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The Schools of Opportunity Project

The Schools of Opportunity Project, running from 2015 to 2019, recognized schools that close opportunity gaps for students. The uneven distribution of resources in education systems drives opportunity gaps, limiting the educational experience of some students and frequently resulting in inequitable outcomes. The project implemented a research-based rubric to evaluate public high schools for engaging in proven practices that close opportunity gaps for student learning, challenging the nation's excessive focus on standardized test scores as a measure of quality in schools. In the face of stark inequities across our social and economic systems, some schools do attend to opportunity gaps by adopting research-based practices for improving learning. However, schools that do this are not often publicly recognized for their efforts.

The Schools of Opportunity recognition program established 10 criteria included in the rubric designed to evaluate schools through a review of school materials, site visits, and conversations with students, teachers, and administrators.[1] For example, Criterion 1 asked schools to demonstrate how they "broaden and enrich learning opportunities, with particular attention to reducing disparities in learning created by tracking and ability grouping." Schools answered these questions by submitting documents, such as their course schedules, and evidence, such as enrollment patterns, to show how they afford students broad and rich learning throughout the schedule. For Criterion 1, reviewers (composed of education researchers and practitioners) apply the rubric to ask questions about the evidence, such as the following: Does the curriculum include a range of subjects, activities, and experiences that provide a full, high-quality education? Has the school taken steps toward universal access to accelerated and supported learning opportunities? Similar questions were considered across all criteria for which a school submitted materials; schools that demonstrated advanced or exemplary practices across multiple criteria were considered for recognition.

After the Schools of Opportunity recognition program went into hiatus at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the lessons from the program were collected into a book, *Schools of Opportunity: 10 Research-Based Models of Equity in Action.*[2] Each of the book's 10 core chapters focuses on one of the 10 criteria used to select Schools of Opportunity honorees, and each of these chapters is co-authored by a leader of the recognized school along with a researcher with expertise in the focus area.

The Project yielded five years of rich examples (52 high schools in a wide variety of settings and sizes); for each school, written profiles described some of the school practices as one piece of recognition. The aforementioned book expanded on the stories of recognized schools by capturing the details of how schools developed and sustained practices. In this policy memo, we continue sharing these school examples by discussing key practices of schools in two criteria of the project to demonstrate the positive connections between those school practices and recent research on human learning. From the Schools of Opportunity criteria, we highlight *Criterion 1: Broadening and Enriching Learning Opportunities, with Particular Attention to Reducing Disparities in Learning Created by Tracking and Ability Grouping*, and *Criterion 8: Create a Challenging and Supported Culturally Relevant Curriculum*. Using school examples, we expand these two criteria used in the recognition project and integrate recent literature on learning and development drawn from the *Handbook of the Cultural Foundations of Learning*.[3] We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our analysis for education policy.

Recent Writing on the Connection Between Culture, Learning Environments, and Brain Development

Prior to engaging with school examples, we begin by discussing the evidence base on human learning that supports our analysis. Learning is influenced by a number of factors and includes a "dynamic interplay between neurobiological processes and people's participation in cultural practices."[4] Carol Lee and her colleagues recently analyzed how learning happens within cultural contexts with a focus on neuroplasticity—how people's experiences change the structure of the brain.[5] This research offers important lessons for understanding the interplay between culture and brain science in terms of learning in schools, particularly for students who hold non-dominant racial and ethnic identities.

Additionally, the study of epigenetics explores how gene expression changes as a result of experiences.[6] Research has found that individuals' early experiences influence the expression of their genetically inherited traits. Lee and colleagues point, in particular, to the influence of the cultural and language practices of caretakers, family members, and close community members on the development of infants' neural pathways.[7] These neural pathways act as lenses through which infants make sense of new information. Neural pathways, for example, prime infant brains to recognize and understand familiar words and concepts, contributing to language development.

Human brains are oriented toward social interactions that involve learning from and about other people and toward seeking a sense of belonging in groups.[8] These social interactions,

relationships, and groups are again influenced by cultural practices, creating variation in the ways different people experience social interactions. Lee and her colleagues point to infants' natural tendencies to imitate members of their social groups as an example of how cultural norms and practices relate to our biological human desire to seek belonging.[9]

Because people typically belong to multiple cultural groups, they develop multiple, intersecting, identities and self-representations. Lee and colleagues point to the ways in which features of time and place affect cultural practices, and note that people develop varied skills, habits, and ways of communicating based on their different "communities of practice."[10] Learning occurs implicitly and through observation as well as direct instruction and guidance. According to Lee and colleagues, humans "form long lasting representations of the behaviors [they] witness."[11] Importantly, observation is a significant form of learning that happens before children enter formal schooling. Interactions children observe are mediated and influenced by cultural norms and practices.[12]

Schools represent one important community in the lives of students. The cultural practices in a school building and the relationships between adults and students are driven in part by the policies guiding instruction. We focus on two practices, *detracking* and *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, to discuss how thoughtful implementation can support holistic learning and development stretching beyond any single assessment outcome. To amplify the connections with the evidence base provided by Lee and her colleagues' work on the "braid of human development," we draw on two additional frameworks describing the cultural aspects of learning.

To explore the benefits of detracked course offerings, we draw on Na'ilah Nasir and her colleagues' learning pathways framework, an examination of the cultural influences on pathways by which individuals engage in and access learning over time.[13] We then refer to H. Samy Alim and his colleagues' framework for culturally sustaining pedagogy, which expands on the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy to advocate for learning environments that might sustain cultural practices in historically marginalized communities.[14]

Learning, Access, and Tracking

Learning largely depends on the access young people have to rich, engaging, opportunities in schools. Often, schools block students from participating in challenging learning spaces. Those barriers can be formal or technical (e.g., a student does not have the prerequisites), or they might be informal (e.g., via implicit messages that a class is too difficult). These restrictions are part of a school's culture that create patterns whereby some students experience classes filled with challenges that help them expand beliefs about their learning potential, while other students do not. These patterns of exclusion from the highest quality learning spaces in schools generally fall along lines of race, class, English-learner status, special needs status, and sometimes gender, mirroring other forms of opportunity gaps. Below, we briefly describe one theory of learning to illustrate how barriers might function in a student's trajectory, and we visit a School of Opportunity that worked to remove these barriers.

Nasir and her colleagues[15] describe a framework of what they call "learning pathways" that includes careful consideration for the cultural factors that influence learning. They define learning pathways broadly to encompass how individuals access and engage in learning over time. These pathways are culturally defined and situated; they include cultural practices and forms of participation that are socially constructed by self and others. This framework explicitly calls attention to the multitude of social and cultural factors outside of schools that might shape children's choices and supports as they progress through potential learning opportunities, both inside and outside of schools. Importantly, it also points to the restrictions that students may experience in schools. The culture of a particular school can shape the types of knowledge and skills valued and transmitted, and thus define the roles and expectations of students and teachers while determining spaces and resources for students. By foregrounding cultural norms and expectations, Nasir and colleagues' analysis goes beyond curriculum to recognize the relational and affective elements of learning.

The authors explain that in addition to individual identities and cultural practices, learning pathways "include enactments of privilege and marginalization that structure access to and position various types of learning and students relative to dynamics of power (e.g. racialized, gendered, etc.)."[16] Learning pathways can include formal and informal learning environments. These spaces are in many cases influenced by the same factors driving inequity throughout society, excluding or limiting some students while uplifting others. The authors focus on the social and cultural factors shaping a learner's path, offering examples of pathways of specific individuals and the supports, or missing supports, along the way. They argue that many analyses of learning address singular programs or instructional practices and ignore the wide variety of social and systemic factors that might impact a person's trajectory.

Tracking students can significantly limit student access to learning, creating a culture of scarcity and judgment.

Adopting a learning-pathways lens as defined by Nasir and her colleagues, we direct attention back to restrictions such as tracking's impact on school culture. Academic tracking is grounded in the largely incorrect premise that high-quality instruction needs to be rationed.[17] Specifically, tracking entails sorting students into achievement categories, most often at the middle- and high-school levels. These mechanisms in schools reserve the richest, most challenging coursework for students who are identified as more capable. Sometimes students are labeled through testing, teacher or counselor recommendations, parent requests, or prior coursework. Providing greater academic enrichment *only* for more advanced students creates a school culture that expects some students to internalize and accept that they are not deserving of challenge and investment.

Tracking students can significantly limit student access to learning, creating a culture of scarcity and judgment. Such mechanisms impact students' developing identities—for example, when teachers, counselors, and course schedules tell them that they are "lower track." Limiting access to courses through tracking also creates a technical barrier in a learner's pathway when, for example, courses taken in middle school often restrict the classes they are eligible to take in high school.

Below, we draw on the *Schools of Opportunity* book and use one of the exemplars of Criterion 1 to illustrate how removing barriers to challenging coursework and expanding potential

learning pathways requires much more than simply opening enrollment to all students.[18] Once the door is open to greater challenges, creating a supportive learning culture requires a team effort to closely examine and revise practices that may have been long-standing in previously tracked courses.

An Exemplar of Detracked Learning Opportunities

South Side High is a diverse suburban high school located in a community of 28,000 in Rockville Centre, on Long Island, New York. Current enrollment is 1,067 students. The school is 77 percent White, 10.5 percent Latine, and 7.3 percent Black or African American. Most of Rockville Centre School District's Black students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and live in a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing project. The majority of Latine families reside in Section 8 subsidized apartments in the downtown area of the larger village. By contrast, most of the district's White families earn upper-middle-class incomes. Approximately 18 percent of South Side students, mostly students of color, are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school's old (now reformed) tracked system and its standardized test scores starkly reflected this racial and class divide.

Before they tried detracking, the counselors, administrators, and teachers at South Side tried to make its tracking system more equitable by removing course prerequisites along with recruiting historically disadvantaged students into higher-track classes. But modifying tracking in this simple way did not change enrollment patterns, as students declined the suggested moves or, when moved, would often request moves back to their former (lower) tracks. At this stage in the transformation of South Side, interventions such as support classes and mandatory extra help periods were either nonexistent or underutilized. Additionally, there had been no revisions to the curriculum and assessment models in either the advanced or non-advanced courses.

South Side then tried levelling up the content of its lower-track courses. As a result, the curriculum and expectations in these courses came close to or met the standards associated with the advanced courses. However, teachers found that just sorting students by perceived ability seemed to reduce lower-tracked students' willingness to explore challenging material. The climate in these lower-track courses continued to frame students negatively, even after adjustments were made to the coursework.

South Side High's feeder middle school, followed by South Side itself, then turned to detracking. Over time, the high school encouraged participation by all students in the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. The IB program is a student-centered approach to learning that prepares students for all facets of life after secondary school by focusing on three elements: (a) a diverse, criterion-referenced series of assessments, (b) graded and non-graded student work, and (c) civic-mindedness. These programs are typically reserved for high-achieving students, but South Side took the opposite approach by encouraging all students to take these courses. Once opened to all students, IB participation increased from about 30% to over 80%. Of the participating students, 82% completed an IB English assessment and 72% completed an IB math assessment. In grades 9 and 10, the detracked classes were offered as the standard class. The curriculum was revised to ensure that students

receive the state's Regents diploma—but with the IB assessment model as the template for differentiation and backward mapping.[19]

During the early stages of the reform, IB course work was optional, not mandatory, for students in grades 11 and 12. In later cohorts, all students were required to take IB courses in 11th and 12th grade. More students took the IB classes and the IB exams with positive results. The school's highest achievers continued to succeed in the more heterogeneous IB classes, while the average IB scores for the school's lower achievers were the same or higher after IB classes were offered to all students.[20] Regents Diploma rates followed the same pattern: While the school's high achievers continued to achieve the diplomas at the same rates, its traditionally lower achievers were more likely to achieve them after IB classes were offered to all students.[21]

Supports for Detracking

Those outcomes were driven by the thoughtfulness of South Side's detracking approach with methodical supports to facilitate success. Throughout the process of transforming South Side to meet the new goal, the curriculum and assessment model was revised to support teachers, students, and families. For example, teachers received training, wrote curriculum, and met during professional development workshops as new initiatives were implemented. Parents received information about the changes and provided input during PTA meetings, evening presentations, and Board of Education meetings. Students, in particular, received support in multiple ways:

- Teachers created a common timeline and curricular scope and sequence to ensure instructional consistency among course sections. While teachers still enjoyed a level of autonomy in terms of day-to-day instruction, they also created a series of common assessments that they administered throughout the year to monitor students individually and across sections.

- All classes began with an open "aim" question based on the topic and content for the day. Teachers designed these questions to be accessible to all students while also inviting more detailed analysis from students able to provide it. These questions provided a focal point and objective for students, helping develop a culture where rich questions subject to divergent and sometimes competing perspectives or points of view became the basis for learning and instruction.

- Carefully chosen readings and texts provided students with rich and challenging experiences. Guided reading prompts and scaffolding questions assisted struggling students and guided all students toward sophisticated responses to the aim question.

- Support classes in English Language Arts and mathematics, offered every other day and generally taught by the teachers of the primary classes, provided extra help to all students who wanted to attend. Many non-struggling students, in addition to struggling students, opted to take advantage of these learning opportunities.

- Another optional course, "Math Advanced Topics," introduced topics that exceed-

ed the requirements for the New York Regents exam. This course was designed as a bridge from the Regents-level expectations to South Side's new, higher expectations.

- Revised grading and assessment policies in all detracked classes provided entry points for all students while also promoting high achievement. A new, common, formula for calculating quarterly grades rewarded both process and product.

These elements established an environment that challenges students and offers them supports and flexibility in the systems that guide them through learning opportunities. Teachers work together to craft these opportunities, and families are engaged in the process so that they clearly understand what options are available and how to make the most of the supports.

Connecting Detracking With Research

Detracking the academic pathways for students in public schools is challenging and not widespread. Challenges range from the technical details of adjusting the coursework and making it more accessible to resistance to change from various stakeholders, including students.[22] The implementation of detracking at a school triggers well-documented power dynamics, especially in racially and socioeconomically diverse communities.[23] At the core, however, is the need for a school culture that supports students in the new opportunities made possible by increasing access to challenging coursework.

At South Side, this was a multilayered effort that addressed many of the challenges noted in other reviews of tracking in the broader research literature.[24] For example, Beth Rubin discusses that institutional support for students is critical to the success of detracking.[25] She mentions some of the same ideas highlighted above regarding South Side, such as the creation of supplemental support classes to assist students who are struggling in one or more subject areas as well as meaningful support for teachers striving to implement detracking reform. She also describes the importance of whole-school and district-level changes that create infrastructure for classroom-level detracking reform.

Returning to Nasir and her colleagues' discussion of "learning pathways" as encompassing how students access and engage in learning over time,[26] we now consider the possible interpersonal impacts for students of removing structural barriers in school. For example, detracking may result in more than simply taking challenging classes or receiving AP credits—such as shifts in school culture and relationships that may prove consequential to learning pathway development.

As a school's culture shifts toward high expectations and greater challenge, so might the characteristics of relationships formed between teachers and students. Heavily tested and highly tracked environments shape teacher expectations and beliefs about students.[27] Additionally, students in low-track courses may develop negative perceptions about their own learning ability.[28] These factors shape conversations between students and teachers about their identities as students and their future possibilities. When teachers support students in stretching their learning goals, they encourage students to hold high expectations for themselves.[29] They also create opportunities for new conversations—for example, about students'

interests[30]—which lead to new connections to student life outside the school day. Developing learning pathways in an environment that assumes unlimited potential may allow students to articulate goals and identities that would remain hidden if they were relegated to low-track, low-expectation coursework.

When a school culture encourages students to succeed in challenging learning opportunities and pairs these high expectations with effective family communication, conversations at home may focus less on barriers and more on opportunity. Parental expectations of student success tied with positive relationships with their children's schools have been shown to be linked with positive academic outcomes.[31] Families also create valuable learning opportunities for students that often go unrecognized.[32] When pathways through school are restricted through tracking, family support for students is forced to respond to a system that sorts students, labeling some as less capable than others. In contrast, detracked school environments may invite family engagement and open new avenues for discussion. A school system that views all students as highly capable is a valuable ally to families who hold high expectations for their child's learning potential.

Addressing the role of relationships in learning allows us to expand from an otherwise narrow focus on school achievement outcomes to recognize the broader impacts of detracking on the culture of a school. Taking this broader view, we can consider how detracking can support students' long-term learning and development beyond their K-12 experience, rather than how it might simply raise their test scores. Schools can act as a filter, gatekeeping the richest learning opportunities, or they can catalyze to lifelong learning by offering interesting challenges backed with extensive support. A school's climate and culture include how adults talk *about and with* students and how a school talks *about and with* families; these elements are as critical as opening access to advanced coursework. Tracking still looms as a highly consequential barrier in the learning pathways of many students. Removing this barrier opens possibilities for transforming student experience, not just through access, but by changing the culture of a school. Change includes factors such as the expectations for their success as well as the supports and relationships that provide a foundation for growth.

Learning and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

The next two school examples demonstrate practices that directly support learning through careful attention to cultural experiences of students. Historically, most schools have reflected the culture of White middle-class students.[33] This can be observed through dominant curriculum content that, for example, frames westward expansion of the United States as "manifest destiny" instead of violent colonization; trends in interpretations of behavior wherein Black students' behavior is more likely to be viewed as "blameworthy" than that of White students[34]; and the persisting racial biases in standardized testing that have long been accepted as indicators for learning aptitude.[35] Centering Whiteness in education promotes deficit theory, which positions non-White identities as inferior.[36] One result is that students coming from nondominant cultural backgrounds have often been labeled as lower-performing or oppositional.[37] This research found that students with nondominant identities responded in a variety of ways to a learning environment not valuing or building upon

the cultural capital that they brought from their homes and neighborhoods. Some students embraced dominant norms and expectations, others consciously rejected them, and others embraced and rejected certain norms depending on the context of home or school.[38] Because cultural contexts influence learning and development, education scholars who focus on the academic success of students with historically marginalized racial and ethnic identities have therefore highlighted the need to create school systems and environments reflective of students' home cultures.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) refers to teaching that is "specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment."[39] According to Ladson-Billings, the concept of CRP has three criteria: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.[40] "Academic success" refers to the need for students to experience success in school settings and in the opportunities associated with academic excellence. "Cultural competence" means engaging with students' cultures in service of learning. "Critical consciousness" refers to the focus on more than individual achievement by equipping students to "critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities."[41]

Building on the teaching described by Ladson-Billings, Alim and his colleagues expand from culturally relevant pedagogy and other strengths-based pedagogies and argue for culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as a "critical framework for centering communities."[42] Embracing this framework would move the goals of education toward a system that would recognize and embrace the dynamic nature of culture and appreciate students' cultural backgrounds as strengths in themselves. Importantly, this perspective acknowledges the potential for harm within oppressive school environments, and those working within this framework can take action to prevent or remedy harm to students. CSP is grounded in an understanding of the link between learning and culture, and how they cannot be separated for students. For example, in Lee and colleagues' analysis of human learning, honoring students' cultural identities in school builds on the diverse culturally influenced neural pathways with which they enter school.[43] CSP's focus on pluralism promotes a school system that honors the learning and development of all students, in contrast to mainstream curriculum and teaching approaches that privilege students who developed neural pathways associated with the cultural practices of White middle-class families. Next, we use the CSP framework to help us understand practices observed in Schools of Opportunity, in one case shifting curriculum in response to student critique, and in another designing from the ground up in response to a community vision.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Practice

Schools recognized by the Schools of Opportunity project provide examples of what culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) looks like in practice. Criterion 8 focuses on a challenging culturally relevant curriculum. To gain recognition in this category, schools submitted evidence of courses, assignments, projects, field trips, and other resources and programs related to curriculum. Reviewers focused on whether schools consciously built upon the strengths of students' home cultures, whether instructional content and practices were aligned with students' experiences, and whether schools thoughtfully infused culturally relevant material into content, resources, and enrichment activities.

Here, we focus on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Early College High School (DMLK) in Denver, Colorado, and Native American Community Academy (NACA) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. While the creation of each of these environments differs—with DMLK shifting over time to a culturally sustaining pedagogy and NACA created with CSP from the outset—each illustrates the possibilities of placing CSP at the center of academic practice. Importantly, students, teachers, and administrators from these schools have also engaged in broader efforts to create systemic change beyond their single school, promoting asset-based educational approaches to the rest of their district in the case of DMLK, and across a multi-state network in the case of NACA.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Early College—Shifting to Cultural Sustenance Through Student-Led Activism

The current political moment in U.S. public education is rife with discourse and policy changes intended to erase accurate historical accounts of racism, slavery, and genocide. This erasure creates a revisionist "whitewashed" history, delegitimizes marginalized groups, and maintains the status quo.[44]

In 2019, students at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Early College led a movement to shift their school's pedagogical approach to history instruction—from a White-centered, deficit-based approach to an asset-based one that sees students' cultural backgrounds as strengths, centers joy, and promotes healing.[45]

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Early College is in far northeast Denver, about 15 miles from the city center. Serving students in grades 6-12, this high school has a student body consisting of 61.2% Hispanic/Latine students and 25% Black students, with 80% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.[46]

Before it changed its curriculum, Denver Public School's curriculum tended to gloss over Black history, often presenting it as separate from American history. Additionally, the curriculum took what Alim and colleagues call a "damage-based" approach because the content only focused on the oppression of Black people without acknowledging the contributions or accomplishments of Black historical figures.

DMLK's shift to a culturally sustaining pedagogy was sparked by a visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. A group of high school students traveled with their principal to the museum to enrich and supplement students' classroom learning. The museum focuses on the life stories of formerly enslaved peoples in the United States, emphasizing the complexity of their experiences.

Students noticed that the depth of what they learned at the museum was very different from how they learned about Black history at their school. They expressed their disappointment and concern to their principal during the trip—asserting that they should have been able to learn what they learned at the museum at their own school. With their principal's support, the students created a vision for reform at their own school. Their goal was to change their history curriculum to reflect what they had learned about their own histories in a way that

highlighted the richness and assets encountered in Black history.

Over the next year, students engaged deeply in co-creating new curricular materials. They started by meeting with district staff. Then they met with their history teachers, all of whom were White. After the students gave a presentation to the history department on what they had learned and possible remedies to long-standing problems in the curriculum (specifically, the lack of meaningful engagement with the histories of Black, Latine, and Indigenous populations), the entire department traveled to the NMAAHC. After returning, the history department gave a presentation to the students about the current history curriculum and shared ideas for how they would change moving forward. After changes to the curriculum were solidified in subsequent meetings, the students and history teachers presented the planned curriculum changes to the rest of the faculty.

This process illustrates Alim and colleagues' concept of "decentering Whiteness" in practice. As Alim and colleagues point out, asset-based approaches to pedagogy are often implemented inauthentically and ultimately as a bridge to learning goals that are, "asking young people and families to abandon their languages, literacies, cultures and histories in order to achieve in schools."[47] This occurs when teachers and administrators view curricular content that is related to students' experiences and cultures as an afterthought or as existing only during certain portions of students' time in schools. For example, engaging students in learning about Black history only during Black history month positions Black history as separate from the regular curriculum and does not shift normative ideas about what is important enough to be included in standard curriculum. The process of decentering Whiteness allowed the DMLK community to critically assess their curricular materials, making way for a shift to an approach more likely to sustain the students in their school.

Further, students met with the school board to advocate for curricular changes that would emphasize the histories of Black, Latine, Indigenous and other peoples of color in districtwide curriculum. Next, they started a podcast called "Know Justice Know Peace: The Take." Podcast discussions included youths' perspectives on racial justice issues like the history of policing in their community, district policy related to identity and curriculum, and the need to de-center whiteness in school curriculum. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the podcast became a central part of the students' effort to create changes in their district. Additionally, the podcast itself became an opportunity for students to enact and engage in culturally sustaining learning. By engaging in the process of creating change, students also experienced applied and enriched learning about what was important to them and their community.

Their work contributed to the passage of a Know Justice Know Peace Resolution by Denver Public Schools on October 22, 2020. The board credited student organizers at DMLK for driving this change and working collaboratively with school board members and district personnel. The resolution created policy that recognized the impact of learning materials across subjects in Denver Public Schools by including more humanizing and culturally sustaining curricular materials. That material centered the histories of Black, Latine, and Indigenous peoples and was implemented in K-12 social studies classrooms across the district.

Native American Community Academy—Building Sustenance From the Ground Up

Our second example comes from a school designed with culturally sustaining practices at the core. Serving about 500 middle and high school students in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Native American Community Academy was created in 2005 with a mission of sustaining the cultural assets—such as language, practices, and history—of Indigenous students in the region. The vision of the school seeks to help students become physically, emotionally, and spiritually well; lead their communities; prepare for college both academically and emotionally; and develop confidence in their cultural identities. NACA's perspective highlights a culturally sustaining approach designed as a response to the harmful centering of Whiteness in other educational spaces. Additionally, NACA's approach honors the cultural assets of its Indigenous students as strengths to promote academic success as intrinsically connected to the authentic development and valuing of students' cultural identities.

The establishment of the school began with a community-engaged effort to understand the visions, hopes, and dreams of over 100 partners who were committed to the education of Indigenous youth. The goal of this effort was to shift the Native American educational experience from one driven by assimilation and economic interests to one that re-centers Native languages, cultures, and identities. Community members shared critiques from their own experiences within the education system, including barriers to success like low academic expectations and embedded racism within the school system. Then, community members shared their greatest hopes for change, the vision that drove the creation of NACA.[48] This process of creating the school alongside the community illustrates that centering communities can shift educational spaces towards cultural sustenance. Instead of focusing on mainstream academic outcomes, NACA was created with the educational goal of highlighting and building upon community assets.

Rooted in traditional models and values surrounding leadership, the curriculum invites students to create change for the benefit of their communities.

At NACA, roughly 90% of the instructional day is grounded in Indigenous perspectives. Students learn Indigenous languages and engage with Indigenous literature.[49] Co-teaching models allow teachers to create immersive language environments for students learning a particular Indigenous language.[50] Across the curriculum, instructors include examples and content to embed Indigenous knowledge.[51] To deepen students' understanding of their cultures and identities, NACA has an exchange program for juniors and seniors with their sister schools in New Zealand.[52] The positioning of Indigenous languages and ways of knowing as inherently academic—a perspective absent in mainstream, dominant approaches to education—pushes against the centering of Whiteness in educational settings to shift schooling towards the pluralistic outcomes for which Alim and colleagues advocate.

NACA also strongly emphasizes leadership development for students. Rooted in traditional models and values surrounding leadership, the curriculum invites students to create change for the benefit of their communities.[53] A "critical Indigenous consciousness" involves giving back to the community with an awareness of how Indigenous identities are framed historically, socially, and politically.[54] This includes helping students become aware of the health and social inequities that create challenges in their communities—and giving students the

tools to address those challenges.[55] As a part of this work, students have engaged in different campaigns including addressing violence against women and fighting for voting rights.[56]

Since NACA was created in 2005, a network of affiliated schools has expanded to include 14 schools in and beyond New Mexico. NACA leadership also created a fellowship to support training opportunities for teachers and school leaders in other communities to learn about their culturally sustaining approach. Training delivered by NACA to leaders in other school communities stresses that communities must be at the center of starting or transforming a school. The content of professional development includes providing structures for teacher support, resources on indigenizing curriculum, and communicating principles that can be translated and implemented in other communities.

Research Evidence on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

An important part of Alim and colleagues' concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) is shifting education to a system that values pluralistic cultural assets and outcomes. CSP does not implement nondominant cultural knowledge, language, and experiences in order to lead students to the dominant White-normed outcome.[57] Looking more broadly, Sleeter and Zavala[58] recently conducted a literature review on outcomes related to ethnic studies, found to be a cornerstone of asset-based approaches to pedagogy.

First, engagement in ethnic studies courses promotes a positive sense of identity and self among students of color. For example, Black students who showed an awareness of racism and regard for being Black—a goal associated with ethnic studies and other culturally sustaining approaches—were more likely to succeed in college than Black students who did not have the same awareness and regard for their racial identity.[59] Other research on ethnic studies programs similarly links student enrollment to outcomes such as identity, empowerment, achievement, self-concept, and critical thinking.[60]

Studies of ethnic studies programs do not necessarily measure all elements of what Alim and colleagues describe as CSP. But they do provide evidence for the benefits of engaging students in learning about the histories and cultures of historically marginalized communities. There are positive academic outcomes related to engagement in ethnic studies. For example, research finds that ethnic studies curricula promote academic achievement in reading,[61] math,[62] and writing.[63]

Recent research on ethnic studies exemplifies the positive outcomes associated with engagement in educational experiences that frame students' cultural experiences as assets. One study that examines elements of CSP using "standard" outcomes, like test scores and GPA, suggests CSP *may also* promote additional academic engagement. In 2021, Bonilla, Dee, and Penner[64] examined the impact of ethnic studies courses on student achievement and engagement with school. Their sample included five cohorts of students who attended schools with a policy of automatically enrolling incoming ninth grade students in ethnic studies courses if their eighth grade GPA was below 2.0. The "treatment group" consisted of students whose eighth grade GPAs were slightly below 2.0, and thus were enrolled in ethnic studies courses. The "control group," on the other hand, consisted of students whose eighth grade GPAs were

slightly above 2.0, and so were not automatically enrolled in ethnic studies courses. The "treatment group" students performed better than the control group students on measures of school achievement and school engagement.[65]

Beyond these examples of benefits on student well-being and traditional academic measures, Alim and colleagues describe the importance of learning environments that attend to certain core principles. We saw examples of this in both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Early College (DMLK) and the Native American Community Academy (NACA). By developing curricula drawn from the knowledge of Black, Latine, and Indigenous peoples, both schools departed from traditional, mainstream White normative curricular approaches to encourage students to experience their own cultural backgrounds at the center of their education. At DMLK, the shift to a culturally sustaining curriculum illustrated the process of deconstructing norms in the curriculum that previously went unquestioned. At NACA, the school and community showed what is possible when commitment to Indigenous knowledge influences educational design choices from the outset.

We encourage policies that develop systems to better support the learning of students with nondominant cultural identities.

Additionally, both schools' curricula included a breadth and depth of culturally relevant material, allowing students to recognize the joy and beauty in their cultural heritage, alongside the pain. A central part of the curricula at both DMLK and NACA was engaging students in the real-world application of what they were learning. DMLK students created a podcast, and their advocacy efforts became a part of the curriculum itself. NACA students regularly engaged in efforts to heal and grow with their communities beyond the school. Both schools valued students' contributions to their communities alongside other academic outcomes, with teachers providing space for students to explore the community history, knowledge, and practices relevant to their lives both in and out of school. Schools have typically not done a good job of supporting students with nondominant cultural identities, but DMLK and NACA show that they can.

From their example, we encourage policies that develop systems to better support the learning of students with nondominant cultural identities. This would include, where possible, divesting from systems of accountability rooted in understandings of how students learn, and what they should learn, that are based on White cultural experience. Doing so would make room for culturally sustaining curricular and pedagogical approaches. While schools like DMLK, NACA, and limited others have succeeded in designing and supporting challenging culturally relevant curricula within the constraints of local, state, and national education policy contexts, these schools are the exception, not the norm.

Forming policy environments that operate from a better understanding of the cultural nature of learning, and that encourage the development and implementation of systems that reflect this understanding, is a vital starting point. Additionally, these examples highlight the benefit of engaging youth, families, and community members to design and implement culturally sustaining school environments. By drawing on the strengths of knowledge and cultural practices of students' homes and communities, schools have the potential to become more enriching, engaging, and sustaining.

Conclusion

Our brief analysis here is limited by several factors. The Schools of Opportunity recognition program sought to elevate stories of schools that have demonstrated exemplary work across 10 research-based criteria, and as a result, these examples are exceptions to mainstream schooling norms—meaning that their stories may be difficult to generalize. Because these promising practices are not widely used, there are few far-reaching systematic analyses that demonstrate the benefits of the approaches we highlight. School leaders and policymakers can look to these Schools of Opportunity as guides for how to proactively reframe learning goals and outcome measures. Such a reframing could facilitate transformative work and allow for progress to be tracked using measures that encourage holistic interventions such as those described here.

Looking at schools as sites of cultural activity situated in broader networks of student experiences reframes achievement toward more diverse learning outcomes and drives questions about the purpose of schooling. Rather than focusing on achievement measured by test scores, one might consider outcomes such as the following:

- How does a school culture support or inhibit the lifelong learning pathways a student might pursue beyond the school curriculum?

- How does a school prepare students to navigate complex realities such as racism and the erasure of history and cultural practices?

These types of questions about the goals of learning in school represent a framing grounded in the reality of students' lived experiences, the challenges students face across multiple spaces in their lives, and the roles schools might play in response to these challenges. However, attempting to use the typical summative assessments, such as test scores, for answers to such questions will not provide an accurate understanding of student learning across these domains. Education systems also need assessment practices that would better measure progress toward holistic goals for students.[66]

Some schools do acknowledge the intricate cultural nature of learning and prioritize a holistic vision of student needs, beyond outcomes that centralize achievement scores on tests. And some schools, like those recognized in the Schools of Opportunity program, have taken extra steps to create structures to address student development and learning to ensure all students are experiencing a broad and diverse set of opportunities to grow in academics and beyond. The stories here focus on one criterion in each school case and how it intersects with recent academic writing on learning and development. However, each of these schools also does much more across all Schools of Opportunity criteria to meet the needs of their students.

For example, South Side has revamped many aspects of its programs to focus on mental health and wellness while undertaking detracking; DMLK and NACA support culturally sustaining pedagogy while also offering rigorous experiential learning opportunities. All three schools described here are strongly devoted to treating their teachers as professionals. Schools of Opportunity do not approach student needs with a singular remedy; all of them recognize the need to blend overlapping supports to allow for the greatest learning potential.

This is also a key lesson from recent research on learning and human development, leading us to envision a system where all students attend schools that recognize their unique blend of culture and encourage growth in every aspect of their lives.

Notes and References

1   See https://schoolsofopportunity.org/selection-criteria. The 10 criteria are as follows:
    1. Broaden and enrich learning opportunities.
    2. Create and maintain a healthy school culture.
    3. Provide more and better learning time.
    4. Use multiple measures to assess student learning.
    5. Support teachers as professionals.
    6. Provide rich, supportive opportunities for students with special needs.
    7. Provide students with additional needed services and supports.
    8. Enact a challenging and supportive culturally relevant curriculum.
    9. Build on the strengths of language minority students.
    10. Sustain equitable and meaningful parent and community engagement.

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