TEACH +PLUS

The Phoenix Project:
Building An Equitable Educational System Beyond the Pandemic

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The Phoenix Project:
Building An Equitable Educational System Beyond the Pandemic

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The Innovation Imperative

The Phoenix Project was born in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and rooted in the teachers' desire not to return to normal, but instead to use everything they were learning about themselves, their students, and education to innovate and build a system that is better and more equitable than ever before. The teachers imagined our education system like a phoenix, rising from the ashes of tragedy and injustice. Educators are natural problem-solvers and they felt the opportunity to reimagine education was long overdue.

Teachers aren't the only ones. The pandemic closed early learning programs, schools, and colleges for more than 98 million learners. The result is what the Hunt Institute calls a "COVID constituency" of Americans looking for solutions to the challenges facing our schools.[1] Teachers, students, families, and many others want to seize the moment.

For all of us at Teach Plus, the Phoenix Project has made one thing clear: Instead of treating the COVID-19 pandemic as a catastrophic setback, teachers want to take its lessons and lead the way to a better, more equitable education system. Guided by their new vision, we believe we must focus on the interconnected efforts that would transform our education ecosystem. We want to place children, educators, and communities at the center of the work, and to shape an education system based on what we know about how people grow and learn. In this report, we present teachers' ideas and a blueprint for change, including specific recommendations for state, district, and national policymakers on how to make the Phoenix Project vision a reality.

Methodology

Design thinking is a process used to solve problems in unique and creative ways. Rather than jumping to solutions, design thinkers explore the root causes of the problem and work to unleash their creativity in identifying user-designed solutions.

In April 2021, 175 educators from 30 states gathered virtually for the launch of the Teach Plus Phoenix Project, a design thinking event to reimagine teaching and learning and create a more equitable education system beyond the pandemic. Led by 16 Teach Plus teacher leaders, the participants joined four design thinking groups to help shape interconnected solutions to improve the system: Thriving Students; Thriving Teachers; Engaged Families and Communities; and Teaching and Learning for the 2020s. These four themes were generated by the Teach Plus National Policy Advisory Board made up of 20 Teach Plus teacher leaders from across the country.

During the design thinking process, the teachers **empathized** with students and families as they considered their experiences and needs; **defined** the problems that act as barriers to equitable and effective education systems; **brainstormed** ideas and then **prototyped** solutions to these barriers; and, finally, **tested** those solutions over the course of multiple virtual engagements.
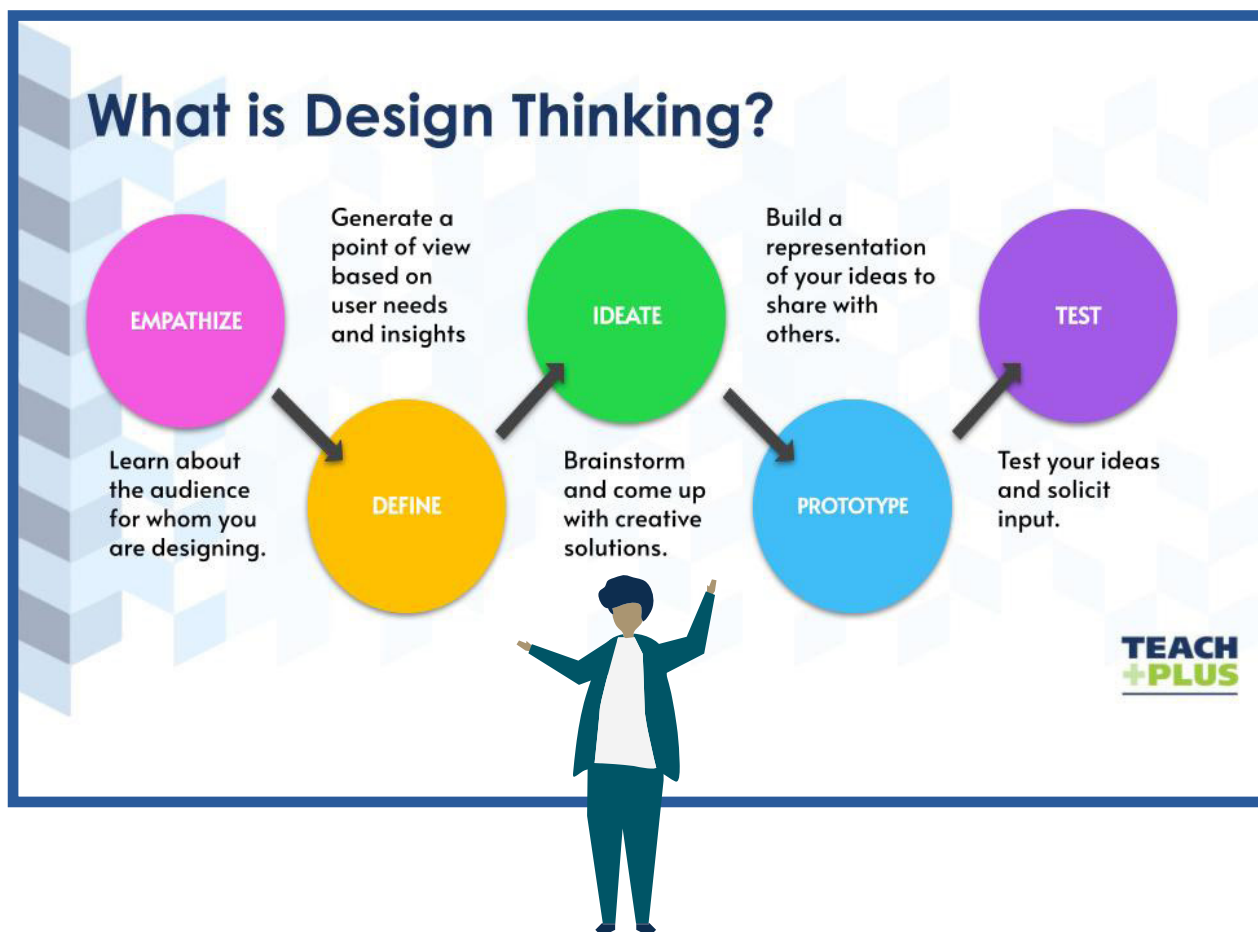
THRIVING STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

All too often in our educational system, schools are arranged around the "banking concept of education."[2] Schools are set up to treat students as empty containers waiting for the teacher to pour information into them. Later, students are expected to repeat back this information on standardized assessments measuring rote memorization rather than critical thinking. Many school systems fail to provide relevant and culturally inclusive curriculum, covering material that seems disconnected from students' lives, families, and cultures. They may provide assignments that are far below grade level.[3]

Our school system frequently fails to reflect the science of learning. It may fail to differentiate instruction for students' learning styles and prior learning or ignore trauma that—without proper support—may impede students' ability to learn. Far too often, schools perpetuate racism and other forms of bias and tolerate or instigate traumatic experiences. In this section, we explore what an educational system that empowers students to thrive looks like by **reimagining what we teach and how we teach it**.

"Students need to have their identity honored in the classroom. They must see themselves in the texts and materials that are used in order for educators to teach the key skills and standards."**—Sheila Weathers, Teach Plus Nevada teacher leader**

ENACTING THE VISION FOR THRIVING STUDENTS

IMAGINE A SYSTEM where students bring their full selves to school; see their identities, cultures, interests, and neighborhoods reflected in their instruction; and learn critical thinking and social and emotional skills through meaningful, relevant projects. In this reimagined school system, students would be able to connect their learning to their communities and their futures and have their identities, cultures, and histories affirmed in the classroom. In this system, students become change agents because their school curriculum has cultivated self-aware, thriving learners.

1 REIMAGINE WHAT WE TEACH.

Students need instructional materials that offer mirrors of their own experiences—validating them, their families, and their cultures—and windows into new worlds and communities they have not yet imagined. They also need standards-aligned instruction that challenges them with grade-level material. Students need to see school as deeply connected to their present and their future, engaging in ongoing, project-based learning.

- **Adopt high-quality, culturally affirming instructional materials and equal access to advanced coursework.**
  Despite the availability of curricular materials' ratings based on their alignment with standards, schools and districts must focus on identifying materials that reflect a diversity of authors, perspectives, protagonists, and more.[4] And while there are some widely available curriculums with diverse representation, it will always be necessary for schools and districts to provide teachers with the support they need to customize curriculum to the unique student makeup in their own classrooms and neighborhoods. Equally as important, schools must support educators in understanding the "why" and the significance of culturally affirming instructional materials as teachers engage with them. Finally, schools must offer equitable access to advanced coursework, including Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment programs.[5]

- **Adopt relevant, real-world project-based learning.**
  Real-world projects can tie together multiple subjects, integrate social-emotional learning with academic learning, and allow students to choose subjects that are of direct interest to them and contribute directly to their communities.[6] For example, students can propose policy solutions to their school boards and legislatures, lead community-based projects, produce works of art, teach their own classes, and invent new products. Partnerships with community-based organizations, businesses, and families further strengthen student engagement and learning.[7]

2 REIMAGINE HOW WE TEACH.

A key lesson from the pandemic is the ongoing need to address student mental health in response to the devastating effects of COVID-19, poverty, racism, violence, and other forms of trauma that affect students' ability to succeed in school. Another lesson is rethinking the school day for teachers and students to allow for flexible groupings, more time for group work, personalized learning, and self-care.

Reimagine the school day and year.

Innovations in both the delivery of instruction and the structure of school have the potential to improve equity, accessibility, mental health, and executive functioning skills. Schools and districts should adopt flexible learning in and out of school, restructuring the school day to allow for this additional flexibility. Schools and school districts can also consider having teachers "loop" with their learners, following them up from one grade to the next.[8,9]

Address student mental health.

Brain science demonstrates that students cannot learn when their amygdala is activating a fight-or-flight response. That is why it is imperative for school systems to address student mental health. This effort must include a combination of on-site mental health resources such as school counselors, educator training in trauma-informed instruction practices and mental health first aid, and safe, nurturing school environments where students can thrive.

LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION: TEACHERS ENACTING A VISION OF THRIVING STUDENTS

Aimee Parra, Teach Plus New Mexico teacher leader

"My kindergarten class is like a small-town community. We each hold important roles that make learning fun and engaging. Each day, Shyla, our 5-year-old mayor, shares our learning goals and reviews academic skills previously covered. Olive, our meteorologist, shares the daily weather report and Aziah, our record keeper, reminds me to record our Zoom session for those absent that day. All of my students regularly participate in discussions about the logistics of the day and our learning goals. My teaching through these leadership roles has increased my kindergartners' achievement in written language, communication, and other academic skills.

This experience has opened my eyes to the learnings we can take from the pandemic and the possibilities of reimagining our schools so we can better serve our students and communities. We should examine the most important skills our students need for a successful future. To me, these skills begin with social emotional learning."

"COVID-19 laid bare the disparities in education as poor students, who are disproportionately from communities of color, were seemingly shut out if they did not have access to a laptop or Wi-Fi. However, there's a silver lining when it comes to distance learning: empowerment. Only through empowering our students to value their education will we see success during virtual learning. Therefore, if we want to continue striving for academic success and educational equity, teachers must empower their students by diversifying their curriculum to become unabashedly anti-racist and liberating.

To empower my student Juan, I wanted him to look at writings from Christopher Columbus and other conquistadors about their feelings toward Mesoamerican tribes, half of Juan's cultural ancestry. I showed Juan different videos and documents detailing his culture before, during, and after colonial exploration. We had incredibly powerful conversations about his culture and his love for every part of its history. Juan realized that from looking at his history, his knowledge became his power. He also started to ask questions and push my thinking as a teacher and gatekeeper of American knowledge."

Travon Jefferson, Teach Plus Texas teacher leader

"Recently, I adapted a lesson from 'Teaching Tolerance' called 'Countering Islamophobia.' In this lesson, we looked at the experiences of people stereotyped based on their religion, race, and gender. When discussing these scenarios, my students began to tell their own stories of feeling marginalized, belittled, and stereotyped. I then invited them to create an ad campaign that identified a specific stereotype, discuss how the stereotype may affect how one sees their identity, and demonstrate how they could change people's perspectives. The results were amazing.

Especially in this moment, we have an opportunity to reimagine what school looks like beyond just addressing the lost instructional time and COVID-19 trauma. We have a chance to really listen to our students, to leverage their strengths and insights, to look at them as partners in creating learning experiences, and to elevate their voice."

Amber Riehman, Teach Plus California teacher leader
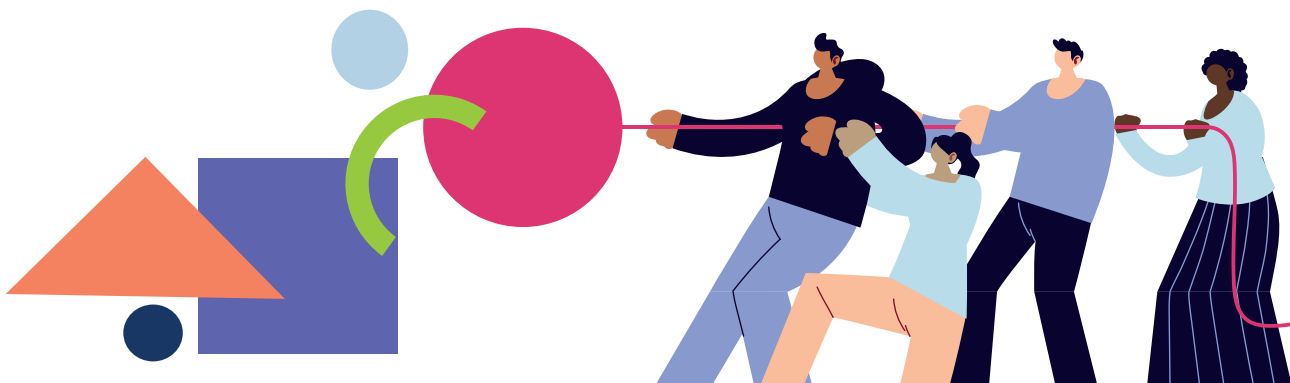
THRIVING TEACHERS

> "We teach because we want to build a strong society of healthy, successful people. Trust us educators to know what our students need and how we can lead them to academic and personal greatness."
>
> **—Kristen Rhodes Beland, Teach Plus Rhode Island teacher leader**

INTRODUCTION

For too many teachers, the profession is flat, changing little from day one until retirement. Overwhelmed with student loans from educational institutions that focused more on theory than on providing enough real-life experience in the classroom, many educators have not been given the tools necessary to teach the whole child in a 21st Century classroom. School districts often do not provide the mentorship educators need, teachers receive few opportunities to lead in their schools and even fewer chances to make their voices heard at decision-making tables. Many teachers, especially teachers of color and teachers in other marginalized groups, are discouraged from being themselves at school, facing discriminatory dress codes, rules, and norms. Finally, long hours, low pay, little time for collaboration and planning, and insufficient attention to teacher mental health take a toll on teachers and drive attrition.

ENACTING THE VISION FOR THRIVING TEACHERS

IMAGINE A SYSTEM that attracts, supports, retains, and grows excellent, resilient educators who reflect the diversity and brilliance of their student bodies, and who have differentiated opportunities to lead and learn throughout their careers. To build this system, we must build societal and systemic trust in our educators. This is a system where teacher voice is at the heart of all decisions and leadership is no longer seen as an administrative role, but includes a collective and collaborative voice bringing positive, impactful change for all students.

1 RECRUIT AND RETAIN TEACHERS WHO REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF THEIR STUDENTS.

Research demonstrates that teachers of color make a difference for all students, especially students of color.[10] Yet the diversity of our teaching force does not reflect the growing diversity of our nation's students. Policymakers and school leaders must emphasize the retention and recruitment of teachers of color by building and holding schools accountable for culturally affirming school environments that allow teachers and students to bring their whole selves to school.[11] They must build career ladders for teachers of color, engaging diverse teacher leaders to mentor and support their colleagues, and they must make teaching affordable through investing in high-quality preparation pathways and offering the compensation that teachers deserve.

2 PREPARE TEACHERS FOR THE COMPLEX WORK OF TEACHING.

Teachers need to be well-prepared before becoming a teacher of record, receive strong induction and mentoring, and continue to have opportunities for relevant professional learning in all the years that follow.

Form the Whole Teacher Preparation Consortium.

To improve how we prepare educators, a consortium of states could form a whole teacher preparation model, following which educators would be licensed to teach in all participating states. The model would begin in high school, providing hands-on teaching experiences and internships for aspiring educators. Preparation programs would include the science of learning, social-emotional learning, family engagement, cultural competence, trauma-informed instruction, and equity, in addition to content-specific pedagogy.

The Whole Teacher Preparation Consortium would offer opportunities for observations and student teaching in a wide range of communities, and culminate with a year of student teaching. Aspiring teachers would play key roles in schools, helping to accelerate learning for students who need individualized attention and free up teachers of record to lead teams of teachers or conduct deep dives with small groups of students. This model would be a building block in reimagining school staffing and teacher preparation, and provide an example to elevate the field.

3 DISTRIBUTE LEADERSHIP.

Rather than relying on a superhero principal, the best schools distribute leadership to teachers who are engaged in planning, goal setting, and leadership of their peers. This includes purposefully affording leadership opportunities to teachers of color and supporting and affirming them as they take on leadership roles. Effective distributed leadership structures sustain new teachers, retain effective teachers, build strong school culture, and build a diverse talent pipeline with positive benefits for years to come.

- **Extend the reach of great teachers**.
  Rather than adhere to an antiquated model in which every teacher, regardless of expertise, experience, and skill, teaches the same caseload as every other teacher, schools should think creatively about leveraging outstanding teachers to benefit the largest possible number of students. Schools should organize themselves so that newer teachers, or those still building key skills, could partner with outstanding teacher leaders. This would give more students access to experienced educators—and provide early-career teachers with the mentoring necessary to become teacher leaders themselves. Opportunities for experienced educators could include higher-paid, multi-classroom leader roles to enable the school to leverage the talents of every educator in the building to advance student learning.[12]

- **Empower strategic grade-level teams and professional learning communities**.
  Teachers learn best from and alongside fellow teachers. Grade-level teams and professional learning communities can act as a key lever to improve teacher practice and advance student learning. Schools should identify outstanding teachers and provide them with training, compensation, and time to lead teams of fellow teachers as they analyze data, set goals, and collaborate to advance student learning.[13]

- **Establish teacher cabinets**.
  Districts, states, and federal decision-making bodies should create teacher cabinets or leverage other mechanisms for engaging current classroom teachers in the decision-making process. To form these cabinets, decision-makers would use a selection process to identify demonstrably effective, diverse, and solutions-oriented teachers. These teachers would be trained to provide specific input, such as leadership skills and policy content. At least once a month, cabinet members would provide real-time input to decision makers on current issues. In addition, they would select important topics and engage in ongoing research, providing policy recommendations related to teaching and learning.

4 SUPPORT TEACHER WELL-BEING.

Educators cannot give their very best to their students if they themselves are overwhelmed, burned out, and feeling hopeless. Recent research has shown that a significant majority of teachers believe their schools are doing too little to support their mental health.[14] Schools should organize themselves to support emotionally thriving teachers, listening to the teachers themselves as they customize a strategy that meets the needs of their faculty. For example, schools could reimagine the work day for educators to include time for teaching, collaboration, professional learning, and self-care. Schools could also provide professional learning or on-site resources, such as yoga classes and counselor or coach visits, to address educator mental health and well-being.

LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION: TEACHERS ENACTING A VISION OF THRIVING TEACHERS

Brandi Sapp, Teach Plus Indiana teacher leader

"As I was s observing Mrs. Lopez, a brand-new teacher straight out of her student-teaching experience, she asked the students to open Google Slides and make a Top 10 list of favorite music to create a 'playlist of you.' And that was the end of the instructions. Students had endless questions about the assignment, but they weren't sure they even wanted to bother asking questions in order to properly do this cringy activity. As an instructional coach, I was disheartened. I see three key challenges for new teachers: the lack of practice with 'real life' lesson planning; an absence of understanding of assessment; and an unpreparedness for dealing with the social-emotional landscape of the public school classroom.

More rigorous requirements for planning while in a student-teaching experience along with mentor planning in the first year of teaching would make for more successful teachers who are able to immediately help their students. Reducing the new teachers' teaching responsibilities to leave time for observation, mentoring, and co-teaching could leave the time for them to grow in assessment practices as well as many other areas of their professional practice. Giving new teachers more space and experience to develop under the guidance of expert mentor teachers in a variety of classrooms supports their ultimate success."
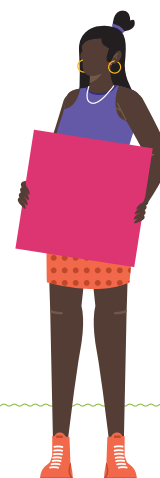
"As a teacher leader of color, it is extremely important to me to be in a position to influence and mentor other staff members, and to train and develop teachers into leadership roles so we can both recruit educators of color and maintain a diverse pool. As part of my Teach Plus Change Agent project, my team and I became role models for other teachers of color to take on leadership positions. We provided opportunities for our colleagues to participate in weekly parent and student outreach meetings to increase student engagement in school. We initiated monthly awards to affirm teachers' excellent work and increase their morale. We focused on social and emotional support of the teachers to buttress school culture, educator retention, and recruitment.

Most of all, we listened and took action. When teachers shared that they were overwhelmed, overworked, and struggling with adversity, I convinced district staff to implement three uninterrupted planning days for teachers to work in their classrooms. Educators jumped on the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, communicate with parents, develop scope and sequences, and prepare for the upcoming weeks of school in a relaxed and comfortable setting."

Raymond Xochitlpìlli Falcòn, Teach Plus Texas teacher leader

ENGAGED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

Though family engagement is a critical ingredient for student success, it often does not receive the same amount of time, cognitive energy, and systemic planning and alignment as other elements within a school improvement plan. That may be because our education system is set up to deprioritize cultural competence and the belief that families have the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems to effectively implement best practices. It may also be because school systems have not provided teachers with the technology, support, and time to engage with and learn from families. Finally, family and community engagement can be at its worst when school leadership and staff fail to reflect the diversity of the students they serve.

ENACTING THE VISION FOR ENGAGED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

IMAGINE A SYSTEM in which **we turn relationships into partnerships,** where families and communities are honored partners in schools and student learning and see their ideas, cultures, and vision for their children reflected in their schools. In such a system, we move far beyond the emails to caregivers and parent-teacher conferences, engaging families as leaders in school communities and partners in their children's learning. In this system, families and community leaders partner with teachers and school leaders to create a vision for the school; students' cultures and traditions are reflected in their learning and in the diversity of school leadership and staff; and moving from home to school, and back again, feels almost seamless.

1 EMBRACE FAMILY LEADERSHIP AND EXPERTISE.

School systems must prioritize professional development on family engagement and cultural competence and adjust schedules and communication tools, consistency, and strategies to ensure that parents have the opportunity to engage.

Reimagine Family University.

For our systems to be aligned and work together to provide clear access for families to advocate and engage in an equitable education for their children, we must provide authentic learning opportunities for families. Oftentimes, parents have trouble helping their children with homework because they have not been engaged in understanding the school's pedagogy. Family University would allow families and children to learn the content side by side, reinforcing the value, importance, and love of learning. In a reimagined Family University, teachers could also model the importance of family culture and expertise by inviting family members—parents, grandparents and caregivers—to teach lessons as well.

● **Build out home visits.**
Home visits can serve as one of the strongest tools for strengthening relationships and helping to set the stage for engaged parents and thriving students. Programs in which teachers are compensated to conduct home visits have demonstrated significant positive benefits, including improved student engagement, increased belief by teachers in students' ability to grow, and strengthened partnerships between teachers and families. One example is the Home Visit Project.[15]

2 ENSURE SCHOOL LEADERS AND EDUCATORS COME FROM THE COMMUNITY.

One of the best ways to build family and community engagement in schools is to ensure that school staff and leaders reflect the community.

- **Form Grow Your Own programs**.
  Universities and school systems should institute Grow Your Own Programs in which school-based staff such as paraprofessionals, parents, and other members of the community receive an opportunity to pursue a teaching license. A second strategy is for school systems to set clear educator diversity goals, working to revamp recruitment, hiring, and retention practices to ensure that educators reflect and come from the communities they serve.

LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION: TEACHERS ENACTING A VISION OF ENGAGED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Tasha Jones, Teach Plus Massachusetts teacher leader

"COVID-19 has intruded into our daily lives, health, jobs, schools—and everyone has had to make vast adjustments. While there are challenges, this crisis has also made us more aware, creative and loving, propelling us into positions we may or may not be trained to handle. As an educator, I wondered how my students' parents are feeling. How can I, as a teacher, support them? So, I asked.

The parents' responses moved me to action. I wanted them to know I am here as a source and resource for school and beyond. So, I made it a point to contact parents to let them know we can do this and get through this together, and I outlined clear steps for how I can assist them. First, I asked my parents what they needed. As a working mother, I know how hard it is to focus on anything if my children are hungry or in need. I asked the parents if the children had food, computers, or internet access. I then assigned lessons to the students, but informed the parents with information as to what was required and how to complete the task—just in case parents needed to assist their child. I did not want any parent to feel as if they could not help their child."
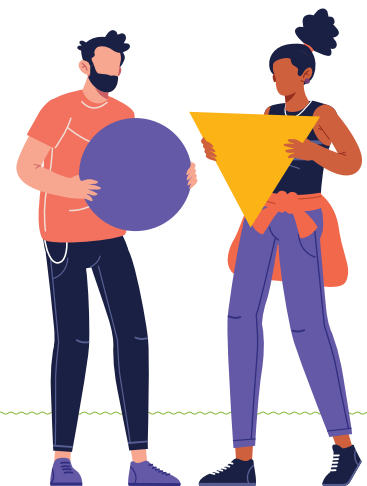
"I extend my kindergartners' experience through the power of diverse books, like The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats.[16] We make personal connections with our experiences in mountain snows. We talk about Peter, the main character, as he makes snowballs and snow angels and has snow plop on his head. We have read many books with characters from many cultures, but Peter is special. Peter, in my experience growing up in a mostly white community, was the first person of color represented in a picture book. My kindergartners consistently express awe at this detail and respond with curiosity.

This year especially, hybrid learning has allowed parents to share this experience, and some have joined us as we read and explored together. Knowledge is inspiring."

Peggy Wallace, Teach Plus Colorado teacher leader

TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR THE 2020s

"There must be systemic change in order for us to reach a place where all students have equitable learning opportunities. We need to use data to inform policy changes, restructure the school day and time and how teachers teach, and include families and students in the process."

—Marissa Castañón-Hernandez, Teach Plus Texas teacher leader

INTRODUCTION

According to the TNTP report *The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It*, 94 percent of students start with college as a part of their plans.[17] Yet gaps in four essential ingredients—grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations—can put those dreams out of reach for too many. These gaps can be caused by lack of high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials, assessments that measure only rote memorization, and one-size-fits-all systems that fail to address the needs of English learners and students who qualify for special education services.

Students are also held back by the digital divide. During the pandemic, one in five teens ages 13 to 17 reported being unable to do their homework because of unreliable internet access.[18] Twelve million children were without internet access altogether. Teach Plus teacher leaders regularly reported that students sat in fast food restaurant parking lots to use the WiFi, though their families couldn't afford to buy a meal at those same restaurants.

IMAGINE A SYSTEM that is both nurturing and joyful, and celebrates the individuality of every child by demonstrating its belief that they can achieve great things. If education is to meet the aspirational needs of students who will create new digital worlds, solve health and environmental issues, humanize automation, and function as empathetic and compassionate global citizens, then it is imperative that teaching and learning in the 2020s **recognize students and educators as thought partners** and expert designers of personalized, inclusive, equitable, and creative learning environments.

1 EMPOWER STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.

Too often, students end up assigned to courses that do not challenge them or prepare them for the futures that they seek. This happens because of implicit bias on the part of counselors and other school-based decision-makers, because schools fail to recognize students' progress on their path to bilingualism, because students have been led to believe they are "not honors material," or because their schools simply don't offer the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses that would be best for learners.

- **Adopt academic acceleration**.
  School systems should work to guarantee equal access to rigorous course material, ensuring that all schools, regardless of zip code, can offer the same level of advanced courses within a school regardless of student demographic. This includes adopting enrollment strategies that automatically place students in the more rigorous course option if they meet the bar on the state assessment in that subject area.[19]

- **Value multilingual learners**.
  Emergent bilingual students, or English learners, are often tracked into English as a Second Language classes for multiple years and offered an education that fails to meet grade-level standards or lacks the opportunities available to native English speakers. States, districts, and schools should adopt policies and practices that provide foundational linguistic, social-emotional, and culturally responsive educational environments that allow newcomers to thrive, with the intent of integrating multilingual learners with students whose home language is English as soon as possible, with a consistent culture of valuing bilingualism. California's English Learner Roadmap provides an example of such a policy.[20] In addition, dual language programs have been shown to benefit all learners.

2 REIMAGINE THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE.

Teachers participating in the Phoenix Project wanted to find innovation in the crucible of this pandemic. As they invested time in learning new technologies for remote learning, teachers realized that many of these can add value to in-person classroom environments. In addition, teachers want to take this moment when standardized assessments have been disrupted to reimagine assessments for the long run.

- **Commit to technology for all.**

  We must close the digital divide at home and at school, ensuring that homes and classrooms have reliable internet access and devices. Just having the technology is not enough. Teachers across the country report finding new ways to use technology-enabled instruction to accelerate student learning, personalize instruction, and make teaching more engaging.[21] For example, more teachers discovered the benefits of a "flipped classroom" in which students watch the lesson online and engage in group work and individual support during class time. They realized that some students like to contribute by talking—and some by typing, drawing, singing, or performing, and they learned to make assignments more engaging and collaborative.

- **Reinvent assessments**.

  Assessments are an essential tool for ensuring that our school systems are serving students equitably. Yet too often, they take time away from instruction, encourage a narrowing of the curriculum, and fail to provide relevant information for students, teachers, parents, and systems. We must reimagine assessments so they measure what matters, including critical thinking and grade-level standards. They must take as little time away from instruction as possible or even integrate seamlessly into instruction. They must provide data in a format that teachers and families can easily understand, and provide it quickly enough that they can take action on the results. ESSA's Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) has provided states with the opportunity to pilot new assessments designed to meet some of these needs.[22]

LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION: TEACHERS ENACTING A VISION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR THE 2020s

Jamey Olney, Teach Plus California teacher leader

"Guadalupe was born in the U.S. to a mom who immigrated from Mexico; she spoke Spanish at home. After eight years in the California school system, Guadalupe entered my 8th grade English Language Development (ELD) class reading at a 3rd grade level. She is one of the thousands of California's Long Term English Language Learners whom our education system has not served well.

Through my Teach Plus Change Agent work, I recruited three passionate teacher leaders who teach at middle and elementary sites in our district to explore how we could better meet our English learners' needs. We believe that if we implement a common formative assessment across K-8, monitor our English learners' progress, and develop a system for all stakeholders to access EL data readily, then we can more quickly pivot our instruction to meet the diverse needs of these learners. We also brought into the project our assistant superintendent and the principals at the two schools in our district with the most significant number of ELs."

"In the past year, Lizabeth had moved to multiple cities across the country, staying with family and friends as her parents struggled to find stable housing and employment. In any other year, this would have forced Lizabeth to change schools with each move. But remote learning enabled her to remain connected with her class. Relationships with her friends and teachers supported her through uncertainty, and remaining in the same school allowed teachers to provide consistent instruction and targeted interventions when she struggled.

Most students certainly learn best in person among their peers. But the traditional eight-hour school day, rigidly divided by bells, has long failed to serve all students. Rethinking the structure of the school day means offering more choice. Students might choose evening or asynchronous courses, or take remote coursework not available in person. Flexible learning isn't a theoretical concept. We all learned to deliver flexible learning last year, and while we know the solutions developed under pressure were not ideal, we also know that it can be done."

Aimee Park, Teach Plus Illinois teacher leader

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities, visiting trauma on students, families, and educators, and disrupting schooling for millions of students. But even prior to the pandemic, our education system was broken, failing far too many students. Through the Phoenix Project, we have learned anew about teachers' remarkable wells of determination. We will not settle for striving to go back to normal. Instead, we call on our public education system to rise, like a phoenix from the ashes, and finally fulfill its promise. The Phoenix Project paper paints a picture of where we want to go and how to get there. Let us all work together to make this vision a reality.

Recommendations for School, State, and National Policymakers

THRIVING STUDENTS

1 REDESIGN CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT TO BE STUDENT-CENTERED AND TO FOCUS ON THE WHOLE CHILD.

In order to provide a more student-centered experience, schools must change their approach to curriculum, assessment, and instruction to become more culturally competent and responsive to the learning needs and goals of individual students.

- *State* policymakers should establish culturally responsive teaching standards across their schools, including providing professional development for educators to engage in culturally responsive practices, and require the teaching of such standards across the state's teacher preparation programs.[23]

- *Federal* policymakers should modify and expand the authority under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) to provide new resources and support to states to develop an aligned assessment system that includes a full array of assessments, including performance and project-based assessments and multiple measures of student performance. Policymakers should also invest new resources in competency-based curricula, learning progressions, and related assessments to better meet and prepare students for college and career-readiness, based on their individual progress and growth.

2 EXPAND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND PROVIDE GREATER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROJECT-BASED AND INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING.

Research has shown that students participating in social-emotional learning programs are significantly more likely to improve their academic performance, better equipped to manage stress, and more likely to have a positive attitude about themselves, others, and their school.[25] And engaging students in real-world challenges and opportunities to apply their knowledge toward developing solutions can significantly enhance pedagogy and the learning experience.[26]

- *School and District* policymakers should implement the core principles of project-based learning in their curriculum design, in a manner that results in rigorous, contextualized, and meaningful learning for students, and that positions projects within the curriculum as a core process for shaping learning.[27]

- *State* policymakers should leverage state and federal funds to establish statewide learning communities and state-directed technical assistance to districts in implementing SEL programs. State K-12 and higher education policymakers can also integrate SEL pedagogy into their state's teacher preparation programs and licensure standards.[28]

3 PROVIDE ALL STUDENTS A PATHWAY TO COLLEGE AND POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS.

Nearly seven out of 10 jobs in today's economy will require some level of post-secondary education and training, yet low rates of college persistence and completion remain a significant barrier to meeting that workforce imperative. Regardless of their background or the zip code in which they live, all students should have access to pathways that enable them to prepare for college and workforce readiness, including opportunities to earn early post-secondary credit and/or industry credentials while still in high school.

- *State* policymakers should establish goals for closing demographic, economic, and geographic gaps in access to high school programs that prepare students early for college and the workforce, such as dual enrollment programs, early college high schools, apprenticeships, and programs that provide high-quality career and technical education. As part of that process, states should revise and revisit their credit transfer and accrual policies to fully fund and recognize any post-secondary credit earned while in these programs toward transfer to two- or four-year colleges in the state. Every state should undertake an audit to remove financial and cost barriers to accessing tuition-free, early college credit.[29]

- *Federal* policymakers should fund model K-12-higher education partnerships to embed dual enrollment and early-college high school experiences on high school campuses. National policymakers should also expand support for high-quality career and technical education programs in high school, particularly those that include apprenticeships and provide work-based learning opportunities leading to postsecondary credit. The federal government can place a greater focus on the use of the Pell Grant to access early college credit, through an expansion of the U.S. Department of Education's Dual Enrollment Pell Experiment.[30]

4 ESTABLISH STRUCTURES TO PRIORITIZE AND PERSONALIZE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS.

Research has demonstrated that positive and healthy adult-student relationships are critical to the stability, trust, and success of students in school.

- *School and District* policymakers should implement new structures in schools to create time and space to nurture adult-student relationships, including looping teachers with the same students for multiple years to develop longer-term relationships and deepen levels of shared trust, learning, and effective instruction, and creating student advisory systems to provide a sense of community and regular interaction to address student-centered issues and to provide academic, and social and emotional support.[31]

- *State* policymakers should provide resources and assistance for school principals and their districts to conduct equity audits in order to establish a clear roadmap for shifting the mindsets of adults in the education system toward equity and student persistence. Equity audits provide schools, districts, and teachers an opportunity to review and reflect on their school policies, procedures, and practices and establish criteria for equitable school, classroom, and teacher behaviors.[32]

- *Federal* policymakers should prioritize investment in support of student mental health by providing access to school-based mental health services and increasing the number of counselors, nurses, social workers and school psychologists, and other mental health professionals. The proposed *School-Based Health Professionals Program* in the FY22 Biden Administration budget would provide $1 billion in direct support to states and school districts to address the shortage of mental health professionals in schools—especially in underserved communities—while building the pipeline of these critical staff.[33]

THRIVING TEACHERS

1 **ESTABLISH STRUCTURES AND DEDICATED FUNDING FOR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODELS AND DEFINED TEACHER LEADER ROLES IN SCHOOLS.**

School and system leaders can act now to make the structural changes needed to define and support teacher leader roles across schools, elevating teacher leaders to leverage their ideas and solutions toward change and supporting greater equity for students.

- *School and District* policymakers can formalize, establish, and differentiate school-based roles for teacher leaders, and provide professional development and coaching for principals on how to structure opportunities to elevate the leadership of their teachers to facilitate change, instructional improvement, and results for students.[34]

- *State* policymakers can utilize federal and state funds to establish career advancement structures and opportunities to elevate and retain experienced, effective, and accomplished teachers. These investments provide opportunities for teacher leaders to advance in their careers, to contribute to schoolwide decisions regarding teaching and learning, and to coach and mentor their peers—all without leaving the classroom.

- *Federal* policymakers can advance proposed plans to invest in structured teacher leadership opportunities and pathways reflected in President Biden's American Families Plan. Congress should also enact a new, discretionary grant program for school districts seeking to redesign their school's time, compensation, and other structures to support distributed leadership. Such models should provide teacher leaders with formalized leadership roles and responsibilities alongside their principals to facilitate shared decision-making, instructional leadership, and collaboration with their peers to transform teaching and learning and improve student outcomes.[35]

CALIFORNIA: Incentives for National Board Certified Teachers in High-Priority Schools

In July 2021, California passed legislation that provides significant support and incentives for teachers in the state seeking National Board Certification, as well as teachers who are already National Board Certified Teachers. The legislation appropriates $250 million from the General Fund to the Education Department for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certification Incentive Program. The program will award grants of up to $25,000 to any teacher who has attained certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, as long as the teacher agrees to teach at a high-priority school for at least five years. It will also award grants of $2,500 to any teacher who initiates the process of pursuing National Board Certification when teaching at a high-priority school.

INDIANA: Career Ladders for Educators

In February 2020, the Indiana State Board of Education approved $3.1 million in career ladders grants to develop teacher leadership opportunities for teachers in the state. The career ladder grant program was the result of a collaborative effort between the State Board of Education and the Indiana State Teachers Association, Teach Plus, and Stand for Children. The Board of Education also allocated $1 million for the creation of teacher residencies across the state.

2 REFORM TEACHER PATHWAYS AND POLICIES TO PROMOTE "WHOLE TEACHER" PREPARATION AND CERTIFICATION.

- **State** K-12 and higher education policymakers can work together to reform state pre-service programs to better reflect the science of learning as well as increase awareness among current teachers of the practical applications of the science of learning in their classrooms.[36]

- **Federal** policymakers can dedicate at least half of the resources under Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to high-quality preparation, induction, and mentoring activities focused on ensuring the success of teachers in the early years. This includes a focus on pre-service preparation that reflects the science of learning, as well as a deeper preparation of new teachers to support culturally responsive practices in their classrooms and to implement strategies that support meaningful family engagement. The U.S. Department of Education can create a model national licensure and certification standard to reflect a singular professional expectation of teacher competency and performance nationally—currently, only eight states offer full reciprocity and immediate eligibility to recognize teacher licensure across state lines.

3 EXPAND RESOURCES TO ADDRESS TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH, INCLUDING ACCESS TO THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES AND ADDITIONAL TIME FOR TEACHERS TO BALANCE THE DEMANDS OF THEIR PROFESSION WITH THEIR PERSONAL WELL-BEING.

- **School and District** policymakers can establish networks of support and professional learning/exchange to promote the mental health of educators. Wellness stipends, professional learning resources, short mental health breaks built into daily schedules, and paid time outside of the classroom can all help to foster educator well-being amidst the stress and demands posed by the pandemic.[37]

ENGAGED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

1 **EXPAND EFFECTIVE MODELS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, ELEVATE THE LEADERSHIP AND ASSETS FAMILIES BRING TO THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION, AND EMPOWER FAMILIES AS EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS.**

WestEd's Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APPT) and the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) are two strength-based models of family engagement designed to recognize, grow, and maximize the leadership and voice that parents and families bring in advocating for and supporting their children's learning.[38,39] Both APPT and PIQE are designed to increase the capacity of parents to provide focused support for student learning at home; to build and enhance their leadership skills and knowledge; and to enter into an effective relationship with their school as equal partners in the learning and success of their children.

- *School and District* policymakers should make use of COVID-19 resources for schools to conduct home visits, supporting educators with resources, time, and preparation to visit their students' homes and meet with families outside of the school setting.

- *Federal* policymakers should prioritize investments in family engagement as a central pillar to build a more equitable education system beyond the pandemic. Congress should double the funding earmarked for family engagement under Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and ensure that districts implement school-based family engagement programs, strategies, and approaches that are proven to enhance the capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence of educators and families (consistent with the dual-capacity building framework for family-school partnerships).[40]

2 EXPAND FULL-SERVICE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of America's schools as first responders to help address the health, safety, and stability of children and families working to recover from the pandemic. Community schools provide integrated student supports, expanded learning opportunities, and family and community engagement activities that result in positive student outcomes. As community hubs that contribute to health, food, and housing security, intergenerational learning, and economic stability, community schools are designed to meet the comprehensive needs of students and to foster strong school-family partnerships.[41]

- *Federal* policymakers should support proposals in Congress such as the *Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2021* as well as the proposed investment reflected in the FY22 Biden Administration budget for the Full-Service Community Schools Program. That proposal would provide $443 million to expand community schools to reach 2.5 million students and their families across an estimated 800 new neighborhoods.[42]

3 REDESIGN SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE MEANINGFUL FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS.

Schools need additional incentives, resources, and support to shift school culture and practice to implement and reflect meaningful family-school partnerships.

- *State* policymakers should establish goals for increasing school-family engagement and embed standards for family engagement in their pre-service teacher preparation programs. The Statewide Family Engagement Center established under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) should establish a task force for the implementation of effective family engagement practices in every state to assist school districts in meeting their school-family engagement goals. [43]

- *Federal* policymakers should establish a new, national competitive program to promote research-based strategies to strengthen family-school partnerships in schools. States should develop systemic, statewide plans in collaboration with school districts to carry out this program.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR THE 2020s

1 ELEVATE AND ENGAGE THE VOICE OF EDUCATORS IN SHAPING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY IN SCHOOLS.

In order for educators to engage students with pedagogy that is nurturing and joyful, school systems should engage teachers in curriculum development and revision. This will reflect alignment to high standards and to meet the needs of the whole child. School systems should also work to integrate the science of learning—including the science of teaching reading—into every aspect of instruction.

- *School and District* policymakers should establish formal structures in their schools and districts—such as teacher advisories and teacher cabinets—to make decisions and design the future of curriculum and instruction in their schools. Schools should use Title II funds to support ongoing, teacher-led professional learning communities that support curriculum development and revision.

- *State* policymakers should establish statewide professional learning communities of educators to develop and implement new approaches to integrating the science of learning into curriculum and instruction. The U.S. Department of Education should establish a national research network on the application of the science of learning in curriculum and instruction.

- *Federal* policymakers should prioritize the use of Title II funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to support school-based strategies that engage teachers in curriculum design.

2 REDESIGN THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE TO BECOME MORE PERSONALIZED AND COMPETENCY-BASED.

Personalized learning provides more customized and individualized approaches to learning for students, enabling them to set goals, make choices connected to their interests and passions, move at their pace, and act as active agents in their learning. Teachers play important roles in personalized learning, in some part as a coach to guide and support student learning while also providing direct instruction to individual students and small groups to scaffold grade-level content, knowledge, and skills. In some, but not all, instances, personalized learning may also incorporate the use of technology.

- *School and District* policymakers should establish personalized learning plans to identify individual student strengths, skill gaps, and goals to map progress toward college- and career-ready standards.

- **State** policymakers should consult with educators, parents, and youth to establish a shared understanding about the benefits of personalized learning. They should review their college- and career-ready standards to map toward a competency-based framework, and provide funds to school districts interested in moving competency-based education models.[44]

- **Federal** policymakers should fund and implement a national study on competency-based and personalized education models, and establish a new priority to develop, implement, and test such models under the Education Innovation and Research Program (EIR).

3 PREPARE TEACHERS FOR TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED LEARNING.

With many opportunities for technology to enhance teaching and learning, educators need new ways to actively innovate, share, and design curriculum and pedagogy using technology.

- **District** policymakers should develop and place teacher leaders in every school with a specialized focus on applying and using technology in pedagogy and practice. Serving as instructional coaches and resources to other teachers in their school, these individuals can help shape and design classroom and schoolwide technology-enabled learning. Teachers are far more likely to engage and learn from educators who can be a long-term, constant resource for their own professional development and growth.

- **Federal** policymakers should expand funding provided for education technology under Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and expand funding for the federal E-rate program to bridge the digital divide and expand home connectivity and access to digital learning devices for all students. During the pandemic, nearly 17 million children—and one out of three Black, Latino, and American Indian children—lacked the home internet access necessary to support remote learning and keep up with their studies.[45]

4 ENACT POLICIES THAT SUPPORT SCHOOLS IN LENGTHENING AND REIMAGINING THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR.

- **National and State** policymakers should provide funds and technical assistance to allow schools to lengthen the school day or year while reimagining how school time is spent to better align with the science of learning. Following the adoption of the landmark school finance legislation in Texas, HB 3, the Texas Education Agency launched the Additional Days School Year (ADSY) initiative that provides funding for campuses to do just that.[46]

Resources

THRIVING STUDENTS

High-quality, culturally affirming instructional materials

Ed Reports

Reconstruction

Citizen Schools

3DE

Whole child, student-centered learning

Prioritizing People: Purposeful investments to better support student and teacher mental health

CASEL

Making Positive School Climate a Priority: Recommendations from Teach Plus California Policy Fellows

Along

SOLD Alliance Design Principles for Schools-Putting Science of Learning and Development into Action

Instruction Partners' resources for accelerating learning and rethinking intervention

Transcend's resources for reimagining school design

THRIVING TEACHERS

Teaching Innovation: New School Staffing Strategies Inspired by the Pandemic

The Levers of Teacher Leadership

New Leaders' Achieving More Together

Leading Educators' The Teacher Leadership Toolkit 2.0

Public Impact's Opportunity Culture

Prioritizing People: Purposeful investments to better support student and teacher mental health

If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover

Next Education Workforce

Educators Rising

Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity

Center for Black Educator Development

ENGAGED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

TNTP: Rising Together

Learning Heroes: Parents as Change Agents

Possip's Parent Engagement Platform

Springboard Collaborative

EdNavigator's Education Guidance for Busy Families

Latinos for Education's Familias Latinas Por La Educación

TEACHING AND LEARNING
FOR THE 2020s

[TNTP Learning Acceleration Guide](#)

[Inequities in Advanced Coursework](#)

[UnboundED](#)

[A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction](#)

[The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down— and How to Fix It](#)

[LEAP Innovations](#)

[Khan Academy](#)

[Flocabulary](#)

[BrainPop](#)

Platforms, tools, and services:

[Peardeck](#)

[Google Jamboard](#)

[WeVideo](#)

[Along.org](#)

[Flipgrid](#)

[Screencastify](#)

[Google Classroom](#)

[Canvas](#)

[Schoology](#)

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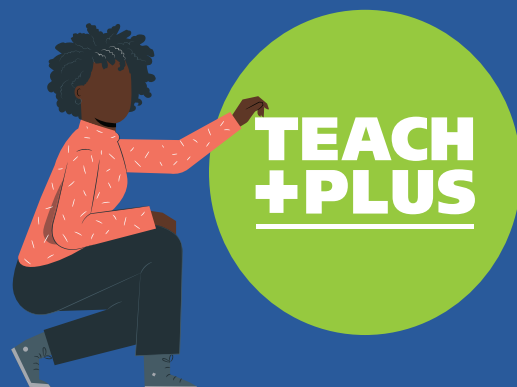
ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success. **teachplus.org**

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