Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Rhode Island:
Youth, Family, and Community-Based Approaches to Equity in Education

The Rhode Island public education system has been plagued by racism since its founding in the early 1800s, and the inequities that developed as a result continue to be one of Rhode Island's greatest challenges.[1]

Youth voice, family engagement, mental and behavioral health supports, expanded learning opportunities, and student-centered instruction all have a positive impact on student outcomes and when integrated into the design and implementation of schools can help address inequities in education based on race and income. Creating policies and practices that are racially aware, that incorporate a whole child approach, and recognize and address the cognitive impacts of trauma, can help address equity.[2]

Student-centered learning includes a range of instructional approaches that are designed to address the skills, knowledge, needs, interests, and aspirations of individual students. Students are encouraged to become actively engaged in their own success and given a voice in decisions that affect their learning at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. Student-centered learning recognizes that learning can occur outside of the traditional school day or school year and is not restricted to the classroom but can take place in the larger community.[3,4]

The Rhode Island Education Accountability Act

In 2019, The Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that expands the duties of principals and school improvement teams, giving increased school-based management responsibilities to principals, teachers, students, parents, and community members that represent the ethnic, racial, and economic status of the school community. Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year the duties of school improvement teams will include assisting the principal in identifying the educational needs of students; making recommendations for the development, implementation and assessment of a curriculum accommodation plan; assisting in an annual review of the school budget; and assisting in the formation of a School Improvement Plan.[5]

Lessons From the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nationally and in Rhode Island, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate unacceptable and persistent inequities in education. Students that will fare the best during the pandemic and the combination of in-person, distance learning, and hybrid models that is offered will be those who attend schools that prioritize healthy student-teacher relationships, provide clear, consistent and linguistically-appropriate communications with families, and foster positive partnerships with community-based organizations. The pandemic has demonstrated that students, families, communities, schools, and the economic stability of Rhode Island are mutually interdependent.[6] Scalable and substantial institutional change is needed, and **schools cannot meet the needs of students and overcome the inequities caused by longstanding systemic racism, bias, and discrimination without putting the voices and leadership of youth, families, and community-based organizations at the center of education policies and practices.**

Youth Voice

Positive school climate is defined by several indicators, including healthy relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community, and is an essential element of an effective learning environment that supports student and teacher attendance, student motivation to learn, academic achievement, and graduation rates. However, many schools fail to provide culturally responsive curricula or to employ educators of color who reflect the identities of students and often impose disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact students of color, creating negative school climates and large barriers to reducing inequities.[7,8,9,10] **Often, efforts to close wide and unacceptable inequities in schools have been based on an adult-centered understanding of equity and do not authentically center the voices of youth.**[11]

> **"They always ask for feedback, like you know there's some teachers like 'Oh, how can I make this class better? How can I do this and that?', but they never act upon it...If you're asking for feedback, then you should actually listen and actually do something about it."** - Providence Public School Student
>
> Source: Young Voices & The New Teacher Project, Student-driven research: data analysis.

In 2017, Young Voices and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT conducted six focus groups with students from seven public high schools in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence, Rhode Island. A key finding was that students want to be heard and respected. When they are not heard and respected, they are not engaged in their own learning and cannot provide important perspectives about what happens in schools and how their schools can be improved.[12]

> **"I just wish they listened to us. It's like they think we only come to this school to get information. That isn't right. I'm not a robot."** - Rhode Island Student [13]

According to the *Rhode Island 2020 SurveyWorks* results, one-third (34%) of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 surveyed reported feeling like they matter to others at their school.[14]

Youth Empowerment

Youth-led, out-of-school time programs provide fun, safe, and student-centered learning opportunities that support youth voice, foster a sense of belonging, offer leadership experiences, and provide spaces where youth can practice self-care and heal from trauma based on race, gender identify, and sexual orientation with the support of trained and dedicated adults.[15] **Youth-led organizing programs prioritize and value the experiences of youth, create a personalized student-centered experience, engage adult allies from diverse backgrounds, and intentionally create positive, inclusive climates through the process of civic engagement.** Research suggests that these types of programs have a positive impact on students of color, including increased academic engagement and achievement, secondary and post-secondary attainment, access to social-emotional learning and mental health supports, leadership skills, positive social identities, and meaningful youth-adult relationships.[16]

Youth-led Campaigns for Equity in Education in Rhode Island

Several youth empowerment organizations in Providence are working to improve the education system for youth of color by providing wholistic programming that includes the study of power, race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and how these identities are reflected in youth experiences in their schools and communities. The Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), Providence Student Union (PSU), Youth In Action (YIA), Youth Pride, Inc. (YPI), and Young Voices provide youth with opportunities to develop public speaking skills, exercise leadership, gain critical and strategic thinking skills, mobilize their peers, and become civic leaders and global thinkers. **These culturally responsive organizations use an interdisciplinary approach to youth empowerment and civic education** including reading of primary texts, data, budgets, policies and writing of speeches, testimonies, and opinion articles while also providing tutoring services, college and career preparation, social-emotional supports, outreach to families, and referrals to social services.[17,18,19,20]

All programs are free to youth and funded through a variety of sources including public and private foundations, philanthropic support and, in some cases, federal grants.

Youth-led actions have made many positive contributions to Rhode Island education including:

■ **ARISE (Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education)**, working in coalition with Providence Youth Student Movement and other organizations, organized to pass the ***All Students Count Act*** in Rhode Island. This legislation mandates the disaggregation of education data to better understand the educational experiences of the many subgroups within the Asian American and Pacific Islander population and requires disaggregation of this data by gender, disability, and English proficiency. Rhode Island was the third state in the country to pass this law.[21]

■ **Providence Student Union (PSU)** led the **Our History Matters Campaign** and worked with Providence Public Schools to create a curriculum that reflects the community. Through a series of student-facilitated meetings with different constituent groups, PSU addressed the lack of representation and covert racism in the Providence Public Schools' history curriculum.[22]

■ **Youth In Action (YIA)** partners with Providence Public Schools to address issues of equity and access in the school system by introducing a curriculum rooted in identity, youth voice, and social change into the classroom. YIA's **School In Action** program includes bilingual English and Spanish sessions on identity and identifying personal and community resources for recent arrivals to Rhode Island and youth designed and youth facilitated school-wide professional development for teachers and administrators on how to create more meaningful relationships and collaborative learning opportunities.[23]

■ **Young Voices** has advocated for youth voice and systemic changes on the state, district, and school level and has conducted interviews, research, and presentations about student absenteeism, school climate and culture, and student perceptions of school discipline in Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, and Providence. Young Voices leads **#RaiseOurVoices**, an initiative led by girls from low-income families to address the root cause of disparities facing students in Providence public schools. In 2019, Young Voices released *Girls of Color Addressing Disparities in Providence Schools*, a report that highlights the disparities in school discipline in Providence Public Schools for girls of color and presented their findings at the Rhode Island State House and to the Providence School Board.[24]

■ **Youth Pride, Inc. (YPI)** offers a variety of professional development trainings on creating safe and inclusive learning environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning students and partners with schools to help them build, strengthen, and sustain their **Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)**.[25]

■ **The Providence Alliance for Student Safety (PASS)** was started in December 2019 by ARISE, PSU, and the Providence Youth Student Movement to fight for safe and healthy schools that treat youth with dignity and respect. Since then, more organizations including YIA, Young Voices, and Rhode Island Urban Debate League have joined the alliance's **Counselors Not Cops Campaign**. This campaign seeks to remove all School Resource Officers from Providence schools, hire health and safety staff focused on alternative strategies for conflict resolution, and increase the number of support staff in schools.[26]

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research is a powerful equity tool that adopts a flexible framework that schools can use to restructure school initiatives in ways that allow youth to become active members in the process of identifying, researching, and disseminating knowledge about equity issues impacting their daily lives in and out of school.[27]

The Benefits of Authentic Youth Involvement in Research

For educators, policymakers, and researchers:

- Having diverse students involved in all aspects of the research ensures that the questions will be authentic, worded in ways that students understand, and focused on the issues that students care most about.

- Involving students in all aspects of the research also ensures that student responses are truly understood and that conclusions and recommendations reflect students' lived experiences and priorities.

- Research that focuses on student voice provides school, district, and state decision makers with knowledge and perspectives about what happens in school that they could not obtain any other way.[28,29]
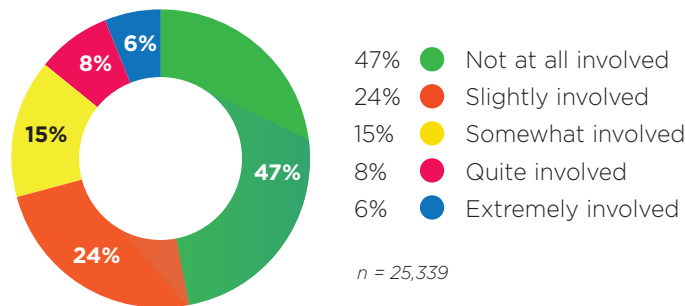
For students:

- Being involved in a research project from beginning to end allows students to develop mentoring relationships with adult researchers, practice research skills, and explore a potential career. It also builds the important social and emotional skills, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills essential for success in college and careers.

- Students also benefit from being heard and valued and contributing to a project that will benefit students like them.[30,31]
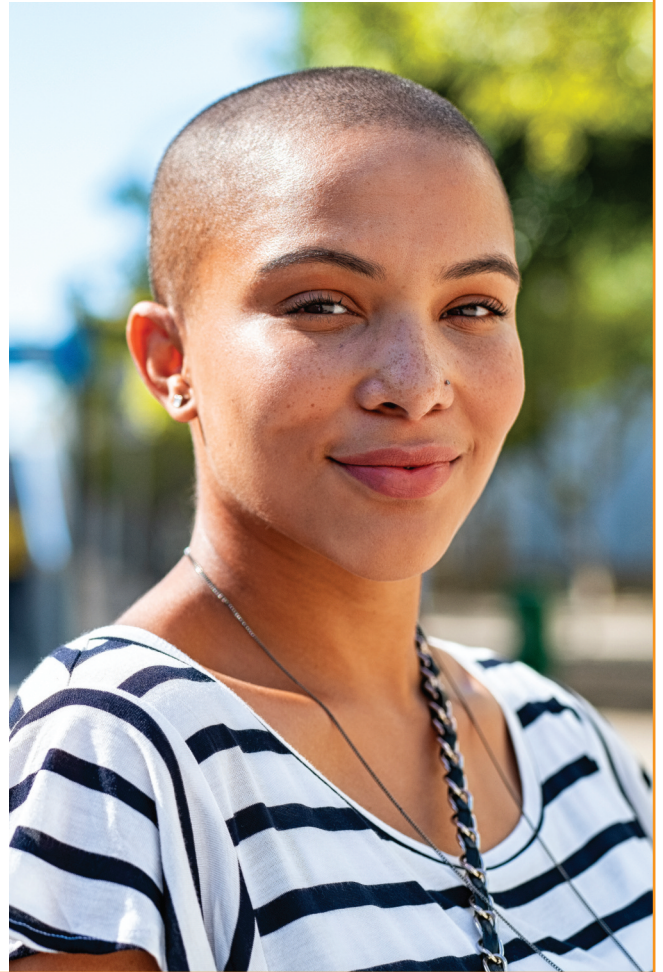
Family Engagement

The level of family involvement and engagement in schools is directly related to the quality of the relationships built between families and educators, school personnel, and administrators. A shared belief in the importance of family-school relationships, a commitment to maintain clear, consistent and linguistically-appropriate communication with families, and relationships built on respect, accountability and cultural awareness improve academic outcomes, student attendance, graduation rates, and post-secondary success. Traditional approaches to parent involvement like parent teacher associations and open houses rarely close disparities in academic outcomes for students of color and students living in poverty because these traditional approaches often lack cultural relevance and language accommodations which exacerbate inequities.[32,33]

Family Involvement in Parent Groups at School, Rhode Island, 2020

47% ●	Not at all involved
24% ●	Slightly involved
15% ●	Somewhat involved
8% ●	Quite involved
6% ●	Extremely involved

n = 25,339

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education. *2020 SurveyWorks Family Survey.* Retrieved September 25,2020, from www.ride.ri.gov

■ Forty-seven percent of family members report they are not all involved in a parent group at their child's school.[34] Less than one in four (23%) of Rhode Island family members surveyed responded favorably to questions about engagement with their child's school.

National research indicates that many families of color, low-income families and immigrant families feel unwelcomed, dismissed, and hostility from school personnel which is often fueled by negative perceptions, bias, and racist beliefs about them. Many schools expect parents to engage in ways that are more consistent with White, middle-class parenting and behavioral norms like helping children with homework, volunteering at school-sponsored events, or attending parent-teacher conferences while often overlooking the value, contributions, and assets of families of color.[35]

Family engagement and school improvement efforts should be centered on the family experience and should provide equitable access to family engagement and leadership opportunities. Such opportunities should work to build families' knowledge of the education system and reform efforts and include information on education terminology, data, evaluation, assessments, and the accountability system. Providing translation services, transportation, child care, and home visits when families are unable to attend in-person meetings at school will help more families actively participate in their children's schools.[36,37]

Equitable collaboration between families and schools is characterized by a reciprocal partnership in which families and schools emphasize relationship-building, work together to develop goals, co-develop a strategy for achieving student success, and include parents as experts on their own children. Active family engagement develops in schools where parents and families have a meaningful role in decision-making about issues that affect learning including curriculum, teaching, hiring, and budgeting and is linked to school improvement and student achievement.[38,39]

Community-Based Organizations

Decades of disinvestment in low-income communities have created gaps between the needs of students and the availability of resources and services to address those needs.[40] **Community-based organizations are often entrusted frontline providers of crucial services that close the gap between resources and needs unmet by schools and government agencies.**

In Rhode Island, hundreds of community organizations provide services and programming to youth before school, after school and during summer and school vacations. The roles of these organizations vary and may include serving as a networking hub that connects youth and schools to community mentors and agencies providing programming in partnership with schools or providing out-of-school time (OST) programs directly to youth in community spaces.[41]

OST programs can contribute significantly to children's development and learning. High-quality, organized after-school and summer programs improve the supervision and safety of youth, promote positive social skills, and, with sufficient dosage, improve student achievement. Quality out-of-school time programs provide engaging activities that are intentionally designed to promote youth development and are taught by trained, dedicated instructors who work effectively with youth. Youth who participate consistently can show improved competence, caring, and connections.[42,43,44]

There is a substantial gap between high-quality OST opportunities available to youth from low-income families compared to opportunities for youth from higher-income families, and higher-income families spend almost seven times more on enrichment activities which contributes to persistent gaps in student outcomes. Federal and city funding of high-quality OST programs helps youth from low-income families participate in OST programs and helps to promote equity.[45] **OST programs have provided crucial services to students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic including assistance with academics, accessing technology, and addressing food insecurity for families. Schools should continue to view OST providers as part of the system of supports for students and families and increase efforts to connect students with OST providers.**

The Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment

The Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment (RIPQA) is a process designed to give out-of-school time program leaders and staff feedback that will guide the design and delivery of programs to ensure youth are given high-quality, structured academic and enrichment opportunities that promote student-centered learning opportunities and strong outcomes. The assessment is conducted every two or three years and may include various stakeholders including program managers, school principals, youth, parents, teachers, and community providers who observe and assess programming.[46]

The RIPQA was created by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA), an organization that serves as an OST hub for more than 2,000 middle and high school students, along with the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. The Rhode Island Department of Education adopted the RIPQA for all 21st Century Community Learning Center sites which together provided afterschool learning opportunities to 10,439 students during the 2018-2019 school year.[47,48]

Several measures of student-centered learning and equity are included in the RIPQA. These indicators include opportunities for family members to be involved in program and organization decision-making; staff training on working with diverse populations; staff participation in orientation regarding the neighborhood and community in which they work and where children and youth live. Other indicators are youth and staff working together to develop guidelines for behavior; psychological and emotional safety including observations for bias based on race, income, gender, ability, appearance, and sexual orientation; staff use of youth-centered approaches to addressing conflict; and formal processes for youth to assess the program and to be involved in activity selection, planning, implementation, and community-building.[49,50]

Child Opportunity Zones

In Rhode Island, Child Opportunity Zones (COZs) sustain and expand the community school model which aims to improve the academic outcomes of students by creating a partnership between school, families, and community partners. Community schools integrate academic, health, and social services to provide a range of supports and opportunities to students and families. Community schools are coordinated by a school or community agency. In Rhode Island, COZs serve nearly 10,000 children and more than 8,000 adults each year. Funding for COZs comes from a variety of sources including the Rhode Island Department of Education, State of Rhode Island, U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, U.S. Department of Health, Rhode Island Department of Health, and philanthropic foundations.[51,52]

Community schools are a **powerful equity strategy** because they are designed to identify and address inequitable practices, disrupt the systems that perpetuate educational and economic disparities, and increase opportunities for all students through partnerships with organizations that impact children. Many community schools have the existing infrastructure that enabled them to mobilize support services and connect with students and families quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures.[53,54]

Recommendations

Youth Voice

- Center the voices and perspectives of diverse youth in policymaking and practice implementation and take youth-generated strategies for school improvement seriously by ensuring timely implementation and transparent accountability.

- Support and sustain youth engagement by allocating resources (e.g., time, space, and academic credit) to support youth leadership within school improvement efforts.

- Create opportunities for youth and families to represent themselves and to participate in decision-making processes within schools.

- Incorporate *SurveyWorks* student and family indicators into the Rhode Island school improvement and school accountability systems.

Family Engagement

- Invest in engagement programs that empower families to be leaders in their child's education and in school improvement efforts. Provide trainings to families about the education system and school reform efforts including understanding education terminology, academic assessments, and the school system. Provide adequate resources to support these programs.

- Promote authentic sharing of power and decision making by creating, supporting, and sustaining opportunities for student and family engagement.

- Identify and address the families' feelings of disrespect and feeling unwelcomed by schools, particularly among families of color, multilingual families, and immigrant families.

- Implement family-centered approaches that increase equitable access to family engagement and leadership opportunities by providing appropriate translation services for multilingual families, transportation to family engagement events, free child care at family events and meetings, and home visits in cases when families are unable to attend in-person meetings.

- Utilize the expertise of families to identify strategies to ensure communication with families is regular, reciprocal, linguistically appropriate, culturally responsive, and supports meaningful, respectful, and healthy relationships between families and schools.

Community-Based Organizations

- Integrate community-based organizations that reflect the identities of students and provide culturally relevant learning opportunities into academic and school support systems. Encourage reciprocal data sharing between OST providers and schools to improve access to information and data to track and strengthen student performance.

- Remove barriers to collaboration with OST providers and increase administrative supports that help students gain access to these opportunities. This may include providing consistent meeting space, collaboration on grant applications and program evaluation measures, and support of student recruitment efforts.

- Create a dedicated, adequate funding stream within the Rhode Island state budget to support high-quality OST programs, professional development, and the development of a high-quality youth development workforce.

- Develop a quality assessment and feedback process like RIPQA for schools. Incorporate indicators of student-centered learning and equity into the school adapted RIPQA assessment tool.

- Hold educators and school administrators accountable for partnering with youth, families, and community-based organizations to address equity and school-improvement efforts.

- Increase the percentage of educators of color and provide the resources necessary to support their retention and leadership.

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