

THE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROMISE

Toolkit Executive Summary

Principle 1: Prioritize Student-Centered Learning

Designing learning experiences that center students' strengths, needs, interests, and aspirations, so every learner is prepared for real life in the real world.

Purpose

Advance the Public Education Promise by supporting districts in making student-centered learning the norm rather than the exception. Experiences where curiosity, agency, belonging, and real-world relevance shape how students learn and how adults design learning.

This toolkit will help district leaders:

- Understand what student-centered learning looks like in practice,
- Build systems that elevate student voice and agency, and
- Provide ready-to-use tools educators can implement tomorrow.

Core Understandings

Student-centered learning is rigorous, relational, and future-driven. It recognizes that:

- Students thrive when they have agency and meaningful roles in shaping their learning journeys.
- Life skills and academic skills develop together, reinforcing each other along the way.
- Belonging, safety, and identity matter. Students learn best when they feel seen, valued, and known deeply.
- Learning extends beyond classrooms through community partnerships, service learning, career-based experiences, and extracurriculars.
- Co-creation is essential. Students, teachers, families, and community partners collaborate to design relevant learning and pathways toward mastery.

Key Insights from Participants

1. Student Agency Must Be Designed into Systems

Team members emphasized that agency doesn't happen by accident. It must be engineered into daily classroom practices and district systems. Districts can expand meaningful student voice through structures such as:

- Anchoring instruction to feedback that privileges student learning as a partnership with both teachers and their peers.
- Co-creating classroom norms.
- Providing students opportunities to set goals and make meaningful choices in learning and assessments.
- Policies that include students to provide input on their learning.
- Student advisory councils, student seats on school boards and staff committees.
- Leadership retreats and summits for students.
- Green teams and sustainability leadership.
- Student-led community presentations.

These practices strengthen belonging, accelerate leadership development, and give students authentic power to shape policy, culture, and learning experiences. When students are decision-makers, not just participants, engagement and ownership rise dramatically.

2. Portrait of a Graduate (or Learner) Brings Coherence

Leaders affirmed that durable skills only become teachable when systems create shared clarity. A Portrait becomes actionable when districts:

- Develop rubrics or learning progressions for core competencies.
- Use shared planning frameworks to guide learning design.
- Adopt common language across classrooms and community spaces.
- Align teacher evaluation, student evidence, and professional learning.

This coherence drives consistency, reduces fragmentation, and moves the Portrait from a visionary poster to a living framework woven into curriculum, culture, and classroom practice. When everyone speaks the same language of learning, students experience transparent expectations and purposeful pathways toward mastery.

3. Creating a Sense of Belonging in Districts, Schools, and Classrooms is Essential

Team members agreed that student-centered learning is only possible when belonging is intentionally cultivated across the system. Students learn best when they feel emotionally and psychologically safe; known deeply, respected fully, and connected to their learning community.

Research shows that belonging strengthens academic engagement, boosts well-being, and is especially critical for students from historically marginalized groups as well as gifted learners who may experience isolation or masking.

Key elements include:

- Ensuring students and educators feel seen and valued through daily interactions, inclusive practices, and high expectations for all.
- Supporting learners' growth in ways that protect dignity and identity, including culturally responsive practices and affirming feedback.
- Honoring learners' lived experiences and weaving their perspectives into curriculum, conversations, and community rituals.
- Creating emotionally safe learning environments where students can take risks, express curiosity, and collaborate without fear of judgment.
- Building consistent, trusting relationships that anchor engagement, persistence, and long-term well-being.

4. Community Partnerships Expand Learning Within and Beyond School

Districts shared that real-world connections elevate learning when partnerships move beyond "events" to ongoing collaboration.

Examples included:

- Civic and government partnerships, (e.g., Joint projects with Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Agencies)
- Partnerships with businesses and nonprofits (e.g., No Place for Hate, Junior Achievement)
- Higher Education Partnerships
- Cultural and place Based Learning Opportunities (e.g., Museums, Science Centers)
- Service-learning, entrepreneurial experiences, and workforce-connected pathways

These partnerships strengthen curriculum, expand access to mentors and experts, and help students map learning to future careers and civic contributions. When community partners are co-creators, not just visitors, students experience learning that is relevant, relational, and real.

5. Student-Centered Learning Requires Parallel Supports for Adults

Leaders emphasized that student-centered learning is only sustainable when adults have clarity about expectations, and they experience agency, and belonging, too. Priorities included:

- Human-centered professional learning that honors teachers' strengths and interests
- Structures for creativity, collaboration, and wellness
- Strong induction and mentoring systems
- Hiring educators with dispositions aligned to student-centered values
- Creating Career Ladders to support ongoing growth for educators

Districts also noted the importance of tools that reduce complexity and cognitive load:

- Planning templates and generative AI-assisted unit design
- Ready-to-use protocols for curiosity, collaboration, and reflection
- Clear measurement tools such as rubrics, self-assessments, and portfolio templates

In a time of educator shortages, supporting the adults who support students is essential for scalability, stability, and transformational impact.

Conclusion

Student-centered learning fulfills the first, and foundational, promise of public education: to nurture every learner's potential by designing experiences that reflect real life in the real world. When students have meaningful agency, when learning is coherent and competency-driven, when belonging and identity are honored, and when community partnerships connect learning to purpose, they grow into confident, curious, future-ready adults.

This work also requires parallel supports for educators, ensuring they have the clarity, tools, and well-being necessary to bring these practices to life every day. Together, these insights point toward a system where every learner is known deeply, challenged appropriately, and supported to thrive. One where student-centered learning becomes the norm, not the exception, across our schools and communities.

Principle 1 Toolkit Work Group Members

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