

Student-Centered Schools: Policy Supports for Closing the Opportunity Gap

June 2014

About This Series

Findings from SCOPE's *Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap* study are published in four case studies and a cross-case analysis, a policy brief, and a web-based educator's tool.

To see the full series and related work, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/projects/633>

This research is made possible with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

By Linda Darling-Hammond, Diane Friedlaender, and Jon Snyder

Across the country, students of color and low-income students continue to achieve at far lower levels than their more advantaged peers. Some schools, however, are breaking that trend, producing much stronger achievement, higher graduation and college-going rates, and greater success in college and career pathways. This policy brief describes how four student-centered high schools support student success, and it recommends policy strategies that could sustain schools like these on a much broader scale, so that they become the norm rather than the exception.

The four California public schools we studied in *Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap*—City Arts and Technology High School in San Francisco, Impact Academy of Arts and Technology in Hayward, Dozier-Libbey Medical High School in Antioch, and Life Academy in Oakland—are non-selective in their admissions and serve primarily low-income students of color. They enact student-centered practices through either the California Linked Learning Initiative or the Envision Education model. Linked Learning, a statewide initiative, integrates rigorous academics with career-based learning and real-world workplace experiences. Envision Education is a charter network that creates personalized learning environments for students to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. All achieve graduation and college-going rates far above district and state averages for the populations they serve, offering real promise for narrowing the achievement gap.

What Are Student-Centered Practices?

Student-centered practices focus on the needs of students and develop pathways to connect students with their futures in a number of ways. They include:

- rich and relevant curricula that connect to the world beyond school,
- engaging pedagogy that offers opportunities for deeper learning and addresses students' learning needs,
- authentic assessments that evaluate and guide teaching and learning,
- instructional supports that enable success,
- personalization of the educational process, and

Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy in Education
Barnum Center
505 Lasuen Mall
Stanford, CA 94305
scope@stanford.edu
650.725.8600
edpolicy.stanford.edu
[@scope_stanford](https://twitter.com/scope_stanford)

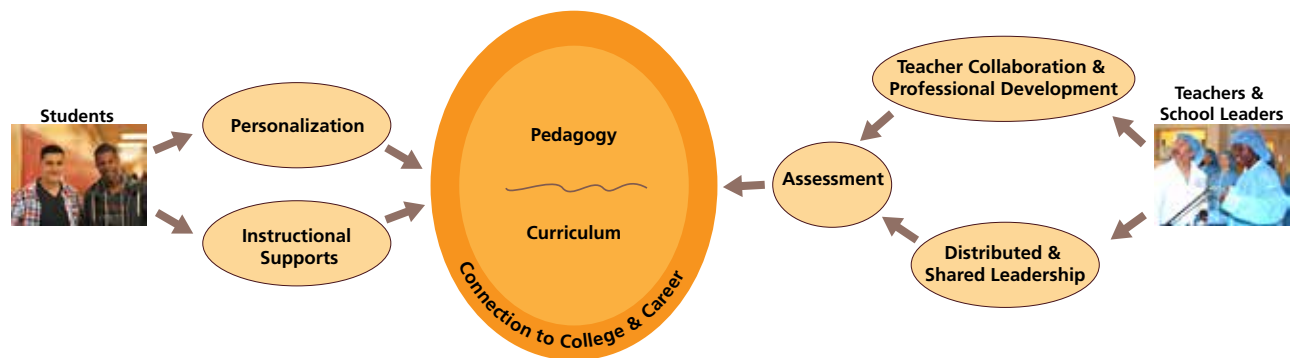
- continuous problem-solving and improvement driven by collaborative teacher learning and decision making.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the schools personalize instruction and provide instructional supports that allow students to engage in a rich curriculum that prepares them for college and careers. The curriculum helps them develop the analytical and communication skills they will need to navigate and excel in a dynamic, information-rich environment. To build these skills, each of the four schools places a central focus on supporting students’ leadership capacities and autonomy through a relevant curriculum, and inquiry-based, student-directed, and collaborative learning. These opportunities operate both within the classroom and beyond the classroom in internships and other work- and community-related learning experiences.

The common personalization practices in the schools in this study include advisory programs, a culture of celebration, student voice and leadership opportunities, and connections to parents and community. Undergirding each of these practices is the expectation that a core component of teachers’ jobs is to build relationships with their students. Instructional supports include the use of advisory to provide academic support, differentiated instruction, tutorial and after-school support, and the provision of additional resources and support to English language learners and special education students.

Teachers are enabled to do this work by engaging in ongoing collaboration and professional development, enacted through distributed and shared leadership, and guided by authentic assessments of student learning. These assessments inform educators’ understanding of students and their learning and help drive a continual conversation about instructional improvement.

Figure 1: Student-Centered Practices



Why Student-Centered Practices Are Important

Currently, practices like these are found more often in schools that serve affluent and middle-class students than in schools in low-income communities. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has been increased emphasis on test-based, rote instruction, particularly schools serving low-income students of color struggling to raise scores.

Meanwhile, concerns for fostering 21st century skills have led to the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which emphasize critical thinking and analytic skills for college and

career readiness that are not easily assessable through traditional multiple choice testing. These goals call for a focus on deeper learning and student-centered practices.¹ Deeper learning competencies mean that students master core academic content, think critically, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and learn how to learn—elements that are not currently measured in the existing accountability system. Furthermore, new assessments that measure the Common Core standards (such as those under development by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) will require local districts to incorporate more complex forms of assessment into their instructional repertoire.

While promising, these new initiatives will require tremendous transformation of teaching approaches, school organization, and leadership orientation, particularly in schools previously focused on getting students to pass tests aimed at lower-level skills. Schools serving low-income students and students of color have the furthest distance to travel to meet the goals of the Common Core State Standards and corresponding assessments.

To understand how to help schools close the distance between their current practices and outcomes that are consistently preparing all students for college, career, and life, it is crucial that we not only look closely at the school models, structures, and practices that facilitate student-centered learning, but also take a wider, systemic perspective that considers how policy, practice, and research intersect to undermine or support student-centered pedagogy.

Schools Closing the Opportunity Gap Through Student-Centered Practices

Despite the many forces limiting learning opportunities for low-income students and students of color over the last decade, some schools have managed to create a context within which a rich, engaging curriculum is offered to all students in a manner that personalizes education and supports students' individual needs. The four schools we studied did this in different ways, but they shared common elements. Brief school descriptions can be found on page 4.

A defining characteristic of each study school is a strong school vision that includes an unrelenting belief that every student has the potential to achieve high academic standards and to attend college. The schools' visions shape what students are expected to know and do when they graduate, and how students are supported to achieve these goals.

For teachers, what and how they teach is shaped by what students are expected to know and do upon graduation: their graduate profile. In these student-centered schools, performance-based assessments tasks, portfolios, research, and exhibitions are used as sign posts to move students toward these graduation goals. They also become drivers of instruction, as curricula and pedagogy need to prepare students to excel on these major assessments. One of the most distinguishing factors about a student-centered educational approach is a seismic shift in the purpose of assessments: away from a focus on accountability measures designed to separate students from one another and toward a focus on promoting learning and mastery for all students. Student-centered schools use assessments to provide vital feedback to both students and teachers that enhances the learning process so that students can gauge their progress, providing information that helps to orient teachers and the student.

Student-Centered Schools

City Arts and Technology High School, San Francisco, CA

The hallways at City Arts and Technology High School (CAT) are lined with brightly painted murals with themes embracing diversity, civil rights, and community empowerment, as well as posters promoting college attendance and academic success. CAT, operated by Envision Education, has a strong emphasis on authentic assessments (such as student exhibitions and portfolios), ongoing teacher professional development, grade-level teacher collaboration through weekly “family meetings,” quarterly parent-teacher conferences, and expectations that every graduate will complete the necessary coursework to be admitted to the University of California. Student-centered instruction at CAT is about creating opportunities for students to practice skills and get one-on-one guidance, while also helping to keep cross-classroom expectations for students consistent.

Dozier-Libbey Medical High School, Antioch, CA

Dozier-Libbey Medical High School, an autonomous, small school in the Antioch School District, is located on the edge of town amid cow pastures and near several medical centers. In response to district overcrowding and an assessment of the highest community employment opportunities, Dozier-Libbey opened with a health care focus and is certified as a Linked Learning career pathway. Dozier-Libbey integrates health and health care issues across its curriculum through interdisciplinary projects and work-based experiences outside of the classroom. Dozier-Libbey holds a strong commitment to mastery by offering students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning in ways that correspond to students’ strengths. Believing in the potential of every student has enabled the principal and staff to create a culture of caring and respect between and among teachers and students.

Impact Academy for Technology and Arts, Hayward, CA

Impact Academy, operated by Envision Education, prides itself in using project-based teaching to foster strong academic growth and deep, meaningful learning experiences for its students. Impact links traditional content areas with non-traditional ways of schooling. Using common subject areas (math, English, science, social studies, art, and Spanish) married with the school’s five core competencies (research, analysis, creative expression, inquiry, and workplace learning), Impact deliberately steps away from relying on antiquated ways of delivering instruction and assessing learning. There is a universal culture of family and community evident on the Impact campus. Teachers and students alike rely upon close relationships as a means of encouragement and motivation for the hard work that is required for all members of the school community to achieve positive outcomes for students.

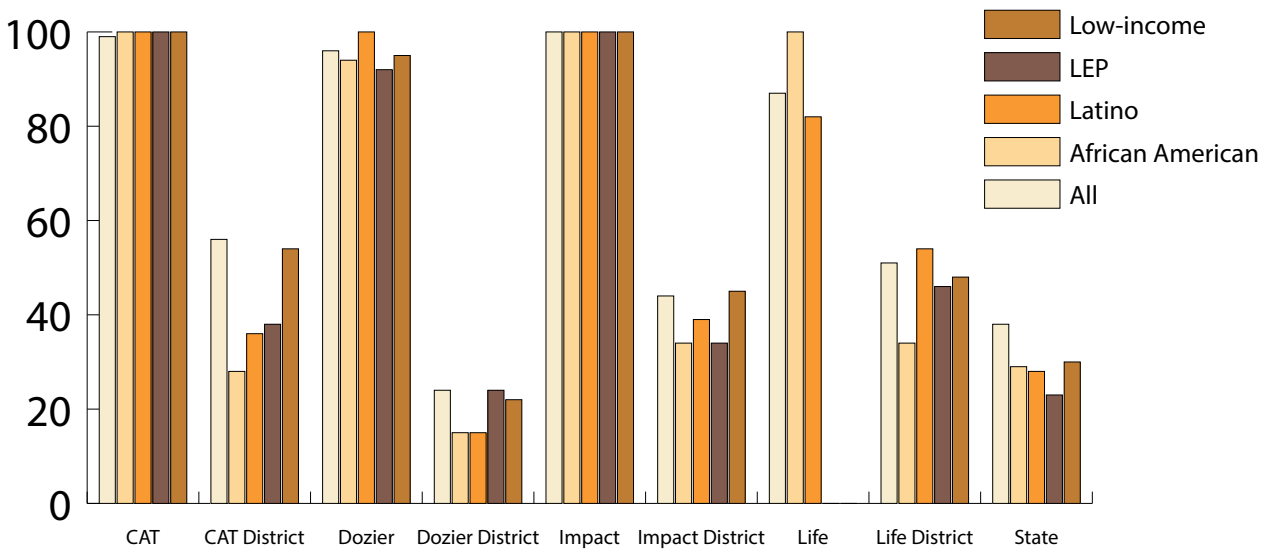
Life Academy, Oakland, CA

Life Academy is a small public high school in Oakland Unified School District that weaves student-centeredness into nearly every aspect of its work and culture. Its goal is to prepare its students to become future health professionals within the biological sciences, and it is certified as a Linked Learning career pathway. The school’s focus on students is evidenced through college and career preparation coursework, inquiry-based pedagogy, health/science career internships, a 4-year advisory program, multiple performance-based exhibitions that include an interdisciplinary and scholarly senior exhibition, and a wide array of student interest-driven “post-session” classes at the end of the year. Life Academy’s focus on students drives every decision: what and how to teach authentically, what structures will equip students and teachers to know and believe in each other, and how to bring out the best of the students and their community.

teacher collaboration; enrich teacher expertise in pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and academic support; provide opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice; distribute leadership to include teachers, parents, and students; and utilize external support.

Schools that incorporate these key features of student-centered practice are more likely to develop students who have transferrable academic skills; feel a sense of purpose and connection to school; as well as graduate, attend, and persist in college at rates that exceed their district and state averages. In these schools, our analyses documented that students exhibited significantly greater gains on the California Star Test and the California High School Exit Exam than similar students in other schools; graduated at rates above district and state averages; were much more likely to have completed a college preparatory curriculum (in California, the a-g requirements); and were much more likely to be admitted to, attend, and stay in college than similar students (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: College Preparatory Course Completion Rates by Percentage of Students (2011–12)



Source: Data for all sources except Life Academy from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
 *Life Academy data from Oakland Unified School District

Policies That Can Support Student-Centered Schools

Creating high schools that are designed around student rather than adult needs requires more than a mind shift and hard work; it requires the conditions to enable that shift in beliefs to be translated into action.

All schools that are serious about closing the opportunity gap need support at multiple levels. This includes supports for educator learning and the use of student-centered practices at the school level, from the district or charter management organization level, and at the state and federal level. In this research, we identified three areas of support that substantially influence the ability of high schools to engage in student-centered practices:

- funding policies that shape what resources are available and how they are used,
- human capital policies that influence teachers’ and school leaders’ capacity to enact

- student-centered practices, and
- instruction and assessment policies that impact what is taught and how student learning is measured.

Funding Student-Centered Schools

In California and across the country, inadequate funding hampers many schools serving low-income and minority students from fully realizing their goals and addressing student needs. Insufficient funds impact schools' ability to hire and retain quality staff and to provide enough services, such as specialized instruction for English language learners, to meet the needs of their students. Rich curricula and extracurricular offerings are also affected by funding shortfalls.

New funding formulas are needed in most states to address these problems. As The Equity and Excellence Commission observed:

The common situation in America is that schools in poor communities spend less per pupil—and often many thousands of dollars less per pupil—than schools in nearby affluent communities, meaning poor schools can't compete for the best teaching and principal talent in a local labor market and can't implement the high-end technology and rigorous academic and enrichment programs needed to enhance student performance. This is arguably the most important equity-related variable in American schooling today.²

Because of these kinds of inequities, compounded by ongoing budget cuts in California and an antiquated system of categorical programs that constrained the uses of these scant funds, our study schools had to raise external funds to accomplish many of their goals. Even with this fund-raising, they were still unable to provide students many of the resources they deserved. They also often had difficulty recruiting and retaining experienced teachers, especially in shortage fields.

However, in 2013, California raised school taxes and implemented a new Local Control Funding Formula, a weighted student formula that allocates greater funding to schools serving high-need populations, while giving them more control over how best to spend the funds. This funding formula, one of the most progressive in the country, will dramatically change the level and quality of resources available to schools with high percentages of low-income students, English language learners, and foster children as it is phased in.

Other states have realized benefits for children from approaches like California's. For example, Massachusetts adopted a weighted student formula funding system in the 1990s that is credited—along with its investments in early childhood education, extensive teacher professional development, and new standards and assessments—with propelling large gains in student achievement, especially among previously low-achieving students.³ Similarly, an OECD report on international education achievement found that the highest performing and most steeply improving nations were investing a greater share of their education resources in schools serving the most disadvantaged students.⁴ It is clear that policies are needed both to ensure adequate funding and to encourage its spending in productive ways. Consequently we recommend:

1. **Adequate and flexible funding:** States should adopt funding strategies, like weighted student formula approaches, that provide school funding based on the costs of educating students who live in poverty, are new English learners, or encounter other risk

factors, and should allow schools to use the resources flexibly to implement new school models that innovate successfully.

2. Resource accountability aimed at student success: States and the federal government should encourage successful innovation and thoughtful uses of resources by asking schools and districts to guide and justify their expenditures in terms of outcomes—evaluated through multiple measures of student learning that include achievement, graduation, and college- and career-readiness—like California’s new Local Control Accountability Program does.

3. Resources for Linking Learning to the world beyond school: Like the Linked Learning initiative in California, stable sources of state and federal funding should be developed to support schools’ abilities to develop curricula, internships, community service programs, and dual enrollment programs that link high school students’ academic learning to real-world work and postsecondary education.

Preparing Educators for Student-Centered Schools

Developing educators who can teach and organize schools to meet student needs while attending to deeper learning goals is key to transforming outcomes for students. Teachers and administrators need to enter the profession well-prepared to address students’ academic as well as social and emotional needs in a way that empowers students to take control of their own learning. Initial preparation and induction are not enough, however. In order to succeed, teachers and administrators, individually and collectively, need ongoing support to assess, reflect, and revise their approach in a continuous cycle of inquiry.

We found that schools tried to recruit as many teachers as possible from a handful of high-quality pre-service teacher education programs that prepared their graduates to address students’ social, emotional, and academic needs through interactive, relevant, and authentic instruction. However, competition to hire these teachers is fierce, and there are not enough to go around.

Some of the schools partnered with universities to help develop a stronger supply of teachers prepared for student-centered practices. In these programs, candidates had clinical training in these schools or others with similar practices and philosophies, tightly connected to coursework on student learning and development, inquiry-based teaching strategies and curriculum development, as well as teaching of new English learners and other students with special needs. In addition, the schools focused on ensuring that beginning teachers received mentoring from veteran teachers while in their first years on the job so that they could further develop these practices.

States need to improve schools’ access to educators who are prepared to offer high-quality, student-centered instruction. To do this, states must focus more effectively on producing educators who understand how students learn; how to motivate that learning through engaging pedagogy and real-world connections; and how to address students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. In addition, such well-prepared educators must have incentives to work and stay in schools serving high-need students. Consequently, we recommend:

4. Educator standards: States should set standards that expect programs to prepare educators who understand how to engage students in rich and relevant learning, and how to support their academic, social, and emotional development. These standards

should be enforced through accreditation and licensing processes that look carefully at whether candidates have the opportunity to learn these skills and can demonstrate them in practice through teacher and administrator performance assessments.

5. Supports for preparation: Federal and state governments should invest in the expansion of high-quality programs that prepare teachers and administrators for the more sophisticated skills needed to implement student-centered practices, including those that offer strong clinical training through teacher residencies or professional development school partnerships with schools that use these practices. To make this training affordable, governments should invest in service scholarships that underwrite preparation in such high-quality programs for a diverse pool of talented recruits who commit to teach or lead in high-need schools and fields for at least 4 years.

6. Supports for induction: The federal government should offer matching funds to states to provide more focused and better funded supports for both teacher and administrator induction in the initial years of practice. These investments would support accomplished mentors who engage in student-centered practices with released time to coach beginners in their early years on the job. In well-designed programs, schools could access mentor training offered through universities, regional agencies, or districts and coordinated by the state.

Of course, ongoing support for educators is needed. Professional development time was sacred in the schools we studied. All the schools implemented grade-level collaboration time in which teachers discussed the needs of students they shared, as well as how their curriculum plans might intersect. This supported a focus on student needs and on interdisciplinary planning. However, the schools would have liked time for departmental planning as well, as is common in some better funded innovative schools on the East Coast⁵ and in places like Singapore, Japan, and Shanghai, which offer several hours of collaborative planning time to all teachers each week and additional time to beginners so they can learn from their colleagues and become effective sooner.

In addition to collaboration time, teachers need models of effective instructional practice. To varying degrees, the study schools provided teachers with release time to observe each other's instruction and to engage in professional development around their individual and collective goals. Teachers in each of the study schools benefited from a staff-identified, focused, yearlong area of attention. This focus shapes professional development and enables the staff to dig deep into important topics, such as literacy or academic support. These in-depth examinations of topics enable teachers to learn from each other and collectively define their goals and expectations.

In traditional schools, principals can feel isolated and unsupported, but in both the Envision Education and Linked Learning schools, principals benefit from being part of a larger network. In the Envision schools, principals participate in instructional rounds and leadership huddles. Linked Learning schools and districts belong to a network that shares practices and provides school administrators with the network-level support they need to guide their school's foci for the coming year. School-to-school networks have proven successful in England, Canada, and Australia by providing all schools opportunities to learn together, as well as enabling struggling schools to learn from schools that offer positive exemplars of practice.⁶

To support the professional learning needed to sustain student-centered practices, we recommend:

7. Time for collaboration and learning: States and districts should provide funding for the redesign of schedules to allot time for collaborative teacher learning, curriculum planning, and problem solving, including peer observations and coaching in classrooms. The use of this time can be well-focused by examining authentic student work and focusing on how to strengthen student learning in curriculum building in these settings, as well as professional development and evaluation. A culture of collaboration can also be encouraged by including professional collaboration as a skill to be developed, demonstrated, and “counted” as part of professional competence in the evaluation system.⁷

8. Meaningful professional development and evaluation: States can support meaningful professional development by encouraging individual, school, and district professional development plans, such as those developed by Learning Forward (previously the National Staff Development Council) to help schools move beyond the one-shot workshop to a sustained, practice-based approach.⁸ In addition, states and districts can design teacher evaluation so that it reinforces student-centered practices and rewards collaboration, while supporting goal setting and inquiry to support educators’ growth, supported by colleagues who offer counsel, modeling, and peer observation.

Implementing Student-Centered Instruction and Assessments

Student-centered instruction that includes inquiry and project-based instruction, collaborative learning, relevant curriculum linked to real-world problems and contexts, and performance-based assessments is challenging to implement effectively. In addition to developing expertise in these student-centered practices, educators need to create a balance among competing needs that arise within their classrooms and in their schools. These include:

- instruction that addresses gaps in basic skills and that which is student-directed,
- teacher autonomy and common practices,
- individual classroom-level assessments and common grade-level assessments, and
- student responsibility and opportunities for revision.

When students come to school lacking basic skills and reluctant to persevere through obstacles, the teachers need to modify how they structure instruction. This modification is one that must be negotiated on a school-by-school and a classroom-by-classroom basis, because students vary in their skills and their willingness to take on challenging tasks. The students within the study schools often required substantial direct instruction in order to gain the skills necessary to execute complex projects in which they could then take more of the responsibility for managing their learning. Foundational skills and work habits were often instilled in the beginning part of the year, and revisited periodically, setting the stage for more complex projects.

Key to a student-centered learning environment is instructional coherence, so that students do not need to adapt every class period to new classroom practices, procedures, and expectations. This is particularly true for students who are also struggling to master the academic content. Each of the schools we studied was purposeful in the balance it struck between teacher autonomy and common practices. At each of the schools, a strong school-wide instructional vision and strategy helps provide teachers with clear expectations of what instruction should look like. This, in turn, increases coherence and continuity in student experience across classes. However, room is preserved for teacher creativity and decisions that are responsive to particular students.

In addition, the schools believe that high standards for student work should be demonstrated in an authentic way through a culminating performance assessment. These high-stakes performance assessments require the involvement and commitment of the classroom teachers throughout the students' 4 years in high school. Teachers have to juggle their individual classroom instructional goals with the school-wide assessment goals and actual assessment tasks so they are sure not only that students have completed tasks within their own classrooms, but also that these fit into larger school-wide goals.

The assessment systems also benefit from the instructional coherence created by clear expectations and school-wide assessment rubrics for measuring students' development of cross-cutting skills, such as critical thinking. Each of the schools in the study has clearly articulated life or leadership skills that students need to demonstrate before graduation along with rubrics for assessing those skills. The articulation of these skills reinforces their importance for students, teachers, and parents and also requires teachers to be mindful of these goals in their own instruction and assessments. Instructional coherence also comes into play in terms of teachers' differing abilities to integrate inquiry-based, project-based, and group learning experiences into their instruction. These approaches are challenging to execute well, particularly in subjects like math that traditionally have not been taught this way. Teachers, particularly novices, need more materials and examples for how they can use these strategies in their classrooms. Broad scale sharing of student-centered lesson plans and interdisciplinary projects would be very helpful for furthering the implementation of this approach.

When assessing student learning, the schools keep their eye on the goal of learning rather than on a pacing guide or test preparation. This orientation to assessment means that students have multiple opportunities to revise their work and that if they performed poorly on an assessment they can demonstrate their learning in an alternative way. Educators have to strike a balance between (a) providing students multiple opportunities and alternative ways of demonstrating their learning and revising their work and (b) instilling in their students an ability to complete their assignments with quality in a timely manner. This mastery orientation impacts schools' grading and homework policies as well as how they organize curricula, instruction, and assessments.

To support these practices, state and district policy must also find a balance between common goals and local opportunities for invention and innovation that are tailored to students and our goals for them. Alignment and coherence are important, but they cannot be negotiated entirely at a remote level of government. Once states have adopted high-quality standards and provided curriculum resources for educators to draw upon, their role in guiding practice should be modest, while their role in supporting learning should be robust.

In the NCLB era with its greatly expanded state testing requirements, many schools like these have found that the rich and relevant curriculum they seek to offer has been at odds with the expectations for multiple-choice thinking and teaching posed by high-stakes standardized tests. As a consequence, they have had to try to keep two sets of books, as it were, teaching students to pick one answer out of five on tests of recall and recognition, while also trying to teach them to demonstrate analytical thinking and problem-solving in much more applied and authentic ways.

New assessments that are emerging with the Common Core State Standards may be somewhat more supportive of deeper learning goals, particularly if they are used to inform instruction and improve learning, rather than to sort and label students, teachers, and schools. But even if these assessments

are much better than current tests, they will not provide as deep a set of experiences and insights as the schools' existing performance assessments and portfolios do. It will be important for states and districts to incorporate these kinds of performance-based assessments in their overall conception of the assessment and accountability system.

To encourage and expand successful student-centered instruction and assessment practices in schools, we recommend:

9. More supports, fewer constraints for instruction: Districts, states, and the federal government should support educator learning but limit directives to schools that constrain practice in ways that are not productive for all students and that prevent schools from adopting more successful student-centered practices. For example, curriculum standards should provide information for instructional planning, but not pacing guides or other straitjackets that prevent teachers from meeting students' needs. To evolve a 21st century curriculum that is focused on relevant experiences for a new economy and society, states will need to allow schools to rethink curriculum structures, courses, Carnegie units, credits, grading, and assessments. Governments can support this work with ideas, materials, training, networking, and evaluation, but they cannot standardize it within a regulatory context if it is to succeed.

10. New systems of assessment: Instead of a large number of relatively low-quality state tests that drive instruction, states should adopt a limited set of state-level assessments that support the kinds of deeper learning opportunities central to student-centered schools, and then encourage local use of even more robust assessments that allow students to inquire, investigate, collaborate, present, and defend their ideas, as well as to think critically and be creative. States or districts could provide models of these kinds of assessments and encourage local development for use as part of a broader accountability system that uses multiple measures to inform schools and the public, and that emphasizes meaningful learning for students—as reflected in success on performance assessments and portfolios as well as state tests, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and postsecondary success—as a major goal.

11. Systemic learning: As other successful countries have illustrated, federal, state, and local policies can move practice forward with systemic learning strategies that enable educators, schools, and agencies to learn from one another. States and districts can facilitate this learning by documenting and disseminating successful practices; by supporting school-wide learning so that educators can adopt and adapt successful practices; and by supporting schools in learning from the research and from each other through conferences, networks, site visits, and other strategies. Governments can also develop and explicitly support networks of like-minded schools that are working on similar problems or strategies, so that they can learn with and from each other and share what they learn with the system as a whole.

Conclusion

As this research shows, creating student-centered learning environments offers a promising approach to address the opportunity gap for low-income students of color. Along with other studies that have built a body of evidence about these successful school approaches,⁹ this research has increased our understand-

ing of how to narrow that gap by illuminating the conditions necessary to transform schools serving traditionally underserved students. However, student-centered practices represent a dramatic shift from traditional school approaches. Although some of these practices have been implemented in isolated schools, they have struggled to take hold in an educational policy environment geared toward preparing students to perform on narrowly defined high-stakes tests.

Transforming the kinds of learning spaces most needed by underserved students requires educators who are well-prepared to create authentic learning experiences, grounded in students' lived experiences while addressing their gaps in knowledge and skills. Educators need strong pre-service training as well as ongoing support to ensure that they are meeting students' needs.

Transforming schools requires adequate funding to attract and retain high-quality staff and to provide a rich set of curriculum experiences for students both inside and beyond the school. It also requires that federal and state governments support innovative schools more and mandate less; transform their assessment systems to support deeper learning; and develop systemic learning opportunities among educators, schools, districts, and other agencies. This is no small task, but the practices of the schools in this study—and the contexts that surround them—shed light on the types of teaching and policy supports needed to achieve these goals.

Endnotes

¹ Conley, D. (2011). Building on the common core. *Educational Leadership*, 68(6), 16–20.

² The Equity and Excellence Commission. (2013). *For each and every child: A strategy for education equity and excellence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

³ Guryan, J. (2001). *Does money matter? Regression-discontinuity estimates from education finance reform in Massachusetts*. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁴ OECD. (2014). *PISA 2012 results: What students know and can do—Student performance in mathematics, reading, and science* (Volume I, Revised edition, February 2014). PISA, OECD Publishing.

⁵ Darling-Hammond, L., Aneess, J., & Ort, S. (2002). Reinventing high school: Outcomes of the coalition campus schools project. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), 39–73.

⁶ Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁷ Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). *Getting teacher evaluation right: What really matters for effectiveness and improvement*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁸ Jaquith, A., Mindich, D., Wei, R.C., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *Teacher professional learning in the United States: Case studies of state policies and strategies*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

⁹ Cervone, B., & Cushman, K. (2014). *Learning by heart: The power of social-emotional learning in secondary schools*. Providence: What Kids Can Do; Darling-Hammond, L., Aneess, J., & Ort, S. (2002). Reinventing high school: Outcomes of the coalition campus schools project. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), 39–73; Friedlaender, D., Darling-Hammond, L., Araiza, O., Sandler, S., & Velez-Rocha, V. (2007). *High schools for equity: Policy supports for student learning in communities of color*.

Stanford, CA: School Redesign Network; Newmann, F. M., & Wehlage, G. G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools; Wasley, P. A., Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, N. E., King, S. P., Mosak, E., et al. (2000). *Small schools: Great strides. A study of new small schools in Chicago*. New York: Bank Street College of Education; Wentworth, L., Kessler, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). *Elementary schools for equity: Policies and practices that help close the opportunity gap*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Closing the Opportunity Gap brings together top experts who offer evidence-based essays that paint a powerful picture of denied opportunities. They also describe sensible, research-based policy approaches to enhance opportunities. Available at the following retailers. She is also the Co-Director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE). Professor Carter's research and teaching expertise are in the areas of inequality and the sociology of education, with a particular focus on race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture and identity. That study, *Closing the Opportunity Gap: How Positive Outlier Districts in California Are Pursuing Equitable Access to Deeper Learning*, examines what these seven "positive outlier" districts have in common that may have contributed to their students' success: systemic supports for students' academic, social, and emotional needs; and engagement of families and communities. The school districts in the case studies are: Chula Vista Elementary School District, Clovis Unified School District, Gridley Unified School District, Hawthorne School District, Long Beach Unified School District, San Diego Unified School District, and Sanger Unified School District. Read the report. The CSU Center to Close the Opportunity Gap is a state supported multi-campus initiative with regional networks that collaboratively learn, work, and leverage opportunities across sectors, to support systemic change and advance K-12 students' academic success. Established at California State University Long Beach, and in partnership with San Diego State University, California State University Fullerton and San Jose State University, the Center focuses on identifying and refining proven strategies to eliminate equity gaps at all levels of education. The CCOG shares resources, tools and evidence-based best practices with colleges of education across the CSU and education partners across California. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education ~ Policy Brief. Student-Centered Schools: Policy Supports for Closing the Opportunity Gap. About This Series. Findings from SCOPE's Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap study are published in four case studies and a cross-case analysis, a policy brief, and a web-based educator's tool. To see the full series and related work, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/projects/633>. This research is made possible with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Barn... The Schools of Opportunity project recognizes public high schools that exemplify how research-based practices can challenge and support all students. Since 2015, the National Education Policy Center Schools of Opportunity project has identified and celebrated public high schools that have resisted the test-focused craze of the No Child Left Behind era and "rather than buckling under the pressure to focus solely on student outcomes" have made it a priority also to create strong and equitable opportunities for all students to learn. Drawing upon research described in the book *Closing the Opportunity Gap* (Carter) Further, the school created extra supports for students, including in-class tutors and an...