Guidebook - A Resource Site*. Retrieved February 6, 2026, from <https://www.geniushourguide.org/>
- Lambert, D., Márquez Rosales, B., & Willis, D. J. (2025, November 13). California School Dashboard shows progress and challenges. *EdSource*. <https://edsource.org/2025/california-schools-graduation-rates-gains/745050>

- Lazowski, R. A., & Hulleman, C. S. (2016). Motivation interventions in education: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 602-640.
- Malkus, N. (2025, June). Lingering Absence in Public Schools: Tracking Post-Pandemic Chronic Absenteeism into 2024 [White Paper]. *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED673951.pdf>
- Robinson, C. D., Gallus, J., Lee, M. G., & Rogers, T. (2021). The demotivating effect (and unintended message) of awards. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 163(2021), 51-64. 10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.03.006.
- Schreiber, M. (2024, November 4). Chronic Absenteeism: An Overlooked Vital Sign. *Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health*. <https://magazine.publichealth.jhu.edu/2025/chronic-absenteeism-overlooked-vital-sign>
- Shankar, M., Joseph-Lumpkin, G., Costa, D. K., Cebert, M., Fenick, A. M., Sharifi, M., & Suttiratana, S. C. (2025, Nov-Dec). Health-related and social drivers of chronic absenteeism in an urban school district. *Academic Pediatrics*, 25(8), 103113.
- Stone, M. (2024, April 14). 4 Case Studies: Schools Use Connections to Give Every Student a Reason to Attend. *EdWeek*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/4-case-studies-schools-use-connections-to-give-every-student-a-reason-to-attend/2024/04>
- Wisk, L. E., & Sharma, N. (2025). Prevalence and Trends in Pediatric-Onset Chronic Conditions in the United States, 1999–2018. *Academic Pediatrics*, 24(4), 1-17. 10.1016/j.acap.2025.102810



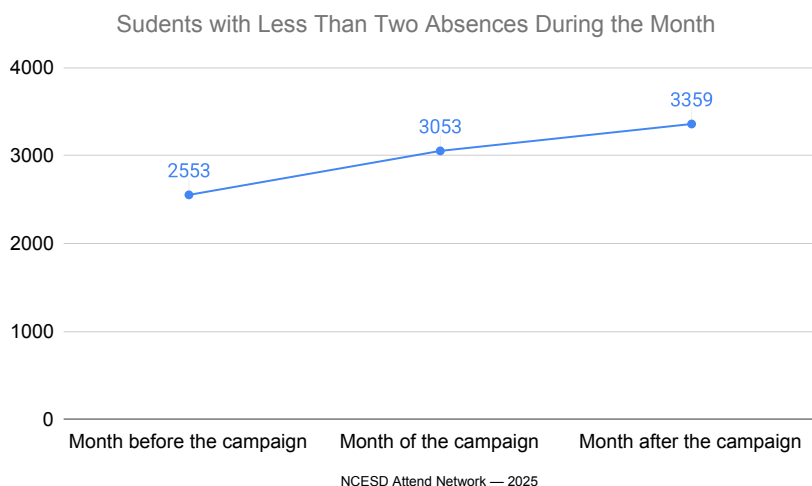


*Above: North Central Education Service District staff members look at attendance data together*

# Starting Strong, Staying Strong: Reducing Chronic Absenteeism Through Strategic Communication

*Bill Eagle and Ashley Goetz  
North Central Education Service District, Washington*

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year, or at least 18 days in a 180-day calendar—has emerged as one of the most urgent challenges facing schools. Rates have more than doubled in many districts, with some states reporting that up to 40 percent of students are chronically absent (Attendance Works, 2023; Mervosh & Paris, 2024). The academic and social consequences are significant: Frequent absences are linked to lower achievement, early literacy gaps, increased dropout risk, and social-emotional disengagement, while also disrupting classroom instruction and limiting schools’ ability to deliver timely interventions (Attendance Works, 2023; EveryDay Labs, 2025). Although barriers such as transportation, health, mental health, and bullying contribute to absenteeism, research points to a critical underlying factor—shifting parent beliefs about the necessity of consistent, in-person attendance. Many families perceive missed days as harmless and view make-up work as an adequate substitute, despite evidence that these beliefs undermine student success (Ad Council Research Institute, 2024). Traditional truancy enforcement approaches, which are often reactive and punitive, have shown limited effectiveness and can strain trust with families. Together, these findings suggest that reversing chronic absenteeism requires proactive, evidence-based attendance communication strategies that address misconceptions, build shared responsibility, and reinforce the value of daily school attendance.



*Figure 1: students with fewer than two absences during the month*

*Source: NCESD Attend Network (2025).*

## A Regional Model: Strategic Communication Cadence

To address the complex challenge of chronic absenteeism, the National Attendance & Engagement Meta Network unites school leaders, educational service districts, and community partners around a shared goal: ensuring more students—especially those furthest from opportunity—are present and engaged in school. As a national learning community, the Meta Network rapidly identifies, tests, and scales promising practices to address attendance challenges. Early evidence underscores the power of strategic, timely communication with students and families in reducing chronic absence.

As a Meta Network member, our regional attendance network designed a sequenced communication cadence that rolls out in three waves: a “Start Strong” attendance campaign in the fall, followed by winter and spring campaigns. Early evidence suggests that such campaigns positively impact attendance not only during the campaign but continue to produce positive impacts for a short time afterwards. Across the network, the number of students with fewer than two absences during the month rose from 2,553 before the campaign to 3,053 during the campaign and continued to stay elevated during the month after campaign completion (see Figure 1).

Each campaign focuses on educating the school community about the value of attendance. To achieve this, the campaigns sent out an informational blitz about the importance of attendance—which included universal messaging designed to shift norms—and the use of an incentive system for positive attendance. Following each campaign, teams deploy “nudge letters”—personalized, non-punitive messages—targeted at students and families whose attendance data indicates they are at risk of becoming chronically absent. These nudges are personalized and include the student’s name, specific information about their absences, and are typically sent via post to homes. This sequence allows schools to ride the wave of awareness generated by campaigns and extend their impact through strategic, data-informed touchpoints.

Experience across our regional network demonstrates that short-term communication surges can improve attendance in measurable ways, especially when reinforced with timely data and consistent follow-up like nudge letters.

## **The Power of a Cadenced Change Package**

Targeted campaigns and nudge letters can function as effective individual strategies for helping schools interrupt attendance declines before patterns become entrenched. However, our data suggests that nudge letters and campaigns used in combination with other strategies and completed using a specific cadence amplifies impact. The North Central Education Service District (NCESD) Attendance Network implemented a seven-component attendance change package designed to support schools in building coherent, proactive systems. A clear pattern emerged: schools that implemented more components of the change package experienced lower chronic absence rates. Specifically:

- Schools implementing all seven indicators clustered near the lowest observed chronic absence rates in the network.
- Schools implementing at least five of seven indicators also performed better than the regional average.
- Schools with fewer components in place were more likely to appear above the average line and closer to the upper control limit.

This pattern reinforces a critical insight: Attendance improvement is not driven by a single strategy, but by the strength and consistency of the system supporting it. The seven indicators—when implemented together—create reinforcing conditions that normalize attendance, promote early action, and sustain improvement over time. Among these seven components was a focus on using the strategies in a specific cadence.

## Why Cadence Matters

Our regional network organizes attendance communications into three strategic waves:

**Start strong (early fall)** to establish expectations and norms.

**Mid-year reinforcement (early winter)** to counter emerging attendance drift.

**Spring persistence (early spring)** to prevent late-year disengagement.

Early network findings indicate that these short, focused communication surges produce attendance gains that persist for several weeks beyond the messaging window, allowing schools to ride the wave of awareness and reinforce positive behavior with timely, personalized outreach.

## Rethinking Systems to Address a Systemic Issue

Embedding a cadenced communication strategy within broader systems ensures that families hear from schools early, often, and in ways that build momentum rather than fatigue.

We encourage schools to reflect on how and when they currently communicate with families about attendance. Are the messages personalized? Are they framed with empathy? Are they delivered early enough to change behavior before patterns become entrenched?

Chronic absenteeism is a multi-faceted issue requiring multi-level solutions. While communications and campaigns are essential tools, they are most effective when embedded in broader systems and carefully cadenced. Schools that establish attendance teams, meet regularly to review real-time data, and implement supportive interventions—not just enforcement measures—are best positioned to make sustainable improvements.

## References

- Ad Council Research Institute (2024). Back to the Classroom: How to Overcome Chronic Absenteeism and Encourage Parents to Send Kids to School Consistently. <https://www.adcouncil.org/learn-with-us/ad-council-research-institute/chronic-student-absenteeism>.
- Attendance Works (2023). Chronic Absence Remained a Significant Challenge in 2022–23. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence-remained-a-significant-challenge-in-2022-23/>
- EveryDay Labs (2025). Spring Slide 2025 Webinar Materials. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/spring-attendance-slump/>.
- Mervosh, S., and Paris, F. (2024, March). Why School Absences Have “Exploded” Almost Everywhere. New York Times. . <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/29/us/chronic-absences.html>.
- U.S. Department of Education (2023). Chronic Absenteeism Data Story. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>.





*Above: A student in either “outer space” or “library” mode*

# Outer Space, Library, Restaurant: Three Noise Levels for a Calm and Productive Classroom

*Alec Patton  
High Tech High Graduate School of Education*

**I**n my first year of teaching I had a problem. OK, I had many problems, but this one was notable because I *solved* it. The problem was that students weren't getting quiet when they needed to write.

This was a big issue, because it didn't matter how brilliant my lesson plan was. If students weren't quiet while they were writing, they weren't writing to the best of their abilities.

Then I observed a middle school lesson. The teacher used one of three keywords to let the students know what the appropriate classroom volume level should be for that activity. These were "Outer Space," "Library," and "Restaurant." Whenever he gave students a task, he also told them what the corresponding noise level should be.

I brought these keywords back to my classroom and they changed my teaching forever.

## How this Strategy Works

The noise level strategy is incredibly simple: Whenever you give your students a task, you also give them one of the following three noise levels:

### **Outer Space**

Outer space is absolutely silent, because there is no matter to carry sound waves.

### **When to use it**

Set the class to Outer Space for tasks that require total concentration, such as reading and writing.

### **Library**

A library is quiet, but not silent. In a library you might ask somebody to borrow a laptop charger or get a suggestion from a librarian, but you wouldn't start a conversation at your table about your favorite bands.

### **When to use it**

Use Library for tasks that are mostly individual, but require some collaboration, such as art activities for which students are sharing supplies, or gallery walks in which students walk around the room to examine artifacts.

### **Restaurant**

Picture a restaurant in which everyone is having a good time. It's noisy, but not because anyone's getting rambunctious, but rather because if people are having multiple conversations at different tables, the cumulative effect is pretty loud.

### **When to use it**

Use Restaurant when you want students to discuss in small groups.

## How to Introduce the Noise Levels to Your Students

The first time you explain the noise level concept to your students, play a game in which you call out different levels and have them switch between them as quickly as possible.

If you call out "Restaurant," they should start talking at their tables. If you call out "Outer Space," they should get silent. Time them to see how long it takes to move from one noise level to another.

For the first week you use this strategy, repeat this exercise a couple minutes every day.

## Using all Three Noise Levels in a Lesson

To show how I use these noise levels in my classroom, consider a lesson I designed for our reading of Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*.

### 1. In-class Writing—Outer Space

One of the central questions that drives *Into the Wild* is “What matters most in life?”

I wanted students to be primed to think about this question as they read, so they began by writing responses to a set of prompts.

The appropriate noise level in the classroom for this task was Outer Space because I wanted students to be totally focused on their own writing.

### 2. Gallery Walk—Library

After they wrote, we did a gallery walk in which students walked around the room looking at photos and bits of information I'd put up that provided context to help them make sense of *Into the Wild*.

I knew it was unreasonable to expect students to do this in silence (if nothing else, I wanted them to say “excuse me” if they bumped into each other!) On the other hand, I knew that if they were all talking freely, many would find it difficult to stay focused on the task. So, I set the noise level at Library.

### 3. “Judge this Book By its Cover”—Restaurant

At this point, every student got a copy of *Into the Wild*. At their tables, they examined the front and back cover to get information about the book. I wanted to get students talking to each other and sharing ideas, so I set the noise level at Restaurant.

### 4. Reading the Author's Note—Outer Space

It was time to start reading the book! I wanted to make sure students were focused on the text without distraction, so we took it back to Outer Space.



# Two Tips for Improvement Reviews: Listen to Experts and Make Senior Leaders Uncomfortable

*Ben Daley*

*High Tech High Graduate School of Education*

A few years ago, I attended an improvement review for a project being undertaken at the High Tech High Graduate School of Education, where I am president. As such, I had an official role within the review: project sponsor.

I had assumed that the main reason the “project sponsor” attended the improvement review was to demonstrate that the organization was taking it seriously. I didn’t expect to play an important role in the review itself. So I was taken aback when, midway through the review, the improvement reviewer, Brandon Bennett, turned to me and said, “Ben, this isn’t a problem for your colleagues. This is a problem for your institution: You’re the president of this graduate school, and this is your problem to solve.” At that moment, I realized that I had been facilitating improvement reviews—a key protocol in our organization’s culture and functioning—the wrong way, toward the wrong goals.

Improvement reviews are a structured conversation with two goals. The first is to provide expert feedback and support to an improvement team. The second is to provide expert feedback and support to the senior leadership team. The improvement reviews I had instigated were missing the first goal because we were trying to give equal weight to every voice in the room. They were missing the second goal because I thought of protocols as being designed



primarily to help the presenter solve problems—I hadn’t understood until that moment that improvement reviews are also designed to change the behavior of an organization’s leadership team.

I want to take these two goals in turn, unpack the assumptions that led me to miss them, and explain the ways in which my thinking about them has changed.

## **Goal 1: Provide Expert Feedback**

### **The case for breaking down hierarchy in protocols**

At High Tech High, we have spent 25 years implementing protocols such as the “project tuning protocol” and “looking at student work protocol.” These protocols emphasize equality of participation, meeting people where they are, and reducing defensiveness that may occur in response to feedback from colleagues. The improvement review differs from these protocols in two important ways, which leads to different benefits: First, within the improvement review, we intentionally value expertise, even within a culture in which we’ve worked to dismantle hierarchies; and second, improvement reviews are not exclusively focused on the presenter—they also deliver feedback to senior leaders, who should also help solve problems.

Another structured conversation for providing feedback is the dilemma consultancy protocol, popularized by educators from National School Reform Faculty and the Coalition of Essential Schools, among others. At the heart of the consultancy protocol are a few beliefs about human capacity: that everyone has something to learn and everyone has something to teach. Also, first seek to understand, then seek to be understood. The egalitarian and structured nature of the consultancy protocol emphasizes and enforces good behaviors, such as “First ask clarifying questions” before you come charging in with your advice, especially because it may be based on incomplete understanding. Another is, “Make sure you are providing feedback that is aligned with what the presenter is asking for.” At High Tech High, we have found that structured conversations such as the consultancy protocol help set important cultural norms. Through these protocols, we have cultivated a culture that believes even first year teachers have an important voice to contribute to the conversation, and even young students can provide feedback to educators and help them see their problems more clearly.

### **The case for *also* valuing expertise**

The dilemma consultancy protocol is a powerful tool for building culture and giving people feedback on their work. But I realized what I had done over the past decade was to unintentionally turn the improvement review back into a dilemma consultancy protocol. I bristled at the notion that some people in the conversation have important expertise that is especially useful to hear so we should prioritize their speaking time. Similarly, I did not appreciate

emphasizing the positionality of some senior leaders in the room given my egalitarian values. As a result, we missed two benefits: that an improvement reviewer, focused on the improvement process itself, is well positioned to provide particularly useful feedback; and that acknowledging the reality of the formal leader who is connected to the project creates an opportunity to “move upstream” and solve problems at the system level.

In addition to the team whose work is being reviewed and other colleagues who join the process, there are two specialized roles within an improvement review which I mentioned briefly above: the improvement reviewer and the project sponsor. I’ll talk more about the project sponsor in Goal 2. For now, let’s focus on the improvement reviewer, who is often, although not always, someone who does not work for the organization. Ideally, the improvement reviewer has previously participated in many improvement reviews, which enables them to quickly identify patterns in projects. With that said, as educators we need to build a deeper bench of strong improvement reviewers. The improvement reviewer has a specific role, which is to attend to the improvement process itself. As Brandon Bennett put it, “When I am acting as a reviewer, I turn the content part of my brain off.” Rather than opining about literacy strategies or math pedagogy, the reviewer puts their attention to questions such as, “Does this project have a strong aim statement? A strong theory of action? An appropriate data system?” “Does there appear to be a will to change, both from the team and from leadership?” “Does the team appear to be executing well with consistent meeting routines and suitable project management?” Freeing up the improvement reviewer to focus their attention and feedback on the improvement process itself creates an opportunity for a different type of feedback than is typically offered by other processes.

## **Goal 2: Provide Feedback to the Leadership Team**

### **The case for focusing on factors within your control**

One thing we learned early on at High Tech High is that dilemma consultancy protocols can veer into areas outside the presenter’s control. Your frustration with your colleague (“I just wish Bob would change his behavior...”) is not a good dilemma to discuss during this protocol. At the heart of the dilemma consultancy is the idea that with support, people can solve their own problems. We attend to this by reminding everyone to focus on both problems and solutions within their control.

### **The case for *also* challenging senior leaders**

I brought this mentality to improvement reviews, and as a result it took me a long time to understand that, unlike dilemma consultancy, improvement reviews are designed to veer into areas outside the presenter’s control. To explain this further, let’s return to the second specific role in an improvement review: the project sponsor. The project sponsor is a person with formal

leadership authority who is most connected to an improvement project. He or she has a responsibility to champion the work, clear roadblocks, direct resources and attention, and provide support to the effort. The project sponsor has become a formalized role within continuous improvement efforts because it is clear that when an improvement project does not have a clear champion at the senior leadership level, there are significant limitations on how far the project can go, particularly in terms of sustained, systemic change.

When we started creating space in the process for the improvement reviewer to provide feedback to the project sponsor, we immediately realized that it wasn't always clear who the project sponsor was. Maybe there wasn't anyone in a formal leadership role who realized that they played an important part in the success of this effort. Or maybe there was, kind of, but it had not been made explicit. Or maybe there was, but that person wasn't invited to the improvement review. Getting more explicit about who the project sponsor is, holding the improvement review when the project sponsor can attend, and insisting on making feedback to the project sponsor part of the process are important next steps to strengthen the potential of the review.

### **Another benefit of including senior leaders: Systematic improvement reviews can reveal patterns across projects**

Another feature of improvement reviews that is often invisible to participants is the opportunity to find patterns across projects. In some cases, we hold multiple improvement reviews on the same day, with common senior leadership across projects. For example, we recently held a series of improvement reviews with the chief operating officer in attendance in which we reviewed projects on admissions, facilities, and food services. By having a common senior leader across each of these reviews and a common improvement reviewer critiquing the work, it became easier to zoom out and see the common challenges that seemingly disparate internal teams experienced across their projects.

One essential part of the review protocol is the opportunity to give senior leaders feedback, which is shared publicly to everyone in the review, just as critical feedback is given to the presenting team. It is important for everyone to see that we all can grow from feedback. However, there is also value in gathering a small group of senior leaders and improvement reviewers to explore themes across projects. In our reviews, we have noticed patterns such as “Communication with the school principals has become a bottleneck to progress across multiple projects; how can we address that more holistically?” Or, “We have too many teams just brainstorming new ideas as opposed to learning from others outside our organization who have already made progress; we need to build time into our next meeting to scaffold that type of work.” Seeing system-level trends creates the possibility to improve the broader organization, not just the specific projects currently underway.

The improvement science guru Edwards Deming claimed that only 6 percent of problems in an organization are caused by individual employees, whereas 94 percent of problems are created by the underlying system that employees are working within. And the people in the organization best situated to improve the underlying system are those in leadership positions. The improvement review, when structured to provide feedback both to improvement teams and those in leadership positions, is a tool that can help organizations tackle big problems at both the individual and systems levels.

## Conclusion

In that improvement review a few years ago, Brandon Bennet, as improvement reviewer, challenged me, as project sponsor, to take more ownership of the problem. Colleagues of mine were working on a project to attract more schools to their network. They had a successful network that was getting great results with students, but they needed to improve how they could get the word out to schools to join their network and benefit from this work. This is, of course, a challenge across many of our teams. The solution was not just for each team to work harder, although hard work remains ahead. Part of the solution was for our institution, staffed primarily by educators, to build capacity in communications, marketing, and sales, across our teams, to share our work more effectively. And that requires learning, attention, and the direction of resources from me as a senior leader. I'm working on it.

When I first experienced improvement reviews, I liked the idea of them, but I rejected the parts that seemed to reinforce hierarchy. I had not intended to insulate myself from getting feedback on the ways in which I was part of a problem but also could be part of the solution. But that was the result of emphasizing an egalitarian approach to participant voice over benefiting from expertise in the improvement process and downplaying the reality that some people occupy formal leadership roles.

In my own institution, the norms and values embodied in the consultancy protocol run deep, as well they should. Holding improvement reviews with expert feedback on the improvement process and explicit feedback to senior leadership will require both a clear protocol but also attention to the cultural norms and values that guide such a review. This includes making it explicit why an improvement review operates differently from other protocols with which my organization is familiar. Let's conduct improvement reviews that attend to the improvement process and provide feedback to all levels of the system in the service of improving our schools and organizations and getting better outcomes for students.

# Contributors

**Jeff Boxill** has served as a presenter and speaker at national convenings including the Carnegie/NCIE Summit and Deeper Learning Conference, facilitating conversations on continuous improvement, leadership, culture, and the relationship between systems and human experience. He also serves as a Leadership and Senior Crew Adventurous Learning and Social Emotional Academic Development Coach with NYC Outward Bound Schools.

**Milena Carmona** is the K–1 Division Associate Head at Avenues The World School, where she coordinates teacher teams and students, and supports curriculum development. She is also a PhD student in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies at Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, (PUC-SP), where she also earned a master's degree in Teacher Education. She works as a researcher and teacher educator with the Language in Activity in the School Context research group (GP LACE/PUC-SP), and publishes academic articles focused on teaching and learning in multilingual school contexts, with an emphasis on equity and diversity.

**Ben Daley** joined High Tech High to teach physics as a founding faculty member in fall 2000. He has been a school director, chief operating officer, and chief academic officer for High Tech High and is now the president of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education.

**Bill Eagle** is an Associate Director at North Central Educational Service District (NCESD) and the incoming superintendent of the Entiat School District. Bill's 33-year career in education includes time as a superintendent, principal, and teacher. Through his work at NCESD, Bill has provided leadership, service, and support to eastern Washington schools for over eight years. Bill provides data and coaching support for NCESD's ATTEND Network.

**Sofi Frankowski** is an independent improvement specialist, facilitator, and coach. She partners with educators and system leaders to improve outcomes and experiences for students furthest from opportunity. Currently, she serves as a leader in two networks addressing the consequential problem of chronic absenteeism: the California-based RAISE Network and the national Attendance and Engagement Meta Network. Previously, she led professional learning in improvement science for 60+ K-12 public schools across two states.

**Dr. Ashley Goetz** has served 21 years in public education systems as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. Currently, she is the Senior Managing Director of Student Success and Learning at the North Central Educational

Service District (NCESD) in Wenatchee, WA. In her role she supports 29 school districts regionally with initiatives such as school improvement, mentoring, and professional learning. Her work with the ATTEND Network and reducing chronic absenteeism serves 18 schools and over 7,000 students.

**Jon Green** serves as the Lead Continuous Improvement Coach at New Visions for Public Schools. He draws on his extensive experience to guide school leaders and implement system-wide improvements that ensure equitable and consistent student outcomes. Prior to joining New Visions in 2014, Jon was Network Leader for The Urban Assembly, where he helped open and support dozens of small schools across New York City. Jon began teaching in New York City in the late 1990s and in 2013 received the Brooke Astor Award for his contribution to the city.

**Eduardo Lomba** served as a school administrator in Lisbon, Portugal's capital, for 13 years. His conviction regarding the need to transform and improve the traditional school model led him to pursue a PhD, through which he conducted a global mapping and analysis of the schools most frequently referenced in scientific research on school innovation within the field of Educational Sciences. His doctoral research led him to establish contact with High Tech High—at the time, the most frequently cited innovative school in scientific publications worldwide—and to propose a partnership with HTH GSE to the Oeiras municipal executive for the implementation of this systemic vision. He is also co-founder and co-coordinator of RIMED, a network for innovation and improvement of education, a platform for collaboration among individuals and institutions.

**Jim May** is president and CEO of New Tech Network (NTN), a national nonprofit that has worked with more than 350 schools across 37 U.S. states and Australia. Through deep partnerships with districts and schools, NTN helps educators design project-based, student-centered learning environments that cultivate the curiosity, reasoning, and adaptive capacities students need to navigate and shape what comes next.

**Amanda Meyer** is an improvement advisor who supports educators to improve experiences and outcomes for students historically least well-served. In her role as Deputy Chief of Improvement at CORE Districts, she collaborates with leaders in large urban systems to apply improvement science to transforming high schools. Within the RAISE Network, Amanda coaches district- and school-based teams to understand and address systemic barriers to school attendance using improvement methods. In addition to her coaching practice, Amanda designs improvement network infrastructure that allows schools to learn from data and one another. Prior to joining CORE in 2017, she was an improvement science specialist at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.



**Chandler Miranda** is Assistant Professor of Education at Molloy University and an educational anthropologist whose work bridges research and practice. A former high school science teacher, she studies how educators create inclusive and empowering learning environments for recently arrived immigrant youth amid exclusionary policies and political pressures. She is the author of *Sanctuary School: Innovating to Empower Immigrant Youth*, published in 2025 by Harvard Education Press, which outlines key mindset shifts for reimagining schools as spaces of belonging, care, and innovation. Her work invites educators to embrace practices that cultivate deeper learning, equity, and collective transformation.

**Alec Patton** is the editor of *Unboxed*. Before that, he taught humanities for five years, first at High Tech High North County, then at High Tech High Chula Vista. He came to High Tech High straight from London, where he worked at the Innovation Unit.

**Ingrid Puche** is an elementary educator and project-based learning specialist who has been with Avenues The World School since 2012, its founding year. She has worked across K–5 as a classroom teacher and project designer, supporting students, teachers, and curriculum development. In addition to her work in elementary education, she has taught graduate-level courses in Brazil and works as a consultant to support curriculum and project-based learning implementation in bilingual contexts.

**Dr. Michellea “Redbird” Millis Rucker** is the founder and CEO of Transforming Our Practice, LLC. Her expertise includes transformational leadership coaching, facilitation, leadership development, improvement science, and thought partnership (consulting). She has over 26 years of experience in education, 10 years in non-profit administration, and 10 years as an edupreneur.

**Ramiro Seré** is the Academic Vice Principal at Escuela Técnica Roberto Rocca in Campana, Argentina. He also leads teacher education courses at Universidad Austral and is part of the Bachelor’s Degree in Education’s Pedagogy and Curriculum team at the Universidad de San Andrés. He holds a Master’s degree in Education and is a PhD candidate in the same field. He has completed specialized studies in language and literature teaching, e-learning project implementation, and school leadership for educational transformation.



# unboxed

EDITORIAL TEAM

Randy Scherer  
*Director of Unboxed*

Alec Patton  
*Editor-in-Chief*

Brent Spirnak  
*Multimedia Ethnographer*

Patrick Yurick  
*Website Design*

Luke Piedad  
*Website Development*

Victor Flores  
*Website Development*

Cecilia Rodriguez  
*Website Development*

Julio Garcia-Granados  
*Data Scientist*

*Unboxed* is a journal of reflections on purpose, practice, and policy in education, published twice yearly by the High Tech High Graduate School of Education.

### **Subscriptions**

*Unboxed* is available online for free at [hthunboxed.org](http://hthunboxed.org), an ever-changing repository of web-based resources for educators, researchers, school developers, and policymakers. Printed copies of this issue are available at [hthunboxed.org](http://hthunboxed.org) and [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

### **Submissions**

Unboxed welcomes submissions from teachers, administrators, teacher educators, policymakers, researchers, and other informed observers of education. In addition to reflections on practice, submissions may include essays on purpose and policy, accounts of teacher research, scholarly articles, project design tools, photography, art, and student work.

Send submissions to [unboxed@hthgse.edu](mailto:unboxed@hthgse.edu) or to the HTH Graduate School of Education, Attn: *Unboxed* Submissions, 2150 Cushing Road, San Diego, CA 92106.

### **Use**

Regarding the materials in this volume, no restrictions are placed on their duplication, distribution, or fair use for educational purposes. Permission to use or reproduce these materials or portions thereof for any other purpose must be obtained in writing from:

HTH Graduate School of Education  
Attn: *Unboxed* Submissions  
2150 Cushing Road  
San Diego, CA 92106

Email: [unboxed@hthgse.edu](mailto:unboxed@hthgse.edu)  
Web: [hthgse.edu/unboxed](http://hthgse.edu/unboxed)

