Elevating the Ingenuity of School Districts and Communities to Co-Create Innovative Solutions

## A New Narrative:

# How Unlocking the Power of R&D Through Inclusive Innovation Can Transform Education

Kimberly Smith and Viki M. Young, Ph.D.

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Center for Inclusive Innovation

Digital Promise®

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# About Digital Promise

Digital Promise is a global nonprofit working to expand opportunity for every learner. We work with educators, researchers, communities, students, and entrepreneurs to design, investigate, and scale up innovations that empower learners, especially those who've been historically and systematically excluded.

## About The Center For Inclusive Innovation

Digital Promise is uniquely positioned as a catalyst for Inclusive Innovation. Digital Promise's Center for Inclusive Innovation combines trusting relationships within educator, researcher, and local and regional education communities (including students, parents, and nonprofits) with the ability to research, develop, and incubate solutions through methods that are inclusive, contextually aware, and equity-centered.

The Center for Inclusive Innovation reimagines education research and development (R&D) by resourcing the creative ingenuity of communities working in partnership with school districts to create equitable powerful learning opportunities with and for students and families furthest from opportunity. Since 2020, the Center has supported over 30 school communities across a number of projects to create bold, innovative, and sustainable solutions. Its work is anchored in a set of core tenets that in summary:

1. engage those who participate in R&D (school district leaders, researchers, and entrepreneurs) with communities and students in co-leadership, co-research, and co-design,

2. honor and prioritize the context expertise of those with lived experiences,

3. amplify student voice and leadership, and

4. build the capacity of communities to sustain inclusive R&D as a practice into the future.

# Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Center for Inclusive Innovation team who lead the research and development work supporting school districts and educators in collaborating with their families and communities. The dedicated and brilliant team include: Akilah Allen, Dr. Alexandra Merritt Johnson, Angela Hardy, Ashley Duffee, Dr. Baron Davis, Briza Diaz, Cassie Graves, Dr. Hillary Greene Nolan, Jenny Bradbury, John Seylar, Kelliann Ganoo, Kristal Brister Philyaw, Dr. Kristian Lenderman, Dr. Korah Wiley, Dr. Latia White, Dr. Lynette Parker, Mai Chou Vang, Sherenna Bates, Tyron Young, and Zareen Kasad.



Together, we collectively developed and evolved our ideas through research, inclusive design, continuous improvement, and most importantly through connection—with each other, with students, practitioners, and our district partners.

Above all, we are extremely grateful to the League of Innovative Schools district project teams and their communities that engaged in the Inclusive Innovation model for their commitment and willingness to share their insights and experiences with Inclusive Innovation. Without their trust in us and effort, we would not be able to share these emerging findings on a model for inclusive and equity-centered R&D in education.

# About the Authors

Kimberly Smith and Viki Young, Ph.D., co-lead the Digital Promise Center for Inclusive Innovation and collaborate with the talented Center team to resource the creative ingenuity of school districts working in partnership with communities to transform education.

## Kimberly Smith

Kimberly Smith is Chief Inclusive Innovation Officer at Digital Promise's Center for Inclusive Innovation. She collaborates with a national network of forward-thinking school district leaders working in partnership with their communities in engaging in equity-centered research and development of solutions to advance equity and excellence for every learner. She held previous R&D education leadership positions at the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, PBS, Discovery Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting pioneering education technologies, interactive curriculum, pathways programs and teacher professional development models. An Aspen-Pahara Institute fellow and co-founder of the National Charter Collaborative, she received her MBA from Johns Hopkins University and BS in Journalism from the University of Colorado Boulder. She serves on the boards of Beacon House in Washington, DC; CatalystED, the Learner Centered Collaborative and the National Charter Collaborative.

## Viki M. Young, Ph.D.

Across national, state, and local contexts, Viki Young leads research studies featuring mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, with particular focus on teaching and learning within embedded contexts and the system supports, resources, incentives, and disincentives that shape change and unintended consequences. She has studied the implementation and impact of K–12 policy and improvement initiatives, including high school reform, inclusive STEM high school models, instructional coaching and educator development, and school choice initiatives. As co-leader of the Center for Inclusive Innovation at Digital Promise, she is building inclusive research practices into an equity-centered R&D model, Inclusive Innovation, with students from historically and systematically excluded communities and those closest to educational challenges co-leading the R&D process. Before joining Digital Promise in 2019, she was Director of the Center for Education Policy at SRI International. She holds a Ph.D. in education administration and policy analysis at Stanford University.

Three years ago, we set out on a journey with over 30 school districts and communities across the country to explore a question:

What if the solution to inequities in education resides in foundational shifts—in mindsets, in proximity, in collaborations—and, ultimately, in the co-research and development of equitable powerful learning **with those who are most impacted?**

**I**n this report, we share what we have learned in the words of the hundreds of students, parents, teachers, and district leaders who have worked together to tackle education challenges by co-leading the research and design of innovative solutions.

## This is their story to tell.

"*I was the most apprehensive, because I wasn't sure how it would work in a math classroom.* Afterwards, I feel way more confident. You can have conversations about inequity... you just have to find the right content."

### Brienne Schuliger

**Eighth-grade Math Teacher**
Reynoldsburg School District (Ohio)

"*It feels surreal that Teaching is My Favorite Color is happening. Having a chance to meet, work, and socialize with and mentor my colleagues who are also teachers of color has given me motivation to keep going. **I have recently struggled finding my worth in education. This has been rejuvenating for me. It has given back to me my passion for education that I thought I lost. It has been healing.**"*

### Deshanna Wisniewski

**Second-grade Teacher**
Hampton Township School District (Pennsylvania)

"Humility is one of the most important characteristics of the superintendency, especially in Inclusive Innovation. Superintendents must be listeners and learners to have the capacity to sit back and let others lead. **It's important to have leaders get out of the way and just be there to support the champions of the work.**"

### Dr. Michelle Miller

**Superintendent**
South Fayette School District (Pennsylvania)

### "I have been a teacher for 27 years."

"*I've probably been to over 100 workshops and professional developments. Today was, by far, the most rewarding and beneficial one I have ever been to.* I literally had goosebumps listening to our amazing students' stories about the negative experiences they have endured."

**High School English Teacher**
Bristol Township School District (Pennsylvania)

"It's really easy to see that people in positions of administrative leadership are problem solvers. They are constantly presented with a lot of problems. Part of being an effective administrator is being able to analyze challenges and develop and implement solutions effectively. For years, they have been pushing for results and developing solutions to achieve them that don't include students. It's time-consuming and difficult to do. **We want to develop and implement a solution quickly, as opposed to one that's going to work. But this isn't a good recipe for creating an educational experience that empowers students because there's no sense of ownership for them.**"

## Frank McCormick

**Assistant Principal**
Gallego Intermediate School
Sunnyside Unified School District (Arizona)

"I have deepened my learning and ongoing journey around equity transformation with the guidance of the Inclusive Innovation process. In my new role as an Associate Superintendent, I am engaging in conversations around equity transformation. The work requires important leadership skills and priorities around data and equity-driven problems of practice, engaging key stakeholders both internal and external, intentional root cause analysis that includes deepening our learning and active listening from our students. **Thanks to the guidance and support of colleagues and partners through our Inclusive Innovation work, I have experiential knowledge and skills that I will continue to seek to sharpen in service of systemwide equity transformation.**"

## Dr. Rebekah Kim

**Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning**
Kent School District (Washington)

The work to create conditions and outcomes that ensure all students can thrive starts and ends with schools collaborating with communities. The voices of these teachers, students, parents, and district leaders demonstrate what a commitment to educational equity looks like beyond its life in a district's mission statement.

For many years, the education sector has invested in frameworks, tools, models, and technologies that have been researched and developed outside of schools and communities, with the goal of solving education's most pressing challenges. Ultimately, however, little improvement or progress on opportunities and outcomes has been achieved for learners who are historically and systematically excluded.

Evidence can be found in the Nation's Report Card. It reveals where the country's students stand—and have stood year after year—after spending 13 years in K-12 education. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2019), only 37 percent of all 12th graders were proficient or better in reading and 24 percent in mathematics. Black (at 17 and 8 percent) and Latino/a (at 24 and 11 percent, respectively). 12th graders fared far worse, exposing cavernous equity gaps in opportunity that have been with us since the nation organized its public schools over 100 years ago.

**Digital Promise has an explicit focus on meeting the needs and aspirations of learners who are historically and systematically excluded.**

We understand that this approach ultimately improves outcomes for each learner, from early learning to the workforce.

We define historically and systematically excluded learners as those from low-income backgrounds, rural learners, learners with learning differences, and Black, Indigenous, and Latino/a learners.



READING

MATHEMATICS

Black

Latino/a

8%

17%

11%

24%

24%

37%

12th Graders Were Proficient or Better In
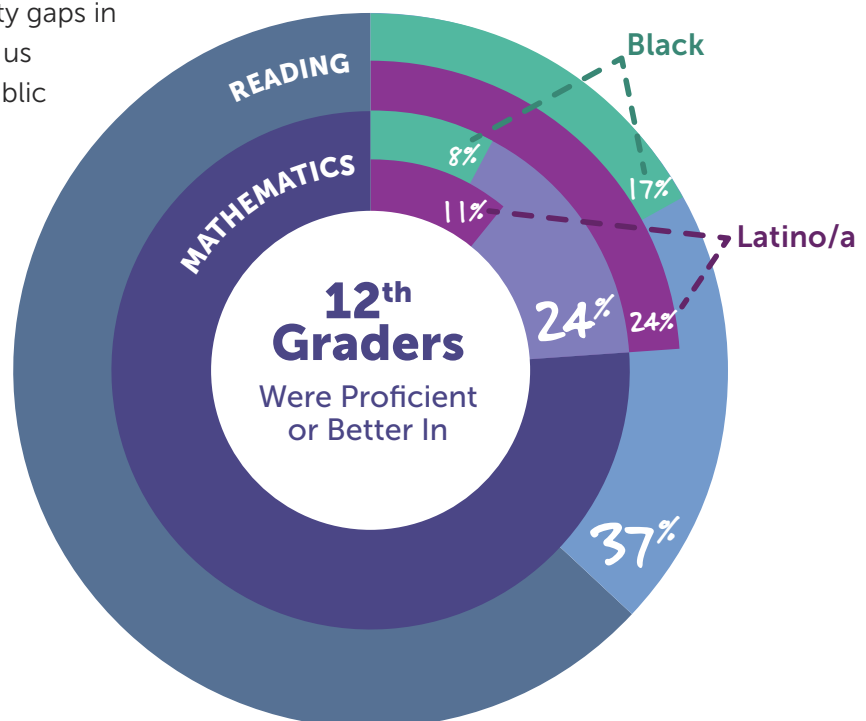
When Digital Promise launched the Center for Inclusive Innovation (CII) in 2020, we raised the question at the beginning of this paper to explore what is missing from the equation. We absolutely need investments in tools and models. And, we need to interrogate our processes and practices for solving education challenges to ensure we are addressing the needs of all students with a focus on historically and systematically excluded students. As discussed in our initial paper, *Designing a Process for Inclusive Innovation*, and OECD's Innovation for Inclusive Growth project, significant precedence exists in education and other sectors for co-creating breakthrough innovations by collaborating with the most impacted people and communities.

By their very nature, public education systems—districts, schools, classrooms, community spaces—have a moral imperative to serve all children. In doing so, these systems need to ensure those who are most impacted by barriers in education are at the table—and the problems and solutions are continually informed by daily interactions among leaders, teachers, students, and their caregivers.
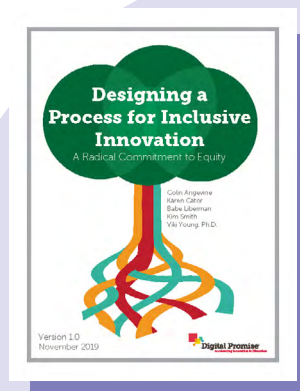
## What shifts have we observed when **districts and communities engage in Inclusive Innovation?**

**Barriers start to dissolve**
as districts and communities identify opportunities to partner to address inequities.

**District leaders**
who engage in shared leadership and decision-making foster systems of learning and belonging.

**Teachers and parents**
support student learning by becoming collaborators and co-designers.

**Students**
who are proximate to challenges have opportunities to showcase leadership and innovativeness when they co-create their educational experiences in partnership with district leaders, principals, and teachers.

The depth of district and community co-leadership— and the significance of the solutions that have emerged from this shared work underscores that the Inclusive Innovation approach offers **a new way for schools and communities to move forward collectively as partners in support of student success.**

The shifts in the R&D process to be inclusive have led to differentiated solutions that are wholly reflective of centering the leadership, voice and needs of educators, students and communities. We highlights a few of the solutions and emerging results to-date below:

## Inclusive Cybersecurity Pathways with Workforce Credentials

Over 800 students are enrolled in the inclusive Cybersecurity pathways initiative across 10 school districts reflecting a uniquely diverse student population — 25 percent female, 12 percent with learning differences, 43 percent free and reduced lunch, 54 percent students of color.

## School Systems Transformation Models

A cohort of school districts are engaged in Inclusive Innovation to research and design solutions to systems-level challenges in collaboration with teachers, students and parents — including addressing disproportionate discipline practices, co-creating shared leadership models, designing parent feedback loops, and engaging English Language Learners and parents in increasing graduation rates.
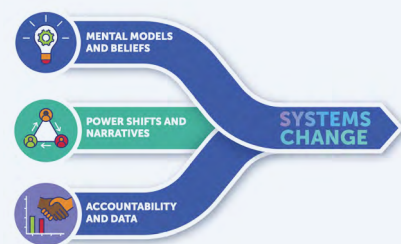
## Student-Led Mental Health Teacher Professional Development

Over 40 teachers participating in student-led mental health professional development in one district and efforts are beginning to scale the model within and beyond the district.

While stress is inevitable, how we respond to stress is what makes the difference.

How do you respond to stress?

## Diverse Workforce Recruitment and Retention

At a time when many teachers are leaving the profession, engaging teachers as co-researchers and designers of solutions is a proven strategy. One school district experienced a 25 percent increase in the recruitment of Black male educators. A regional district collaborative is supporting retention through establishing a network of 50+ teachers across multiple districts. And, the work is scaling to partner with higher education institutions to expand regional workforce strategies.

## Student Engagement in Secondary Writing

Student-created writing activities designed to boost students' confidence, interest, and skills in writing have led to a 15 percent increase in students' engagement and completion of social studies research papers.
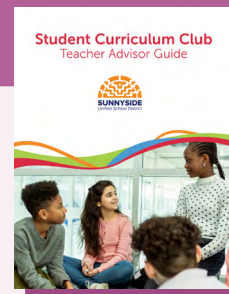
# The Research Guiding Our Work

Research across multiple Inclusive Innovation projects deepened our understanding of:

- Inclusive Innovation in practice;
- The impact that participation in Inclusive Innovation had on district-community team members; and,
- The promise that the solutions they created are beginning to show.

This exploratory research on Inclusive Innovation drew on multiple data sources, including artifacts (e.g., outputs) created by the respective district-community teams, observations of their meetings, data collected by the district-community teams, direct interviews and focus groups with district-community team members and additional participants, and participant surveys. In addition, as part of our own continuous improvement effort, the Center for Inclusive Innovation team completed reflection memos after many district-community team meetings and engaged in systematic reflections three to four times each year to address whether, and in what ways, we improved in the target areas of co-leadership, elevating context expertise, amplifying student voice, and centering equity in Inclusive Innovation.

**An initial round of studies addressed key research questions, including:**

## Context Expertise

In what ways, if any, did context expertise contribute to the Inclusive Innovation process?

- How do participants define context expertise?
- To what extent and in what ways do participants value context expertise in the process?
- What factors facilitated and hindered the inclusion of context expertise?

## Outcomes

What outcomes do district-community teams target through Inclusive Innovation?

- How well do the outcomes created by district-community teams consider those who have lived experiences with the challenge, teacher perspectives, and proximate students' needs?
- To what extent do the outcomes articulated by district-community teams align with districts' strategic and improvement plans?

## Student Voice

In what ways, if any, was student voice important to Inclusive Innovation participants?

- In what ways did Inclusive Innovation, as implemented, reflect student voice?
- How might we improve our effectiveness at incorporating student voice in Inclusive Innovation?

## Mindsets and Capacities

What mindsets and capacities, if any, do participants develop in Inclusive Innovation to create conditions for inclusion, consider diverse perspectives, and engage in co-leadership, co-researching a problem, and co-designing its solution?

## Building the Research Base

Emerging Findings, released in a fall 2022, deepened our understanding of the Inclusive Innovation model and began to substantiate Inclusive Innovation as a critical way to strengthen education R&D for students from historically and systematically excluded communities. We continue to research the sustainability of the initial Inclusive Innovation pilots, with new papers that will be released in early 2024.



Learn More >

**In the pages that follow, we:**

- **Spotlight school and community R&D stories** through the words of district leaders, teachers, students, and community leaders to illustrate the **four Practice Tenets of Inclusive Innovation**—and their respective principles—necessary to make steps toward what educational equity can and should be

- **Summarize the research and lessons** we have learned so far that highlight the promise of Inclusive Innovation and **two Impact Tenets** that inform the next stage of our work

- **Introduce Inclusive Innovation 2.0** based on our learnings supporting over 30 districts in 10 projects over the past three years

To tell the R&D stories, we are going to **take a journey across the country** to seven school districts, from Pennsylvania to Washington state.
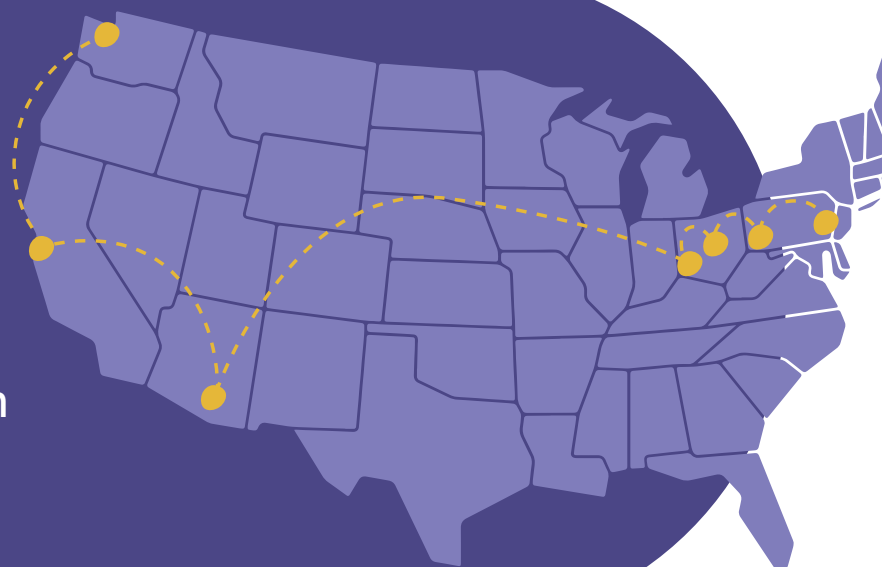
On this journey, we will demonstrate how a collaborative approach to education R&D — that invites those most impacted by challenges to co-research and co-design solutions — comes to life. We show you the practices and solutions generated through the Inclusive Innovation R&D model that have the potential to transform the teaching and learning experiences for each and every learner.

**We frame the journey through our Inclusive Innovation R&D model's six core tenets that we have developed and refined over three years.**

## Practice Tenets

Fundamental to the model is the understanding that **practice informs product** and, therefore, solutions that enable historically and systematically excluded students to thrive must reflect inclusive practices.

### Collective Ownership

The work is co-led, co-researched and co-designed by collaborators who are reflective of the diversity of communities and schools to ensure mutual benefit.

### Student Voice and Leadership

Students are collaborators and their perspectives are prioritized in the creation of solutions to educational challenges.

### Context Expertise and Proximity

Context expertise is emphasized to center the history, identities, and perspectives of those with lived experiences relevant to the educational challenge.

### Continuity of Equity

Deeply integrated research and design practices address the intersections and conditions that impact students.

## Impact Tenets

We conceive of impacts in two key ways—the **progress towards equity** is multidimensional, reflecting children and youth well-being and learning through equitable access, participation, and benefit; and engagement in Inclusive Innovation inherently **builds capacity for communities** to sustain R&D to tackle educational challenges in the future.

### Reimagine Progress

Progress measures must be multidimensional to ensure the access, participation, and benefit of those most impacted.

### Build Capacity

The process resources communities to sustain capacity for R&D into the future.

# Collective Ownership

"*I have struggled to find my worth in education. This has been rejuvenating for me.*"

**Deshanna Wisniewski**

**Second Grade Teacher**
Hampton Township School District
(Pennsylvania)

# Tenet 1: Collective Ownership

**I**n education, leadership hierarchies are clearly defined and well understood. The same is true for education R&D, where researchers and developers are typically afforded the opportunity to create programs and products that may be informed by teachers and students but are rarely co-created with those most impacted. As a result, the solutions—programs, tools, products, and models—often lack context and capacity to adapt to a diverse spectrum of student needs.

We have observed in Inclusive Innovation that oftentimes, districts will start with a challenge they believe is at the core of student disengagement and discover that they are solving the wrong problem or creating a solution that does not actually address the problem. Through a process of **Collective Ownership**, district leaders, educators, researchers and developers can ensure the solution authentically embodies and addresses student and family needs.

**Collective Ownership** recognizes that creating effective education solutions requires side-by-side collaboration with the students, parents, families, and communities that education is meant to serve. And, it acknowledges that gathering their insights through traditional means such as focus groups, observations, and surveys can perpetuate repetitive outcomes.

**Shifting the education R&D process to a model of co-leadership, co-research, and co-design with students, parents, and communities co-owning the process with districts can dramatically shift the solution that is created.**

The **Collective Ownership** R&D principles below offer guidance based on what we have learned through the research on how to facilitate and engage districts, communities, researchers and developers in this work.

| PRINCIPLE | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| **Commit to a shared understanding of collective leadership** | Mindsets, principles, roles and responsibilities, and a shared skillset to collectively lead. |
| **Develop a shared vision for the work** | Clearly articulated values, purpose, goals, and outcomes. |
| **Create a plan and approach to co-lead and implement the Inclusive Innovation process** | Mutually agreed upon processes and decision-making based on the Inclusive Innovation model to create a cohesive culture that centers the voices of those with greatest proximity to the challenge and increases capacity and ownership throughout the process. |
| **Establish a shared approach to support and sustain the resulting solutions** | Mutually agreed upon progress monitoring and continuous improvement cycles to adapt solutions. |

First, we journey to southwestern Pennsylvania to see how Collective Ownership has taken shape to transform how three school districts—Avonworth School District, Hampton Township School District, and South Fayette Township School District—are recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher workforce.

## DIVERSE EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

**COMMUNITY**

Southwestern Pennsylvania

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Avonworth, Hampton-Township, South Fayette

**CHALLENGE**

How to increase retention of teachers of color across a region

**SOLUTION**

Teaching is My Favorite Color, a teacher-designed and -led support and professional development community.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Regional network with embedded mentorship, teacher leadership opportunities, and alliances with higher education institutions to build a pathway to entering the teaching profession

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

From one teacher of color in a school to a support network of 50+ teachers across southwestern Pennsylvania, there are plans to expand to a regional diverse workforce collaborative with multiple districts.

## STORY

## A District Leader Embraces the Humility of Collective Ownership

Michelle Miller, superintendent of South Fayette Township School District in Pennsylvania, has adopted a mindset essential to Inclusive Innovation—a point of view she believes district leaders should take in R&D. Her district, in partnership with Avonworth School District and Hampton Township School District, has advocated for and supported teachers of color across their three districts to lead and implement a strategy that the teachers themselves have designed to recruit and retain teachers of color.

Miller's statement underscores her commitment to the tenet of **Collective Ownership**, wherein people with traditional power embody a humility that enables the intentional distribution of power across the entire team. Intentionally shared power creates conditions that invite team members to lead, contribute, and take risks.

"Our own Inclusive Innovation work elevated teacher voice, perspective, and vision to recruit and retain teachers of color," said Miller. "Having teachers at the table meant that power levels were equal. **We stood back and let teachers lead**."

In Inclusive Innovation, teachers, students, and communities co-lead meetings and processes, down to the level of data collection and analysis, and specify solution design and requirements. In the case of South Fayette Township and its two district partners, traditional leaders have ceded power, acknowledging that teachers of color are most proximate to the challenges they face and can design the most effective solutions. The teachers have the perspectives, strengths, and know-how to develop and implement solutions that will actually work for them.

*"Humility is one of the most important characteristics of the superintendency, especially in Inclusive Innovation. Superintendents must be listeners and learners to have the capacity to sit back and let others lead. It's important to have leaders get out of the way and just be there to support the champions of the work."*

**Dr. Michelle Miller**

**Superintendent**
South Fayette School District (Pennsylvania)

# Teaching is My Favorite Color: Educator Context Expertise at Work in Southwestern Pennsylvania

Second grade teacher Deshanna Wisniewski is one of only two teachers of color at Wyland Elementary School, and only one of four in the entire Hampton Township School District, near Pittsburgh. She has been an instrumental co-leader of the regional three-district inclusive R&D effort to support and increase teachers of color in southwestern Pennsylvania. "Throughout my career, I've had to juggle all the struggles of teaching plus racial bias. It's exhausting." Wisniewski's sense of exhaustion and isolation is commonplace among teachers of color, a fact that leads them to leave the profession at higher rates than white teachers. The Harvard Graduate School of Education reports that teachers of color "often feel disrespected and depersonalized in their jobs." Black and Latino/a teachers in particular "continually have to prove their qualifications to parents."

*"It feels surreal that Teaching is My Favorite Color is happening. Having a chance to meet, work, and socialize with and mentor my colleagues who are also teachers of color has given me motivation to keep going. I have recently struggled finding my worth in education. This has been rejuvenating for me. It has given back to me my passion for education that I thought I lost. It has been healing."*

### Deshanna Wisniewski

**Second Grade Teacher**
Hampton Township School District
(Pennsylvania)

The three-district collaborative that Wisniewski has co-led aims to address the realities that teachers of color confront and make them feel more at home, successful, and acknowledged in their profession and in the regional community. As the collaborative began, the superintendents **established a shared understanding and commitment to equitable co-leadership,** including **a shared plan for implementation centered on the voices of those with greatest proximity to the problem.** As a result, Wisniewski and other teachers of color were empowered to take the helm of the research and design process that led to the creation of Teaching is My Favorite Color (TiMFC), a regional network of teachers of color.

"The teachers know and really appreciate that we are behind their work and clearing obstacles for them," Jeff Hadley, superintendent of Avonworth School District, says. "That gives them confidence to go headfirst into the work. But they lead it." Of Wisniewski, he says, "She has been the brains behind the effort. It was her idea, and the superintendents rallied around it."

At its heart, TiMFC is an effort to build community and address the sense of isolation that teachers of color experience, **the shared vision developed by the core team**. It provides a space for teachers of color to lean on and mentor each other, celebrate, share about themselves and their experiences openly, and foster a greater sense of belonging. They help each other navigate bias with coworkers and discuss the unspoken and hidden rules in schools.

To date, the teachers have held two convenings. In the first, Dr. Valerie Kinloch, former dean of the University of Pittsburgh's College of Education, spoke, and teachers had opportunities to work in small groups, including ones that addressed how to make the educational experience more welcoming for students of color.

Wisniewski says that Ahmed Affaneh, a secondary math teacher, is reflective of the project's success. Of Palestinian descent and a member of the core team, Affaneh explains that his participation in TiMFC led him to tell faculty members at his school how to pronounce his name properly, "as if they had just taken a cold drink on a hot day and pronounced the first syllable as 'ahhh'" with a hard "K" in place of the "h."

"Once the group got close," he says, "I was empowered to tell stories. That has given me new energy and empowered me to be Palestinian. I feel like I can speak up and lead in other places now, too."

Hadley says he can see the ripple effect that raising teachers of color up as leaders will have on entire faculties, calling it a more authentic way of changing the mindsets of teachers than typical anti-bias trainings. "During those trainings, people often dig in their heels when someone tells them they have biases," he says, adding, "Ahmed's telling people that he wants them to pronounce his name correctly has taught faculty that they should ask other teachers and students of color how to say their names. That's a small step, but terribly important for faculty of color to feel more at home." Wisniewski and Affenah say they are starting to feel a greater sense of belonging.

# Student Voice and Leadership

> " *Education is made for students. There is no one who knows what students need more than us."*

**Angelica Martinez**
**Inclusive Innovation Intern and 2023 Graduate**
Sunnyside Unified School District, Arizona

# Tenet 2: Student Voice and Leadership

**W**e have come to understand, from cognitive psychology and learning sciences, that students play an essential role in constructing knowledge for themselves. Even more progress is being made in recognizing, as the Center for American Progress describes in **Elevating Student Voices in Education**, that student voice matters for all students, especially for historically excluded populations whose voices tend to be unheard:

> We should "encourage schools to create opportunities for students to participate in decisions about their education as a means of increasing student engagement and investing students in their education."
>
> *Center for American Progress, Elevating Student Voices in Education*

Over the past three years, with support from the Center for Inclusive Innovation, our Inclusive Innovation R&D district partners across the country have elevated student voice and young people as the experts they are in co-creating their learning experiences. In the Emerging Findings series, we identified what it means for students to be at the table and to honor student voice, as opposed to involving students later on to advance the perspective of adults (see inset). In Inclusive Innovation, the work starts with teaching adults that students can and should lead R&D efforts to dismantle inequities.

The **Student Voice and Leadership** R&D principles below offer guidance based on what we have learned through the research on how to facilitate and engage districts, communities, researchers and developers in inclusive R&D.

| PRINCIPLE | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| **Center the voices and leadership of students proximate to the challenge** | The voices and leadership of proximate students are prioritized and privileged throughout the Inclusive Innovation process |
| **Commit to disrupting power dynamics** | Demonstrated willingness of adults to work outside of traditional structures and norms to support and advocate for the inclusion and leadership of students proximate to the challenge from historically marginalized communities. |
| **Co-create engaging, student-friendly structures and processes with students** | The structures and processes are accessible and designed for student-first engagment. |
| **Value and validate student lived experience in problem definition and solution design.** | Student lived experience is continually valued and validated to ensure that the output and outcome is targeted to and supportive of students most proximate to the challenge. |

Next, we journey to Tucson, Arizona, and Bristol Township, Pennsylvania, to learn how district leaders have fostered student voice and leadership to address the challenges of students disengaged from school writing assignments and students experiencing mental health issues at the intersection of racial trauma.

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN WRITING

**COMMUNITY**

Tucson, Arizona

**CHALLENGE**

How to increase disengaged students' interest in social studies research and writing

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Sunnyside Unified School District

**SOLUTION**

Solutions designed by students to increase student voice, choice, and co-design in social studies writing topics, formats, and curriculum.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Teachers implemented Compact Writing Assignments in pilot classrooms, introducing diverse writing formats including script writing, text exchange, comic book, and response to student-driven questions.

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

Sunnyside School District reports that students who participated in a pilot completed and returned quarterly research papers at a rate that was more than 15 percent higher than those not participating.

## STORY
# Students Leading Where Only Adults Typically Tread

Frank McCormick knows that inviting student voice and leadership is easier said than done. School and district administrators, he believes, may not be wired to push student leadership forward. And their busy jobs make it difficult for them to *rewire* their mindsets. Formerly the technology coordinator and social studies lead for Sunnyside School District in Tucson, Arizona, he co-led one of Digital Promise's earliest Inclusive Innovation projects. Now an assistant principal at Gallego Intermediate Fine Arts Magnet School, McCormick describes the challenge that school administrators face:

> *"It's really easy to see that people in positions of administrative leadership are problem solvers. They are constantly presented with a lot of problems. Part of being an effective administrator is being able to analyze challenges and develop and implement solutions effectively. For years, they have been pushing for results and developing solutions to achieve them that don't include students. It's time-consuming and difficult to do. We want to develop and implement a solution quickly, as opposed to one that's going to work. But this isn't a good recipe for creating an educational experience that empowers students because there's no sense of ownership for them."*

Shifting the mindsets of administrators and the practice of research, design, and implementation is essential to creating solutions that engender student engagement, persistence, and motivation. "If we want students to take ownership and responsibility, we have to give them serious opportunities to take action," concludes McCormick. He sums up why **we need to provide opportunities for students to lead: Empowering students who are most proximate to the challenges they face, and giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility, are recipes for success.**

In Sunnyside, students are taking action and leadership in an area we would normally think is the exclusive domain of trained educators, researchers, and developers: adolescent writing. Sunnyside has responded to pressing challenges of secondary students disengaged in writing by authentically prioritizing historically and systematically excluded students in researching the challenge and designing and implementing a solution.

*"We know that when students have no voice and are not heard and when they have no agency, they are not successful in the classroom. If teachers are always creating learning experiences alone in a vacuum absent of students' real interests, then students are not successful in the classroom. Students have no ownership and writing becomes an act of compliance, not of learning. It's just the act of turning in work rather than engaging in what the actual questions are."*

Frank McCormick
**Assistant Principal**
Gallego Intermediate Fine Arts School and Team Co-Lead (Arizona)

The district and community team narrowed the challenge by focusing on students struggling with ninth-grade inquiry units in social studies. Through surveys and focus groups with students, teachers, high school alumni, and the community, the team identified root causes of the struggle: students lacking choice in researching topics relevant to their lives and the world they live in and not having opportunities to express their voices using diverse approaches to writing about topics in social studies.

Elizabeth Skeggs, career and technical education teacher, recruited four seniors as student interns – Judith, Angelica, Citlalli, Iracema – and facilitated an Inclusive Innovation internship in partnership with the Center's team. The student interns conducted research and designed solutions based on their analysis and understanding of their fellow students' needs. Skeggs talks about how facilitating this experience has led to a change in her own perspective on teaching.

*"Being involved with Inclusive Innovation has had a profound impact on my teaching philosophy. I was able to enjoy watching my students step into empowerment, innovation and professionalism. I saw the power in designing solutions for students by the very students who would be directly impacted. No longer am I able to accept that students should not be invited to be architects in the design of their own education and of the system as a whole."*

The student interns team developed in more detail the three solutions the Sunnyside Inclusive Innovation team initially defined to address the adolescent writing engagement challenge:

## Compact Writing Assignments

The district piloted student-created Compact Writing Assignments to build writing confidence, engage students in peer-to-peer feedback and provide broader opportunities for written expression in two classrooms.

## Digital Village Square

Students designed a concept for an app, Digital Village Square, where students can share ideas on writing topics, get feedback on their writing, interact through comments and threads, and participate in polls and surveys, including those that elicit high interest topics for writing.
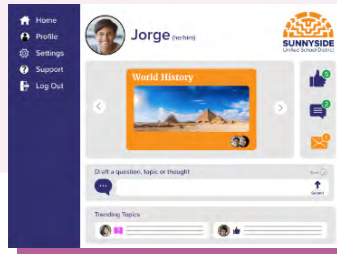
## Student Curriculum Club

Students designed a curriculum advisory council model, where the council (made up entirely of students) identifies high interest topics that students want integrated into social studies curriculum and classes.
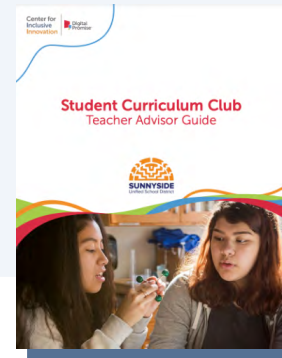
Andrea Aguiar, one of the two teachers who worked with the students to co-design the Compact Writing Assignments (CWAs), is continuing to utilize them in her classes. She loves the different templates because they offer opportunities for both "quick write" and creative writing activities. "The CWAs give teachers an ability to meet students where they are with relevant, interesting writing opportunities."

She noted how important it was for her students to know that Sunnyside students created the CWAs. **"When I told the students that the CWAs were created by students who are in their shoes, it created more buy-in, because they knew a student who knows their community was involved."**
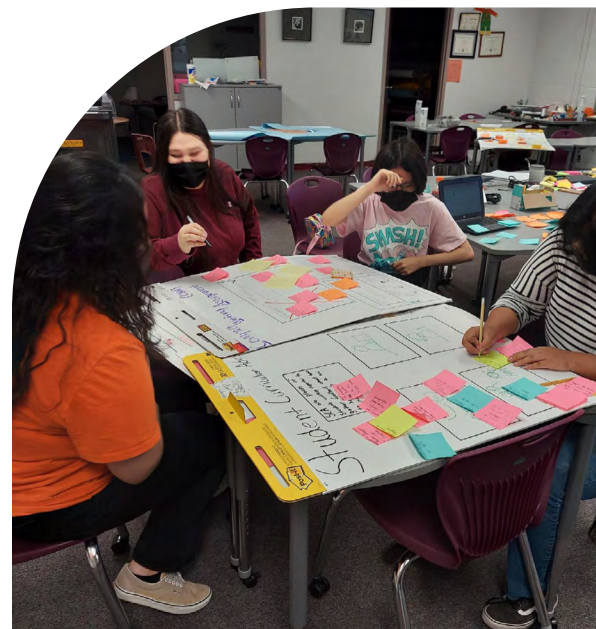
*In Their Own Words: Participants' Perspectives on Honoring Student Voice (Young, 2022)*

Students and adults on the district-community teams articulated students' rightful place at the research and design table. They argued that solutions embodying the diverse identities of the students cultivate belonging, engagement, and agency in students' own learning enterprise. They further underscored that, ultimately, proximity to children's lives is essential to accurately understanding the problem that the district-community team was addressing and therefore to designing a solution to address it.

We found specific factors were necessary to center student voice in Inclusive Innovation:

- Intentional focusing and refocusing on students most proximate to the challenge needs to be continuous as decisions build throughout the R&D process
- Adults learning to listen and championing students' rightful place in R&D, with small and large acts that signal the primacy they place on student voice
- Placing greater weight on students' choices in decision-making processes

Creating openings for students; structuring the team so that students have a critical mass; and structuring time for students to process and collaborate build students' confidence and dispel the intimidation some students feel when faced with working with adults The perspectives from students and the district-community team members who collaborated with them generated reflective questions relevant to all those who wish to amplify student roles in education R&D and policymaking:

- How do we intentionally cultivate the readiness of adults in the system and community to listen to students?
- How do we prepare students to take on these roles and dampen the intimidation students told us they felt?
- What are equity pause points we can reinforce, where the process does not continue without substantial input and leadership from a range of students closest to the challenge?

## STUDENT-LED MENTAL HEALTH TEACHER PD

**COMMUNITY**

Northeast Pennsylvania

**CHALLENGE**

How to address student mental health issues at the intersection of racial trauma

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Bristol Township School District

**SOLUTION**

A student-led mental health teacher professional development model

**IMPLEMENTATION**

High school students, in partnership with a mental health counselor and a community-based non-profit, Bristol Cares, have led a series of professional development sessions to involve more teachers in advancing their understanding of and provide support to students experiencing mental health issues related to racial trauma.

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

Over 40 teachers in the district participated in the pilot student-led sessions, and the district is refining the model to scale the professional development to more teachers.

## STORY

# Adults Advocating for Student Leadership in Bristol Township School District

A broad-based team that included students, teachers, administrators, and community members from the six-school, 6,000-student Bristol Township School District (Bristol) community identified the need to support the mental health of students with a particular focus on the marginalization that students of color experience.

Bristol's district-community team members **valued and validated the lived experiences of the district's historically excluded students** by listening to their stories and learning about the ways in which classrooms can be either welcoming or isolating.

*"We have a wealth of knowledge and ability right in front of us. It starts with students in our own buildings. Students are experts of their own experiences. We don't always need to hire someone from the outside to facilitate deeper learning. With adult support, students can often do that."*

## Malikah Upchurch

**Instructional Coach and Student Intern Coordinator,** Bristol Township School District (Pennsylvania)

Ultimately, the team decided on a prototype solution: High school students led professional development sessions for teachers where students shared stories about their experiences in school. They guided teachers through an exercise to build their consciousness in creating equitable classroom environments. During the 2023-24 school year, they plan to follow up with those teachers on implementing their plans.

Student voice was **prioritized and privileged students in Bristol's work.** Students took a lead role in research, design, and implementation. They were given weighted votes when it came time to decide on solutions, the design of the professional development model, and leading its implementation.

A mental health professional from the community supported the solution development process and provided mental health counseling to students leading the professional development sessions. She continues to work with Malikah Upchurch, an instructional coach and Bristol's student coordinator, to design **engaging, student-friendly monthly programming** that includes discussions related to race and student well-being. Also, each student has been assigned one of six mentors. Upchurch, the mentors, and Damita Harvey, who coordinates the Bristol Cares Coalition and was co-lead of the district-community team, sit in on all the professional development sessions.



*"We're at a stage where students don't want to be told what to do anymore. Giving them leadership is really important. But we as adults are there to support them."*

**Damita Harvey**
**Leader of the Bristol Cares Coalition**

Teachers were deeply impacted by the professional learning experience and developed an expanded awareness of, empathy for, and consciousness about the students. Over 90 percent of teachers who participated in the sessions reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they are more conscious of the experiences of students of color in school. One veteran teacher remarked on how profound the experience was:

> *"I have been a teacher for 27 years. I've probably been to over 100 workshops and professional developments. Today was, by far, the most rewarding and beneficial one I have ever been to. I literally had goosebumps listening to our amazing students' stories about the negative experiences they have endured."*

# Context Expertise and Proximity

"If we had just examined research or talked to researchers and looked at what other people are doing, we would have come up with a different solution. It was getting feedback from the community, students and administrators, and even representatives from the district attorney's office and police department and local elected leaders, that made the difference."

**Damita Harvey**
**Prevention Manager**
Bristol Cares Coalition (Pennsylvania)

# Tenet 3: Context Expertise and Proximity

**C**ontent expertise is widely understood and embodied by those traditionally engaged in R&D efforts—academic researchers, technical developers, and entrepreneurs. Drawing on the Tamarack Institute's **work on context experts** (Attygalle, 2017), we define *context* expertise as first-hand understanding of what it means to live in a community, know the student and community needs, and experience the impact of inequity.

Individuals with context expertise are more proximate to the factors and conditions that are creating barriers. As a result, they have deep, specialized, direct lived experience with the challenges and conditions—and skills and know-how—that outsiders do not know or have the ability to observe. (See inset.)

We know that people in communities that have been historically and systematically excluded can also be content experts as developers and implementers of programs, services, and support systems within their communities.

**In education R&D, Inclusive Innovation** honors content and context expertise on an equal plane—prioritizing context expertise as it relates to researching root causes and developing solutions to challenges, thereby raising up the importance of their voices, the creative ingenuity that lives in the hearts of communities and families, in vibrant cultures, schools and classrooms, and in community-based organizations.

# Examples of Context Expertise

## The Expertise of Families

Lakisha Young, founder and CEO of Oakland Reach—a parent activism and education organization that launched a national learning hub and supports "parent liberators" as student learning coaches—succinctly explains why having community at the table is critical: "Superintendents, principals, and teachers often leave. Families stay."

Families residing in the community— and who may have been attending the same schools for generations have relevant expertise through their everyday experiences, relationships, and local historical knowledge (Moll et al. 1992 as cited in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, 2020). They are experts in the contextual factors impacting their children's education.

## The Expertise of Students

Students are most proximate to the challenges they face and have the context expertise to guide research and development to address the issues. Additionally, students are most affected by decisions about their education. As a result, their perspectives differ from those of educators and other adults making decisions for them or that affect them, and often they have more insight and knowledge than adults acknowledge.

## The Expertise of Teachers

Similarly, teachers have expertise that we must amplify. They are more proximate to instructional contexts and their own lived experience supporting students' needs than administrators, researchers, or entrepreneurs. While teachers may not have the direct experience of students and families in the community, they have unique insight into challenges students face and an understanding as to whether a solution will actually work in the context of their classrooms.

## The Expertise of Community-Based Organizations

Many community-based organizations have been at the forefront of fighting for greater educational opportunity for students and equal resources for schools in historically and systematically excluded communities. Through their established relationships, partnerships, and programs, they have established credibility, earned the trust of community, and understand the significance of context in shaping the applicability and potential impact of solutions.

Exhibit 1 details how participants from four different district-community teams characterized the nature of context expertise that made a difference in their respective Inclusive Innovation pilot.

**Exhibit 1. Stakeholder Groups' Perspectives on Value of Community Member Contributions**

| Stakeholder Group | Nature of Community Member Contribution Valued by Stakeholder Group |
|---|---|
| **Community Members** | • Provide a dose of reality to educators who might be in their own "bubble"<br>• Prevent them from being in their "silo"<br>• Offer "objective" views<br>• Perspectives of "reality on the ground"<br>• Bring a human picture of what students are like outside of school, where they can express their frustrations and hardships in "safe" spaces<br>• Create connections between what students are learning in school and the "real world"<br>• Are necessary because "it takes a village" |
| **Student** | • Use their lived experience to "help explain how to fix it [the identified problems]"<br>• Advocate for students<br>• Offer "objective" views<br>• Bring a human picture of what students are like outside of school, where they can express their frustrations and hardships in "safe" spaces |
| **Family Members** | • Know the "local culture"<br>• Give access to community resources that educators may not know about |
| **Teachers** | • Lived experience of historical discrimination in the community<br>• Give access to community resources that educators may not know about<br>• Build support across the community |
| **School and District Administrators** | • Access different networks<br>• Give access to community resources that educators may not know about |

Source: Excerpt from Context Expertise in Inclusive Innovation: Understanding, Integrating and Building (Young, 2022a, p. 8).

Recognizing and honoring those with context expertise in education R&D does not mean we dispense with the roles of research and development experts. Digital Promise is a research-centered organization and an advocate for research and evidence-generating knowledge to advance equity and powerful learning across the lifespan. We envision a third space where context expertise is integrated with content knowledge or technical expertise along each R&D phase.

We believe generative power comes from those with context expertise—teachers, students, families, communities—being at the R&D table with researchers, district leaders, and entrepreneurs. Together, they can build a shared and accurate understanding of the education problem they are trying to solve and create solutions toward achieving goals and dreams of those most affected by the problem.

**EMERGING FINDINGS**

*Context Expertise in Inclusive Innovation: Understanding, Integrating, and Building (Young, 2022)*

Participants' perspectives on how context expertise was integrated into the Inclusive Innovation process fell into four key categories: Context expertise provided a moral stance for the nature of the problem or solution, offered views of reality, provided practical considerations, and was instrumental in achieving key aims, such as garnering buy-in with the community.

Challenges and ongoing dilemmas that Inclusive Innovation processes need to address include clarifying the role of those with context expertise; cultivating mindsets around lived experience as expertise and the legitimate participation of those with relevant lived experience in decisions they are traditionally not involved in; addressing the district role and hierarchy as the setting for buy-in, political cover, and shared decision-making; illustrating that relevant context expertise depends on the problem and stage of Inclusive Innovation, leading to teachers' liminal role as having both context and context expertise.

Inclusive Innovation participants pointed to key factors that promote the integration of content and context expertise throughout the R&D process:

- Intentional facilitation to monitor opportunities for contributions and judgment in creating deliberate breakout groups by or across role types so that those with context expertise can be heard
- Attention to changing the information flow to ensure that those outside of the formal K-12 system had access to background information that would improve their confidence and ability to engage in the discussion
- Cultivating each participant's own awareness of positionality and the way their relative authority, experience, education, wealth, race/ethnicity, other forms of identity, and their intersection shapes each person's world view and understanding of and empathy for different perspectives
- Structuring each specific R&D activity to build participants' capacity to hear others' voices, especially those closest to the challenge being addressed

The **Context Expertise and Proximity** R&D principles below offer guidance based on what we have learned through the research on how to facilitate and engage districts, communities, researchers, and developers in Inclusive R&D.

| PRINCIPLE | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| **Honor the historical contexts of people and communities** | Value the strengths within the community and the central role local historical contexts play in building trust, framing challenges and creating solutions |
| **Ensure equity of voice in collaborative discussions** | Norms, processes and structures ensure that voices of students and families most proximate to the challenge lead, are centered and heard. |
| **Situate content expertise with context expertise and/or historical contexts** | Those most proximate to the challenge co-lead the interpretation of research and data, landscape scans, and other forms of subject matter expertise. |
| **Ensure intentional decision-making prioritizes those most proximate to the challenge** | Processes for key decisions are transparent and weights decisions towards those who are most proximate to the challenge. |

Journey with us to Middletown City, Ohio, to hear how the context expertise of Black male teachers led the development of a new program designed to increase recruitment and retention.

## BLACK MALE EDUCATOR FELLOWSHIP

**COMMUNITY**

Middletown, Ohio

**CHALLENGE**

How to increase recruitment and retention of Black male teachers of color in the district region

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Middletown City School District

**SOLUTION**

Create a Black male fellowship initiative as a recruitment and retention mechanism for aspiring, early career, and veteran Black male educators through mentorship, professional learning, and community building.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Successful launch of the Admirals Squad with the He Is Me Institute

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

Grow the number of Black male teachers from 12 to 30 by 2027 utilizing a "retention equals recruitment" strategy.

## STORY

# Black Male Educators: From Unicorns to Admirals

Having at least one Black teacher during grades 3-5 reduces the high school dropout rate for low-income Black males by 39 percent—yet Black men constitute only two percent of the American teaching workforce.

Middletown City Schools, a southwestern Ohio school district of just over 6,000 students (99 percent of whom receive free or reduced-price meals), aims to change that. The district plans to recruit a total of 30 Black male teachers by 2027 to add to the current total of about 12. Middletown City sees an increase in Black male teachers benefitting all students. "Their presence creates a more diverse and inclusive education environment for all," says Deborah Houser, Middletown's superintendent.

*"Black males are unicorns in the teaching profession."*

## Kee Edwards

**Assistant Director of Human Resources**
Middletown City Schools (Ohio)

"Black males are unicorns in the teaching profession," says Kee Edwards, senior director of human resources for Middletown City Schools. "You don't hear from them much. You never see them. When you do, you say, 'Wow!' It's a 'wow factor' that can grab the attention of all students, regardless of race."

Houser understands deeply the central tenets of Inclusive Innovation. "A mentor of mine shared with me a long time ago," she says, "that you find the best people and let them do their job. Strong leaders bestow power on others." In this case, the best people were two Black male teachers. They participated in the Inclusive Innovation co-research and co-design process with two Black administrators at the Miami University of Ohio. The He is Me Institute provided additional context and content expertise during the R&D process, applying its substantial lived and professional experience, know-how, and research capacity to help the district design and implement a program to successfully recruit and retain Black male instructional staff.

The organization's research and context expertise elevated a shared understanding of the historical context that has led to the dearth of Black male teachers in the country. Review of the research was situated within the context expertise of the Black male participants, and the teachers had equity of voice in discussions. Of the solutions that were developed as a result, Houser says, "During the design-thinking phase, because we had different minds at the table, I believe we wound up with a project that was different than it might have been."

The team's signature solution became the "Admiral Squad," a network designed exclusively for Black male instructors—teachers, dedicated substitutes, and paraprofessionals. Last school year, the Admiral Squad members participated in four professional development sessions, represented the district at hiring fairs, and visited every school, making themselves visible to Middletown students.

What's important now, Houser believes, is that the Admiral Squad has created a line of sight for Black students, employees, and prospective new hires. "Before, they rarely saw Black men in positions of leadership and prestige," House says. "They can see it. Now they can be it."

# Students and Communities as Co-Researchers

Damita Harvey coordinates the Bristol Cares Coalition for No Longer Bound (NLB), a grassroots, community-based prevention services organization with longstanding roots in Bristol Township, Pennsylvania.

Harvey describes how the collaboration between Bristol Cares and the Bristol Township School District (Bristol) began: "I had been doing webinars about mental health in the Black community," Harvey says. "I shared the webinar with the superintendent, and I could tell it really caught her attention. She eventually came back and asked for my participation. I really felt they honored the history and legacy of my organization, and my work in the community."

As a result of that invitation and her understanding of mental health issues and its **historical context** in the Bristol community, Harvey became a co-lead for the team and brought in more community partners to build on the context and content expertise at the R&D table. The team ensured that there would be **equity of voice in stakeholder discussions** and that the **intentional decision-making process it devised prioritized those closest to the challenge**, especially historically marginalized students.

Students who were proximate to the challenge played a significant role on the team, both in numbers and in weighted voting to account for their first-hand experience with issues at the intersection of mental health and racial trauma. Through focus groups, the team collected data from community members, families, students, graduates, administrators, and others to increase its contextual understanding of the impact of racial trauma on mental health. Students co-lead the **interpretation of the data** and eventually the implementation of the solution: professional development sessions for teachers focused on the racial trauma that students experience. (See the profile on adult support for student leadership in Bristol Township on page 30.)

The amplification of the context and content expertise of NLB, students, community, families, and others changed the direction of a solution that might otherwise have been developed. As Harvey says, the team would have chosen a different solution had it relied only on existing research and not developed it with community and students. "That's why it's so powerful," she reminds us.

**Tenet #4**
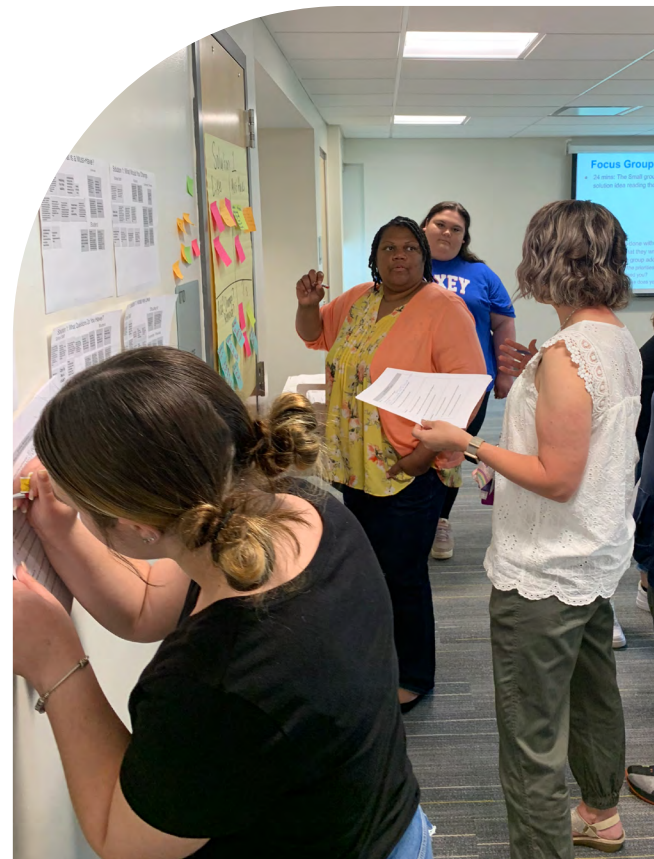
# Continuity of Equity

" *"We're asking ourselves how we create cultures in all 35 of our schools that can truly listen to student experience so that student experience matters. That's the work we do now."*

**John Malloy**

**Superintendent**
San Ramon Valley Unified School District (California)

# Tenet 4: Continuity of Equity

**I**nclusive R&D processes can be difficult to implement and require more time than traditional approaches if the foundation for relationships, trust, and equity practices is not established upfront—which is why we advocate for a Connect & Commit phase at the beginning.



The focus on developing relationships and trust, on learning how to hear, value, and act on context expertise and student voice at the start of Inclusive Innovation may seem slow compared with the frenetic pace of a school day. However, just as a poorly laid foundation will lead to an unstable building, shortchanging the phase designed to establish shared values, understandings, and commitments will undermine the central goal of inclusive R&D: to include and co-lead with those most affected by the challenge so that solutions meet the needs of students furthest from opportunity.

**Continuity of equity** is important to ensure that the centering of students, families and communities does not fade as the team progresses through the R&D process. A culture of mutual accountability to practices enables surfacing of research and solutions that reflect a balance of power, voice and contribution. As a result, team members develop the skill, knowledge and mindset to lead and work collectively.

**Continuity of equity** ultimately builds the team's capacity to engage the participation of district leaders, educators and community collaborators in the work together from beginning-to-end. (See inset for a summary of findings from the Reynoldsburg pilot on how that district-community team maintained continuity in equity.)

### Socratic Circles: Building Tools for Racial Equity Classroom and Community Discourse (Merritt Johnson & Lenderman, forthcoming)

The Reynoldsburg district-community team offers a powerful case study of how equity can be consistently centered through the Inclusive Innovation process. The district-community team of students, parents, community members, teachers, and district leaders co-researched and co-designed open education resources to support educators with leading healthy social justice discussions. The team developed a guidebook, professional development for teachers and accompanying materials that supported both classroom and community discussions. Community-based discussions were intended to inform teachers and students of the perspectives of the community and build support for teachers to lead these discussions in their classrooms.

Specific elements of the Inclusive Innovation process illustrate the district-community team's continuity of equity, including:

- Creating a team charter that names equity commitments (e.g., "**make sure everyone has a voice**") and a compelling vision (e.g., "Students who struggle in school will be able to **get the support they need** and have their educational needs met in order to be successful adults with choices" and All **teachers will be able to discuss and explore current events** within the classroom from various cultural perspectives")

- Developing a community asset map with a strengths-based focus on individuals, organizations, and institutions that the team could draw on to understand the community context, the nature of the challenge, and potential solution ideas

- Defining user personas that clarify the characteristics and needs of the students that the solution aims to benefit, examining root causes with data representing the perspectives of students experiencing the challenge, and targeting outcomes that embed equity through supporting teachers in understanding multiple perspectives and fostering classroom cultures that allow for planned and unplanned civil discourse about social justice

- Designing and refining potential solution concepts with students, teachers, and district leaders to land on the solution the district-community team ultimately developed and implemented

The analysis of the broad range of data from Reynoldsburg, including artifacts, observations, and interviews, emphasizes:

- "The importance of district-community collaboration in centering equity in R&D to ensure solutions are aligned to the implementation context.

- "Inclusive Innovation as a vehicle for fostering district-community partnership in supporting students' leadership and academic success.

- "The usefulness of OER and materials that structure and support teachers in facilitating dialogue on sensitive topics." (p. 1)

The **Continuity of Equity** principles below offer guidance based on what we have learned through the research on how to facilitate and engage districts, communities, researchers, and developers in Inclusive R&D.

| PRINCIPLE | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| **Design parameters and practices to strengthen joint accountability to equity with and between all collaborators** | Create processes to enable each team member to share accountability to equity |
| **Intentionally build capacity for equitable leadership and decision making** | Intentionally practice the skills and mindsets built into the Inclusive Innovation process to support the ability for each person to contribute to equitable leadership and decision making. |
| **Champion the continuity of equity throughout the process** | Continue centering equity commitments and checks throughout the process; reflect regularly on whether and how equity is embedded in Inclusive Innovaiton as practiced and course-correct. |
| **Ensure all collaborators have access and ability to fully participate in inclusive leadership and decision-making** | Implement strategies that ensure students and communities have access and ability to participate across dimensions – proximity, time, space, place, knowledge, information, language (translation and technical language), abilities, etc. |

We are seeing these principles emerge in work with partner districts, including the Highline School District (Washington), the San Ramon Valley Unified School District (California), and the Reynoldsburg City School District (Ohio).
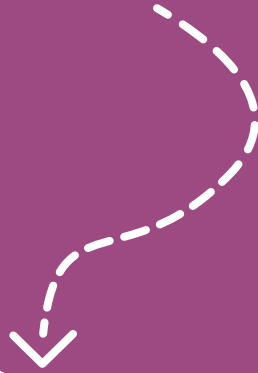
## ADDRESSING DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY

**COMMUNITY**

Burien, Washington

**CHALLENGE**

Reducing disproportionality in discipline

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Highline Public Schools

**SOLUTION**

Data dashboard, school planning template to collect and examine data, and school accountability action plans

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of disciplinary referrals, pilot data collection, root cause analysis, and planning with three schools.

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

The work is a continuing learning journey with the goal of expanding to more schools in the future.

STORY

# A School District's Journey to Close the Discipline Disproportionality Gap

Highline Public Schools outside of Seattle, Washington, has been on a journey to close the discipline disproportionality gap. Disproportionality in student discipline is a national crisis, and a systemic, substantial barrier to improving outcomes for students of color.

Over the years, Highline has reduced the total number of suspensions. Their challenge is that Black students still experience the same disproportionate rate of discipline. Highline is focusing on closing that gap using relevant quantitative and qualitative data sets, which they shared at a webiwwnar – "Digging Into the Data: A School District's Journey to Close the Discipline Disproportionality Gap," hosted by Digital Promise in June 2023. The following information draws from Highline's presentation.

## Analyzing the Language of Discipline Referrals

Highline's core team created a data dashboard of disciplinary referrals that recorded the language teachers used when they wrote referrals for "disruptive behavior" and "refusal to cooperate," particularly for Black students, over a six-year period. A district data analyst created a word map to identify the most common language used by teachers and to help the district uncover implicit and explicit biases.

*"We recognized where we really needed to focus our work and efforts was around root cause analysis in three areas: the quality of connections and communications amongst members of the community, particularly between students and staff; power dynamics which included the distribution of decision-making, power, authority, and the formal and informal influences individuals in our organization have; and mental models, or those deeply held beliefs assumptions, norms, and ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, how we talk."*

## Melissa Pointer

**Director of Social and Emotional Learning**
Highline Public Schools (Washington)

Ivan Duran, Highline's superintendent, shared that different "epistemologies" may explain to some degree why teachers more frequently refer students of color for discipline. "We all need to ask ourselves," he says, "What are the beliefs and histories that adults bring into school settings? These mental models get in the way of the work. We may define a student as being loud, but, well, that's just how it is in his community. And so, there's a disconnect between some communities' epistemologies and how schools operate and run."

## Collecting and Interpreting Street Data

The Highline core team also collected "street data" (Safir & Dugan, 2021), information uncovered by doing equity interviews with students. The Highline district leaders share that talking specifically to students "is the only way we're going to get the authentic truth." Based on what was learned during the sessions, the team designed a listening experience, which the district implemented with a group of students from across the region.

Building on what they learned, the team engaged three schools in the district by designing a planning template that will help them examine disaggregated disciplinary data, collect street data, conduct root cause analysis, and create an action plan. The district's journey to center equity continues.

# Districts Modeling the Continuity of Equity: San Ramon Valley Unified and Reynoldsburg City Schools

Outside of Oakland, California, **San Ramon Valley Unified School District is championing the continuity of equity** in a school system with a very diverse student population. Expectations and performance are high, says superintendent John Malloy. "We are a district where approximately 95 percent of our students do really well. But we're now asking what about the students who are in that five percent who are disproportionately Black and Latino/a/x."

As a result, San Ramon's problem of practice focused on improving the college readiness for these students. Its solution focused on shared ownership and leadership for equitable outcomes for all students. "Shared leadership is the way we do our strategic work in San Ramon" Malloy says. "Transformation happens at schools. While district leaders within the central office need to take ownership for this work, so do all school staff." We are supporting our staff to make this happen.

Malloy involved his entire 12-member cabinet in the Inclusive Innovation problem definition and solution development and implementation processes, and engaged a steering committee led by the district's director of equity to coordinate the work. The committee assembled dashboard data sets for college and career readiness that included academics, aptitudes, and access to varied learning activities. The process amplified student voice by giving students varied opportunities to share their experiences, illuminating a long list of deficit beliefs about diverse children and their families.

Emphasizing that transformation happens at school level and that building-level teams must be empowered to take ownership of the district's equity-focused work, the team provided equity training to school-based leadership teams. The San Ramon team developed a Shared Leadership Team (SLT) structure and approach through their Inclusive Innovation work. The SLT is a

## SHARED LEADERSHIP TEAM MODEL

| COMMUNITY | CHALLENGE |
|---|---|
| San Ramon, California | Increasing the college and career readiness of Black and Latino students |

| SCHOOL DISTRICTS | SOLUTION |
|---|---|
| San Ramon Valley Unified School District | Create and implement a Shared Leadership Team (SLT) model to engage district leaders, school building leaders, and teachers in leading, owning, and addressing the challenge. Provide staff with data dashboards displaying a wide range of data, including academics, aptitudes, and learning experiences. |

### IMPLEMENTATION

The district is implementing a comprehensive continuous professional learning model led by the Shared Leadership Team and incorporating the use of the data dashboards to design actions that support the college and career readiness of Black and Latino students.

### EMERGING OUTCOMES

The team implemented the SLT model across multiple sites within the district and led discussions with school building principals at the end of the year to reflect on and refine the model. The team is implementing a deeper model of building-level empowerment designed to create more collaboration with teaching staff to co-design the approach to equity.

distinctive model in that it engages people at every level—district, school, and classroom—as equity leaders. The model shifts from top-down to distributed and shared ownership which sets the foundation for **continuity of equity** throughout the district. The SLT is now devising a facilitation plan for school-by-school sessions with staff that will include information from the data dashboard and student voice to inform individual school decision-making processes to improve the college-going rates for the district's most marginalized students.

> *"Our commitment is for staff to take responsibility for ALL of our students, especially those we have struggled to serve effectively. We are asking staff to consider their own internal biases, and what students are saying they are actually experiencing in classrooms and in our schools so that we can remove any barriers that impact their college and career readiness. We are supporting each staff, school-by-school, so that each school owns the problem and solution."*

San Ramon is demonstrating a district-wide approach to joint ownership of 100% of students achieving college and career readiness.

Like San Ramon, Ohio's **Reynoldsburg City Schools** is **a champion of the continuity of equity** and is scaling that commitment not only within its own school system but outside it as well, with the community. Reynoldsburg launched its effort to address the problem of practice identified by students, district leaders, and school leaders: how to foster a healthy approach to racial equity and social justice classrooms and community discourse.

Specifically, the team wanted to create a district-wide model that teachers could use to facilitate discussions. The team created a Socratic Circles model as an Open Education Resource (OER), adapting the Socratic method through an equity lens within the context and perspective of the Reynoldsburg district and community.

Members of the Reynoldsburg district-community Inclusive Innovation core team—led by its co-leads, Schyvonne Ross, a school administrator, and Lisa Floyd Jefferson, an instructional coach— worked with students to develop the model to include six professional development modules for teachers, written guidance, and scaffolded learning opportunities for students to develop the skills to facilitate sometimes difficult conversations about race and justice.

> *"I wanted to be involved to have the opportunity to create change around systemic racism within education. I wanted students to have more opportunities to be exposed to culturally relevant curriculum, and teachers to feel comfortable having conversations around racial equity with students."*
>
> **Schyvonne Ross**
>
> **Assistant Principal and Core Team Co-Lead,** Reynoldsburg City Schools

In pilot classrooms at a middle school and in a community-wide Socratic Circle—facilitated by students and attended by the Mayor and other community leaders, teachers, students, and teachers—the community engaged in discussions focused on text, data, and

## CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY SOCRATIC CIRCLES

| COMMUNITY | CHALLENGE |
|---|---|
| Reynoldsurg, Ohio | Foster healthy racial equity and social justice classroom and community discourse |

| SCHOOL DISTRICTS | SOLUTION |
|---|---|
| Reynoldsburg City Schools | Socratic Circles model to support discourse on racial equity and social justice in the classroom and community, with professional development and materials to support teachers on implementing Socratic Circles in the classroom |

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Teachers completed professional development modules, co-designed lesson plans, observed a teacher leading a Socratic Circle in class, and participated in a professional learning community for deep discussions about implementation success and challenges. Teachers implemented Socratic Circles in classrooms, and students led peers, teachers, district leaders, parents, and other community members in a community-wide Socratic Circle, modeling social justice and racial equity discourse.

**EMERGING OUTCOMES**

The success of the Community Socratic Circle is motivating school and district leaders to bring Socratic Circles to other schools in the district, embedding Socratic Circles in teacher professional development, and holding school-community circles. Additionally, the district is sharing the model with other districts within Ohio and across the country.

essential questions designed to inspire critical thinking and discussion about race and social justice.

Brienne Schuliger, an eighth-grade math teacher, shared:

> *"I was the most apprehensive, because I wasn't sure how it would work in a math classroom. Afterwards, I feel way more confident. You can have conversations about inequity... you just have to find the right content."*

During the 2023-24 school year, Reynoldsburg plans to scale the Socratic Circles model to an additional school. Ross and Floyd Jefferson will serve as advisors to additional school districts in other states that are interested in implementing the Reynoldsburg Socratic Circle model.

Reynoldsburg is committed to **continuity of equity** within Ohio and beyond.

# Reimagining Progress

> "[W]e had a ton of different people from diverse backgrounds, and then when we made our outcomes, we really looked at all of that.... So I saw everybody's voice, everybody's different perspective reflected in these outcomes."

**District-Community Team Member**

# Tenet 5: Reimagining Progress

**W**ith Inclusive Innovation, we ultimately strive to reimagine progress, and in doing so, resource communities to sustain capacity for R&D into the future. While student achievement often serves as the bottomline measure of educational impact, we assert that progress measures should be multidimensional, reflect the whole child, and focus specifically on achieving access, participation, and benefit for those most impacted.

In practice, this new orientation to progress means that district-community teams identified outcomes that emphasized students' access, belonging, identity, and agency in their own learning and educational experiences (see [v2.0 model below]). Informed by Rochelle Gutiérrez's (2009) work, these four dimensions of equity can be used to understand root causes of a challenge and frame the specific problem the district-community teams set out to address, the nature of the outcomes they define, and the goals of solution concepts they develop. As Exhibit 2 illustrates, when outcomes target access, belonging, identity, and agency, they address the whole child— mental and emotional well-being; sense of self, belonging, and cultural identity as strengths in the path to educational attainment and economic mobility; and lifelong skills and mindsets important to interpersonal relationships in a civil and interdependent world.

**Exhibit 2. Sample Outcomes Developed by District-Community Team Addressing the Whole Child**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Access** | "Teachers will develop classroom cultures that support maturity/ civility in both planned and unplanned conversations about equity" |
| **Belonging** | "Students will feel inclusion and ownership in shaping their curriculum" |
| **Identity** | "Students take up opportunities for authentic, creative expression through different avenues" |
| **Agency** | "Students of color who have experienced racism have the knowledge and training to advocate for themselves and others against racism" |

(See Exhibit 3 for outcomes defined by district-community teams across four inclusive Innovation pilot projects, and the inset for a summary of the research paper exploring equity-centered outcomes in Inclusive Innovation).

**Exhibit 3. Problem Statements and Outcomes Created by Pilot Districts**

| | Problem Statement | Outcome Statements |
|---|---|---|
| **Pilot District 1** | Students need a voice in selecting the research topics which have social, cultural, and historical relevance to their lives and choice in exploring those topics from multiple perspectives using accessible, diverse sources and varied assignments and formats. | 1. Students indicate increased comfort as writers and demonstrate increased enjoyment and confidence as writers.<br><br>2. Students will feel inclusion and ownership in shaping their curriculum.<br><br>3. Students recognize the validity of other positions, other viewpoints, and understand the role society, culture, and power play in shaping opportunities available to them in their community. |
| **Pilot District 2** | Problem Statement: Teachers need innovative strategies to help them design authentic writing opportunities that will support and nurture scholars' creative expression through a medium of their choice. Scholars need opportunities to use their distinctive creativity to enhance their learning through writing across all content areas. | 1. Students demonstrate increased confidence in writing.<br><br>2. Students take up opportunities for authentic, creative expression through different avenues.<br><br>3. Students write across content areas. |
| **Pilot District 3** | The local district community of students, staff, and parents need intentional opportunities to discuss, learn about, share, and address issues surrounding race to better support the mental health of students negatively impacted by experiences and normalization of racism and the lack of its acknowledgment. | 1. Students of color who have experienced racism have access to an awareness of a resource (person or process) to address the mental health impacts of racism.<br><br>2. Students of color who have experienced racism have the knowledge and training to advocate for themselves and others against racism.<br><br>3. The community (school and larger) is educated on the impacts of racism. |
| **Pilot District 4** | Teachers need training with techniques to help create a safer environment and guidelines on how administrators will support teachers and handle complaints through official [district] channels to get out of the loop of fear. | 1. Teachers will feel more empowered to facilitate discussions of race/racism and create a mutual understanding of the importance of DEI because they are supported (e.g., by the community, families, and district and building administration).<br><br>2. Teachers will know how to understand students and take on different points of view.<br><br>3. Teachers will develop classroom cultures that support maturity/ civility in both planned and unplanned conversations about equity. |

Source: Inclusive Innovation pilot artifacts, excerpt Exhibit 5. Problem Statements and Outcomes Created by Pilot Districts (White, 2022b, p. 8-10).

**Reimagining progress** also translates into students who are most impacted by the challenge directly leading, designing, and informing the solutions to best meet their needs, reflecting the axiom above that equity in outcomes is inextricably linked to equity in process. For instance:

- High school student interns in Sunnyside developed the Compact Writing Assignments based on direct input from ninth graders with whom the interns conducted focus groups and surveys about their school writing experiences and how compact writing assignments could be structured to build confidence in writing.

- Socorro student ambassadors in middle school designed and ran small writing groups for peers who, like they, did not identify as strong writers and could benefit from interest-based, low-stakes writing activities as opportunities for creative expression and to build their comfort as well as skills in writing.

- Bristol Township students led mental health and racial trauma-focused professional development for teachers by directly sharing their own stories and redefining their role by training teachers.

- Reynoldsburg community members participated in Socratic circles focused on social justice, galvanizing school and civic leaders' support to sustain and the spread of Socratic circles in the district.

These examples illustrate how meaningful access and participation in defining the problem, determining the target outcomes, and designing the solutions represent progress toward equity by having those most impacted take a rightful place throughout the R&D process. That rightful presence is essential if solutions generated through R&D are to achieve the types of outcomes communities desire for their children to thrive and determine their own futures.

**EMERGING FINDINGS**

*Using Inclusive Innovation to Create Equity-Centered Outcomes (White, 2022)*

District-community teams identified the outcomes they expected to achieve if they were successful at addressing the problem they set out to address. The outcomes reflected the whole child and the context expertise and student voice present in the process, illustrating a breadth of outcomes beyond achievement that result when the process incorporates the voices of those closest to the challenge.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the policy environment and accountability structures within which districts must operate, filtering the way districts engage in systems improvement and change. The outcomes defined by district-community teams aligned with key district strategic goals, and provided more specific focus on students from historically and systematically excluded communities.

Tenet #6

# Building Capacity

" "[T]he whole concept of designing with people that you're going to be implementing things with... Co-designing with those people is really important... [M]any times,... adults maybe don't give as much weight to the voices and opinions of students...  [O]ur students have things to say, they have experiences... So always making sure that I'm tuning in as an administrator and a leader to what my students have to say."

**School District Administrator**

**District-Community Team Member**

# Tenet 6: Building Capacity

**I**f progress is a continuous journey, Inclusive Innovation cannot be a one-off project after which district and community return to business as usual. Resourcing communities to **sustain capacity** for R&D into the future is therefore the second impact tenet, reflecting the Center's vision for R&D at scale.

The deep work each district-community team undertook in Inclusive Innovation built the capacity of those who directly participated. The participants emerged carrying those mindsets and skills into their everyday work and spheres of influence. As one principal on a district-community team shared: "getting to involve more parents and different people in this process, I think, was a great way of doing it... I've kind of learned from it and applied it to some of our leadership meetings, and so this process I do think is a great way to create something that's going to be lasting."

The initial pilots provided promising evidence of the types of capacities different types of participants developed (see inset).

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**EMERGING FINDINGS**

### Capacity Building in Communities to Create Equity-Centered Educational Opportunities (White, 2022)

Participants reported building a range of foundational mindsets and skills through engaging in Inclusive Innovation, including being able to consider different perspectives and sharing power; developing trusting relationships; valuing student voice and honoring context expertise; knowledge of and confidence in collaborating in co-research and co-design.

Overall, because being able to facilitate in myriad ways to deeply and authentically integrate those with lived expertise and student voice and to elevate their roles in co-leadership, Connect & Commit forms the foundation for building capacity towards equity-centered inclusive R&D. Activities such as team-developed equity commitments, a team charter, sharing each individual's lived experience and context expertise as they relate to the challenge the team is addressing, and mapping relevant community assets begin to build mindsets and skills that underpin the rest of the R&D process.

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Reflecting the foundations of Connect & Commit, the vast majority of district-community team members surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their own identity influenced their relationships (87%), and that trusting relationships are important in understanding the needs of students furthest from opportunity (100%) and co-designing solutions (97%) (Exhibit 4). A large majority of participants also reported that they were confident in being able to recognize their positionality and establish trusting relationships in efforts to meet the needs of students furthest from opportunity (88% to 97% at least moderately confident) (Exhibit 5).

**Exhibit 4. District-Community Team Members' Trust and Relationship Mindsets**
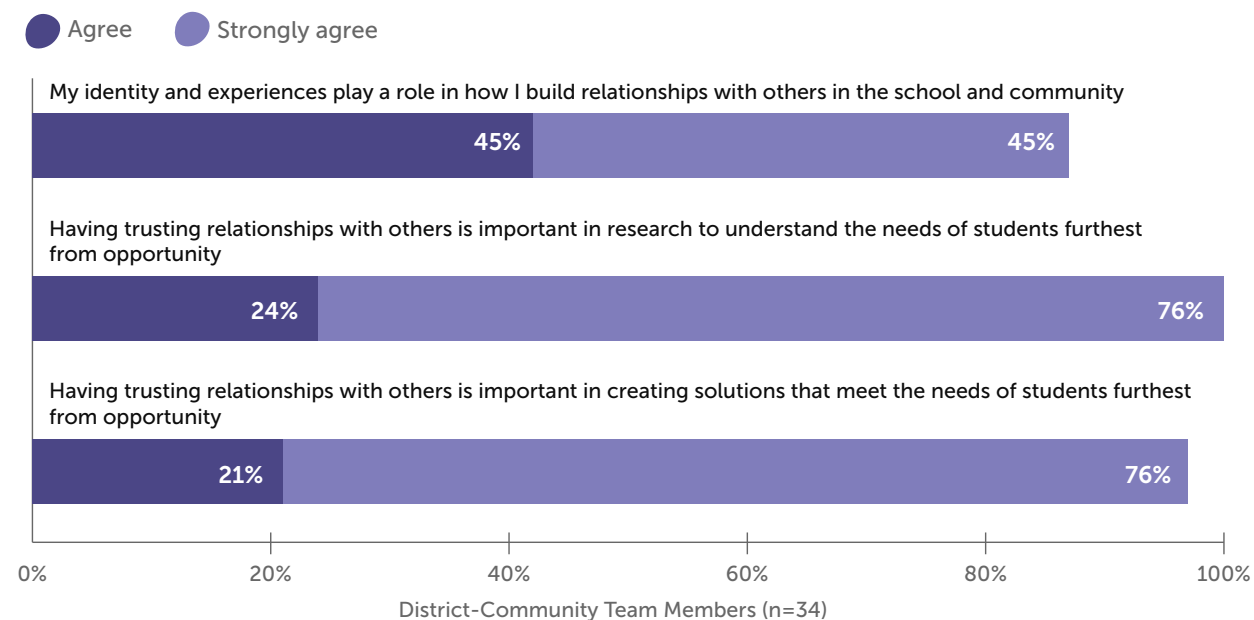


● Agree  ● Strongly agree

My identity and experiences play a role in how I build relationships with others in the school and community
45% | 45%

Having trusting relationships with others is important in research to understand the needs of students furthest from opportunity
24% | 76%

Having trusting relationships with others is important in creating solutions that meet the needs of students furthest from opportunity
21% | 76%

District-Community Team Members (n=34)

Source: Digital Promise Inclusive Innovation Post-Engagement Survey, 2022. Also reported in *Exhibit 7. Survey Responses-Participant Reflection on Developing Trusting Relationships* (White, 2022a, p. 10).

**Exhibit 5. District-Community Team Members' Confidence in Building Trust and Relationships**
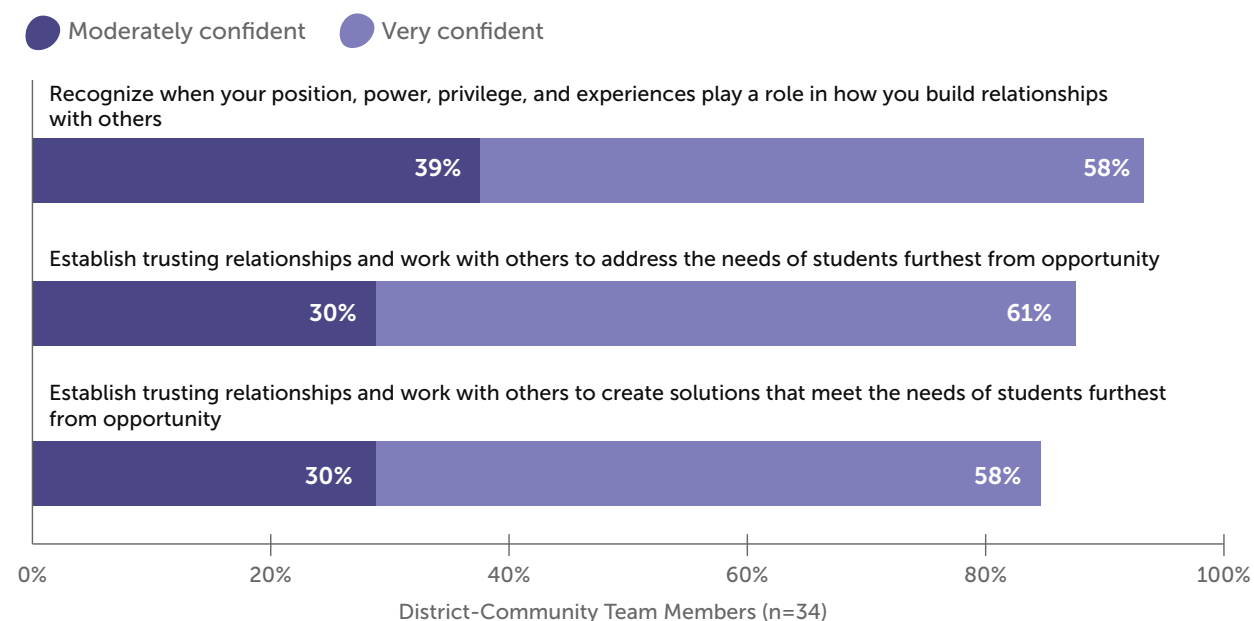


● Moderately confident  ● Very confident

Recognize when your position, power, privilege, and experiences play a role in how you build relationships with others
39% | 58%

Establish trusting relationships and work with others to address the needs of students furthest from opportunity
30% | 61%

Establish trusting relationships and work with others to create solutions that meet the needs of students furthest from opportunity
30% | 58%

District-Community Team Members (n=34)

Source: Digital Promise Inclusive Innovation Post-Engagement Survey, 2022. Also reported in *Exhibit 8. Survey Responses-Confidence with Developing Trusting Relationships* (White, 2022a, p. 11).

District-community team members understood the central tenets of Inclusive Innovation, specifically in honoring context expertise, prioritizing student perspectives, and collaborating with those experiencing the challenge (91% to 97% agreed or strongly agreed). Participants also reported that the model increased their ability to engage in equity-centered R&D, which they center the needs of students furthest from opportunity in research and solutions design (94%) (Exhibit 6). Participants further expressed confidence in capacities related to conducting Inclusive Innovation, specifically including school district and community members in creating solutions to problems in education (97%), prioritizing the needs of students furthest from opportunity in creating solutions (91%), engaging in research and designing solutions to address the needs of students furthest from opportunity (90%), and doing so with multiple stakeholders including those most affected by the problem (94%) (Exhibit 7).

**Exhibit 6. District-Community Team Members' Mindsets on Context Expertise and Equity-Centered R&D**



Source: Digital Promise Inclusive Innovation Post-Engagement Survey, 2022. Also reported in *Exhibit 7. Survey Responses-P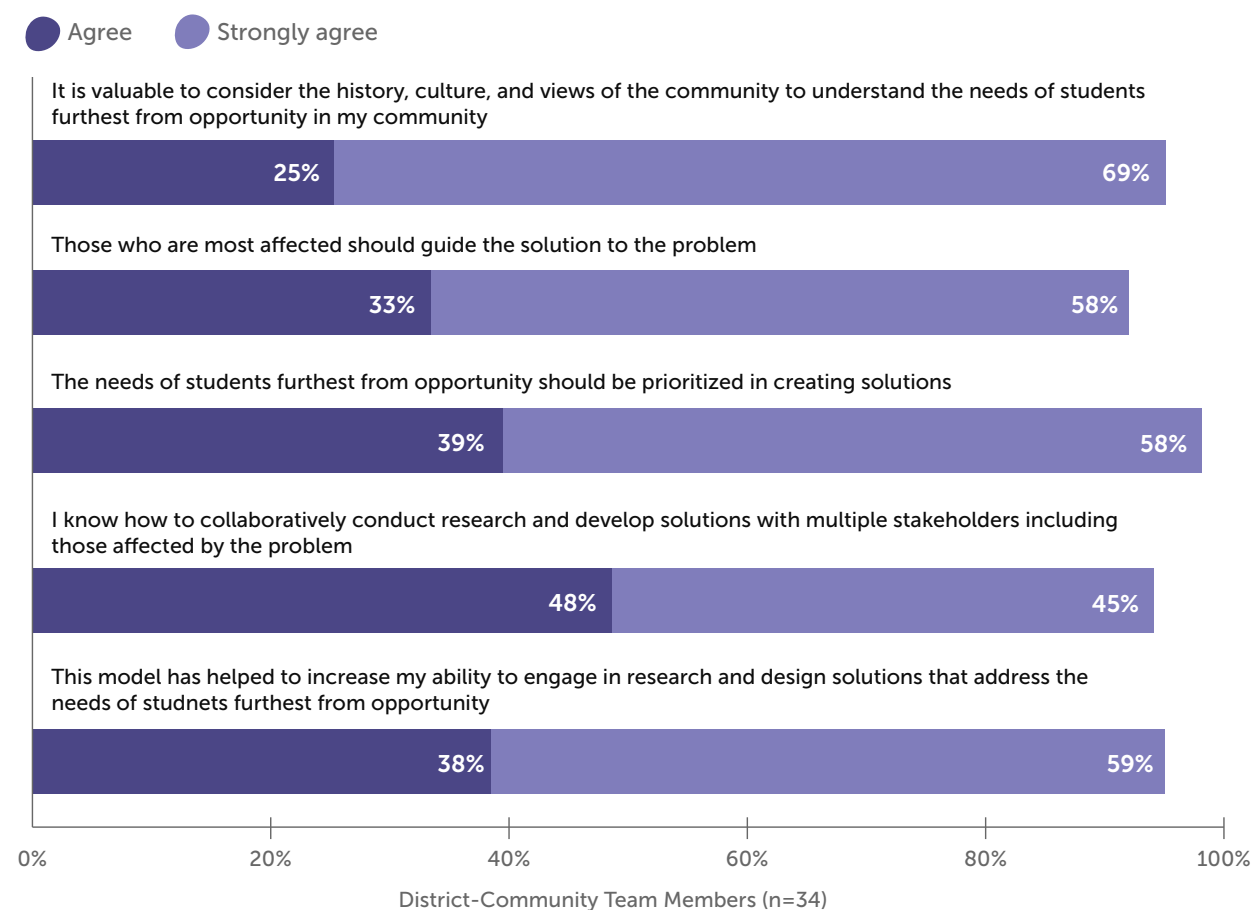articipant Reflection on Developing Trusting Relationships and Exhibit 11. Survey Results-Participant Reflection on Knowledge of Collaboration with Stakeholders* (White, 2022a, p. 10 and 17).

**Exhibit 7. District-Community Team Members' Confidence in Equity-Centered R&D Capacities**

● Moderately confident  ● Very confident

Identify resources in the community based on the history, culture, and views of others to understand the needs of students furthest from opportunity

| 55% | 36% |

Include members from the school district and community in creating solutions to problems in educaiton

| 34% | 63% |

Prioritize the needs of students furthest from opportunity in creating solutions

| 33% | 58% |

Collaboratively conduct research and develop solutions with multiple stakeholders, including those most affected by the problem

| 44% | 50% |

Engage in research and design solutions that address the needs of students furthest from opportunity

| 34% | 56% |

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

District-Community Team Members (n=34)

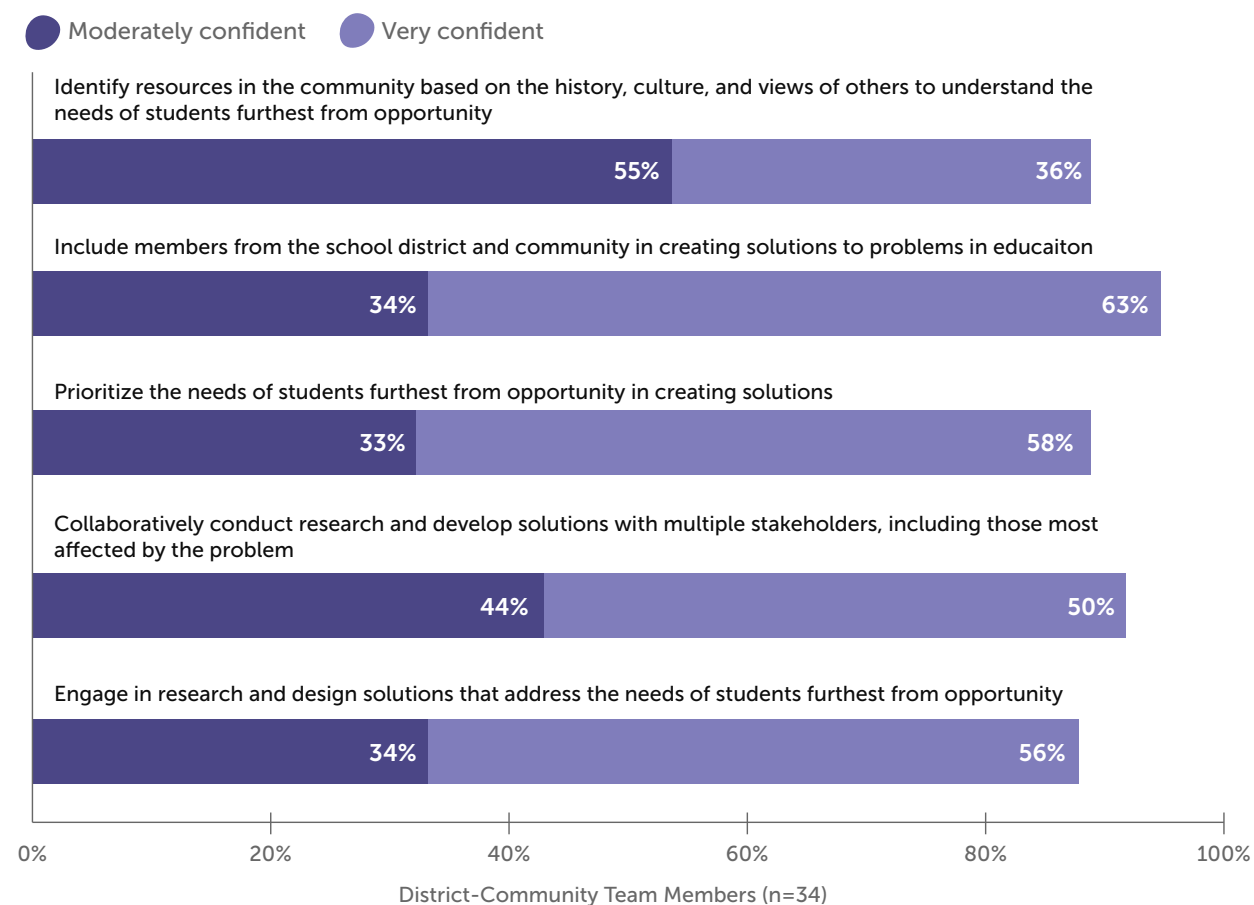Source: Digital Promise Inclusive Innovation Post-Engagement Survey, 2022. Also reported in *Exhibit 8. Survey Responses-Confidence with Developing Trusting Relationships* and *Exhibit 12. Survey Results-Participant Reflection on Confidence in Collaborating with Stakeholders* (White, 2022a, p. 11 and 18).

Transforming education R&D means re-examining the assumptions about who is involved and how, which students are centered in defining the problem definition and designing its solution design, and which outcomes are meaningful and to whom. We need to think about community capacity to tackle these assumptions and sustain R&D, because by doing so, communities will generate greater demand for inclusive processes and propel inclusive R&D to scale. Although this work is in the early stages and we will uncover more about systems-level change over time, our learnings so far from the initial Inclusive Innovation pilots reinforce both the necessity for capacity building and the possibility of doing so through the Inclusive Innovation model.

The six Inclusive Innovation tenets reflect a progression in deepening our own understanding and evolution of the Inclusive Innovation model, where the four practice tenets were intentionally designed and brought to life in the work thus far and the two impact tenets were necessarily emergent as we tried out the full Inclusive Innovation model over the past three years. In Inclusive Innovation 2.0, we heighten our emphasis on capacity building by codifying the mindsets, skills, and knowledge that participants will learn and practice through Inclusive Innovation.

# Introducing Inclusive Innovation 2.0

# Introducing Inclusive Innovation 2.0

**A**fter sharing our learnings, some of the stories, and data from the past three years, the question now turns to how we are building on this work to achieve transformative outcomes and impact for historically and systematically excluded students and communities.
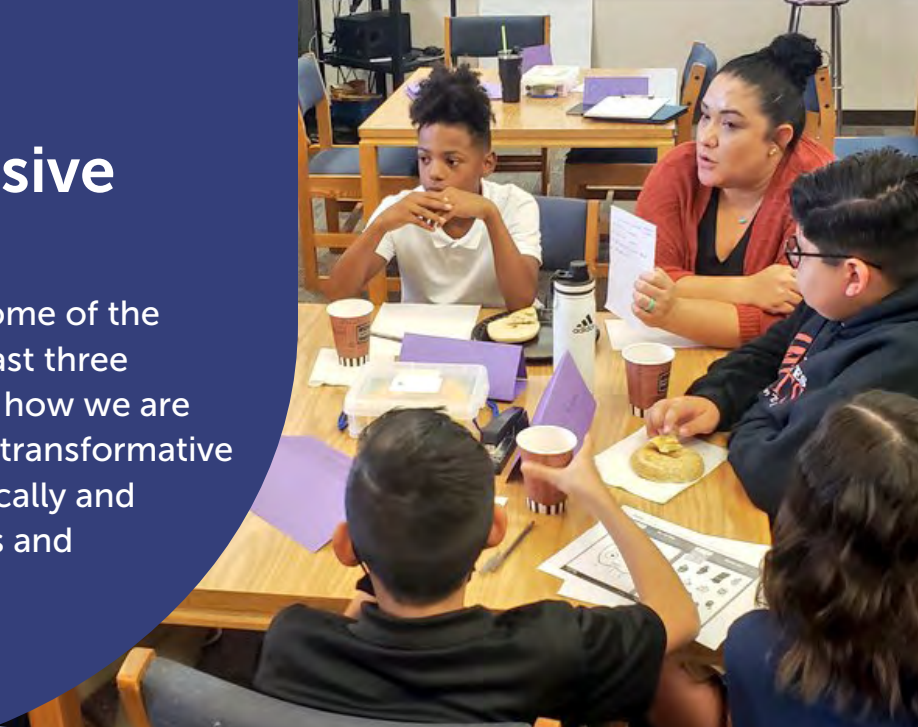
In our commitment to continuous improvement, we have applied the research and our own first-hand experience of facilitating the work with districts and communities to refine the model and, with this paper, we are introducing the Inclusive Innovation 2.0 model.

Inclusive Innovation 2.0 remains anchored in the original five phases we introduced in our initial paper, *Designing a Process for Inclusive Innovation*. Our work thus far underscored the importance of engaging districts and communities in each of the five phases. Each phase, starting with Connect & Commit, progressively builds on one another and interweaving equity-centered practices throughout proved essential to supporting the mindset and condition shifts.

**Diagram: Inclusive Innovation v1.0 Model**

|  | Connect & Commit | Inquire & Investigate | Design & Develop | Implement & Iterate | Sustain & Scale |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Goal** | Build relationships, trust, and a shared commitment to tackling a challenge. | Deeply investigate the challenge from multiple perspectives and arrive at target outcomes for addressing and measuring progress against the challenge. | Create one or more prototype solutions that can be tested for the target outcomes. | Implement one or more prototypes, tracking multiple progress indicators and target outcomes to iterate and improve. | Implement refined solution(s) in multiple contexts, improving local implementations and gathering knowledge for scaling. |
| **Equity-first practices** | Engagement | | | | |
|  | Capacity Building | | | | |
|  | Reflection | | | | |
|  | Recognition | | | | |

With Inclusive Innovation v2.0, we are not fundamentally changing the model. We learned that the phases of the model itself held true in the work we engaged in with distr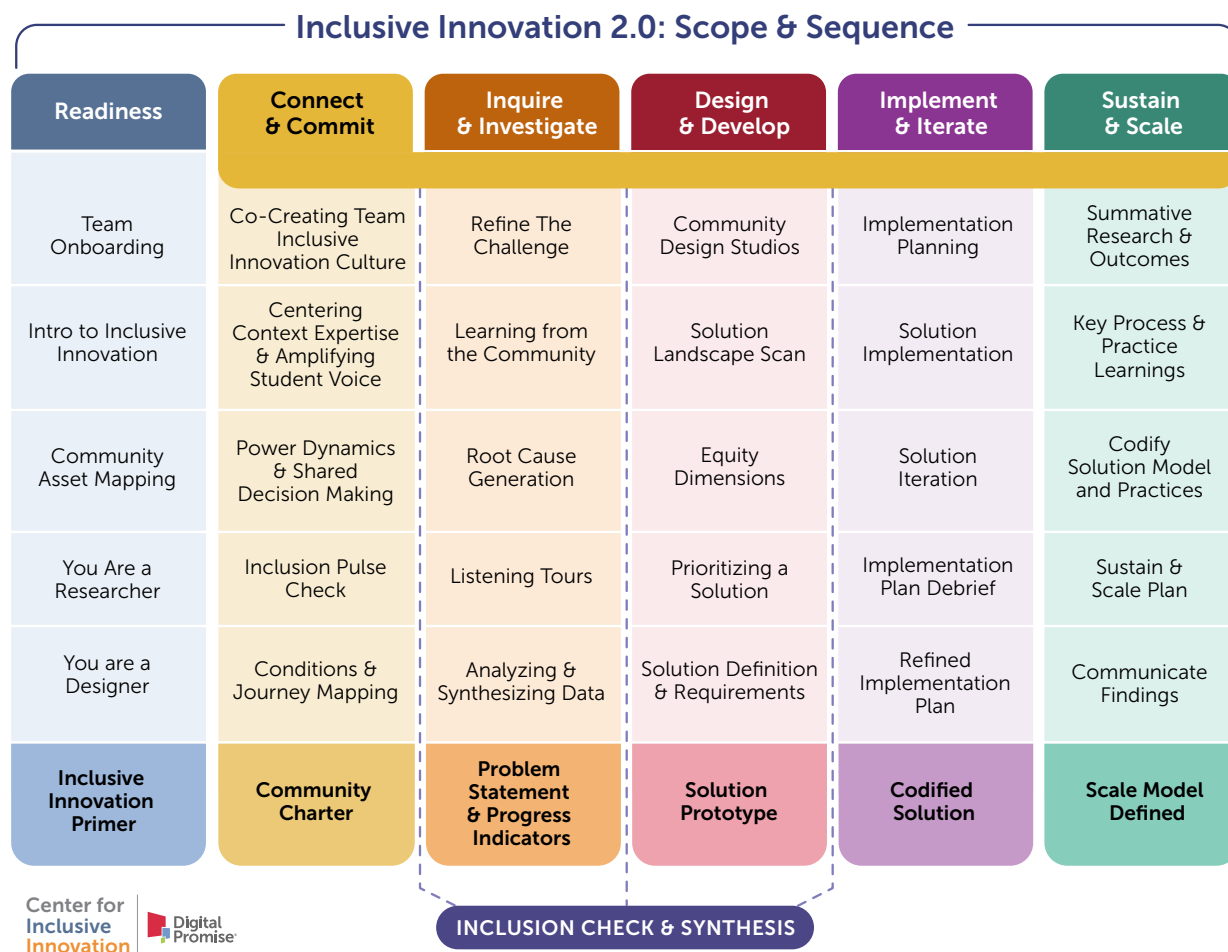icts and communities. In practice, the process is more fluid and the phases are not strictly separate. Therefore we are refining the model to demonstrate key ways in which the phases are interwoven.

**Diagram: Inclusive Innovation v2.0 Model**

### Inclusive Innovation 2.0 Model

| Readiness | Connect & Commit | Inquire & Investigate | Design & Develop | Implement & Iterate | Sustain & Scale |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ensure team readiness for the work, introduce the Inclusive Innovation model and the concepts of co-leadership, co-research and co-design | Build relationships, trust and a shared commitment to tackling a challenge | Deeply investigate the challenge from multiple perspectives and arrive at target outcomes for addressing and measuring progress against the challenge | Create one or more prototype solutions that can be tested for the target outcomes | Implement one or more prototypes, tracking multiple progress indicators and target outcomes to iterate and improve | Implement and codify refined solution(s) in multiple contexts, improving local implementations and gathering knowledge for scaling |
| **Inclusive Innovation Primer** | **Community Charter** | **Problem Statement & Progress Indicators** | **Solution Prototype** | **Codified Solution** | **Scale Model Defined** |

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To bring the model to life, we originally authored over 40 protocols—R&D activities aligned across the phases—to facilitate the district and community engagement. The protocols are the secret sauce, so to speak, because each one is intentionally designed to guide teams of district leaders, teachers, parents, students, researchers, and developers through a process that is predominantly rooted in shifting power dynamics and human relationships while moving the work of addressing an educational challenge forward. As such, the protocols are designed to be provocative.

**Diagram: Inclusive Innovation v2.0 Model with Protocols**

## Inclusive Innovation 2.0: Scope & Sequence

| Readiness | Connect & Commit | Inquire & Investigate | Design & Develop | Implement & Iterate | Sustain & Scale |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Team Onboarding | Co-Creating Team Inclusive Innovation Culture | Refine The Challenge | Community Design Studios | Implementation Planning | Summative Research & Outcomes |
| Intro to Inclusive Innovation | Centering Context Expertise & Amplifying Student Voice | Learning from the Community | Solution Landscape Scan | Solution Implementation | Key Process & Practice Learnings |
| Community Asset Mapping | Power Dynamics & Shared Decision Making | Root Cause Generation | Equity Dimensions | Solution Iteration | Codify Solution Model and Practices |
| You Are a Researcher | Inclusion Pulse Check | Listening Tours | Prioritizing a Solution | Implementation Plan Debrief | Sustain & Scale Plan |
| You are a Designer | Conditions & Journey Mapping | Analyzing & Synthesizing Data | Solution Definition & Requirements | Refined Implementation Plan | Communicate Findings |
| **Inclusive Innovation Primer** | **Community Charter** | **Problem Statement & Progress Indicators** | **Solution Prototype** | **Codified Solution** | **Scale Model Defined** |

**INCLUSION CHECK & SYNTHESIS**

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With our experiences testing out the protocols and refining the process through intentional improvement cycles, we have a clearer understanding of which protocols best set the stage for district-community teams to begin their work together, the most effective protocols within phases, and ways to streamline activities to build the core deliverables that anchor each phase. These elements are detailed in the Inclusive Innovation 2.0 Scope & Sequence and described in the table below.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Readiness** | To engage in this approach to R&D, it is important for participants to be prepared to embark on the journey. We name the importance of a "primer" to set the foundation for engaging as a team in this work. |
| **Connect & Commit** | The protocols focus on stage setting for trust and relationship building. We have found it to be an effective practice for teams to engage in a deep level of human connection and explicit equity practices to co-create their Inclusive Innovation culture. |
| **Inquire & Investigate** | The protocols facilitate exploration of the challenge through community-led research and refinement based on learnings to hone in on the core challenge statement, its root causes, and the definition of progress outcomes. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Design & Develop** | The protocols guide the imagination of solution ideas—and then invites the team to apply the equity dimensions to shift and stretch solution ideas. The development process applies the shifts to the solution to ensure the prioritization of equity is fully represented in the solution prototype. |
| **Implement & Iterate** | The protocols extend the focus on equity into the implementation phase by testing the prototype to ensure that those furthest from opportunity achieve access, participation, and benefit when the solution is in educational context and community. |
| **Sustain & Scale** | The final phase supports the team in completing the research, capturing the learnings, and codifying the solution to enable the outcomes and impact of the work to be shared—and for others to utilize the solution if scaling is a goal. |

In addition to the protocols, we have developed a set of tools to enable teams to apply their learning about co-research and development to their practice of designing for equity. We share three tools as examples: the Dimensions of Inclusive Innovation, Solution Concept Stretch and the Journey Map tools.

**The Dimensions of Inclusive Innovation Tool**: Informed by Rochelle Gutiérrez's Dimensions of Equity model, the focus of the tool is to introduce provocations that are wholly centered in unlocking access, belonging, agency, and identity in learning experiences designed with and for students who are historically and systematically excluded. The tool is effective in helping teams shift and challenge their thinking about what a solution should aim to achieve.

| Access | Belonging | Identity | Agency | Achievement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Access relates to the resources – including physical resources, experiences, services, and information – and modalities that students have available to them so they can fully participate in learning. | Belonging is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. Belonging relates to a sense of being seen, heard, and valued, which can be communicated through interpersonal and instructional supports. | Student identity is honored. Culture is embedded in the language, identity, and lived experiences of students. Solutions that reflect culture and identity embrace the historical and current realities of student experiences. | Agency relates to issues of social transformation and can manifest as student voice in their learning, opportunities for students to analyze and critique society, and alternative notions of knowledge and measures of success. | Achievement is a dimension of equity that refers to and is measured by concrete outcomes. Equitable achievement requires that high standards are predicted and supported for students at all levels. |
| How can the solution be made more accessible to students who are historically and systematically excluded? | How can the solution create a sense of belonging for students who are historically and systematically excluded? | How can the solution embody the culture and identities of students who are historically and systematically excluded? | How can the solution shift agency to students who are historically and systematically excluded? | How can the solution provide asset-based feedback highlighting strengths and encourages growth for students who are historically and systematically excluded? |

Informed by R. Gutiérrez (2009), Framing equity: Helping students "play the game" and "change the "game"

**The Solution Concept Stretch Tool**: We utilized the 2x2 diagram from our first paper to invite participants to transform their solution ideas from reaching those who are already well-served and supported to providing access, participation and benefit to those who are systematically excluded. The tool is a simple yet powerful mechanism for encouraging teams to question whether the solution concept is indeed centered in equity and how to shift more towards innovation and equity to create novel, differentiated solutions that are intentionally designed to meet the needs of historically and systematically excluded students and families.
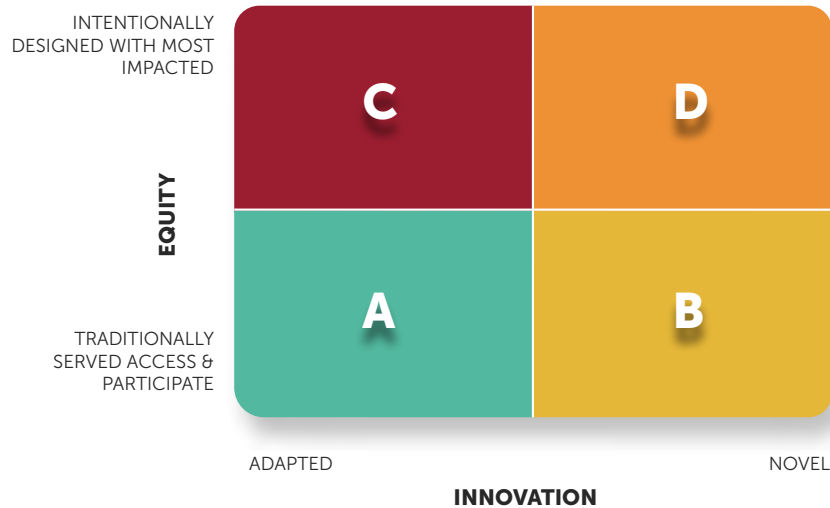


**The Journey Map Tool**: To capture the Inclusive Innovation model-in-action – the challenge, research, solutions and outcomes – we created a journey mapping tool. The tool enables teams to codify the key takeaways from each phase of the work and share the story of how the collaboration resulted in solutions that are shifting conditions and outcomes.
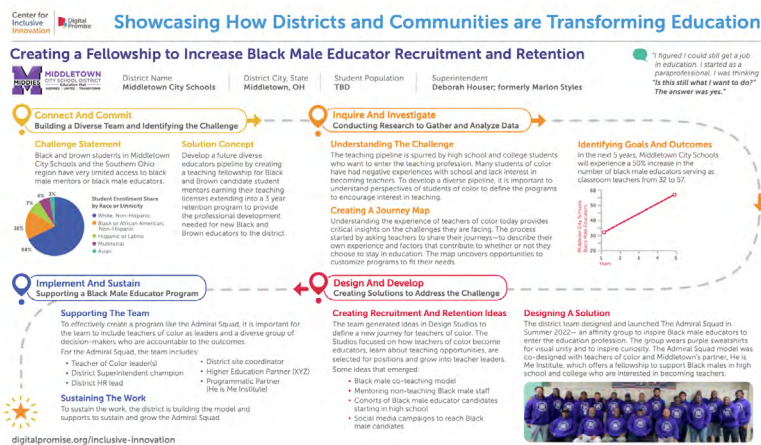


We will make the Inclusive Innovation model broadly available over the next year by inviting districts, communities, researchers, developers, and policymakers to learn how to bring the methodology and approach into their work. We will create opportunities for districts and communities to embed the model within their context and advocate for the democratization of R&D by sharing the principles, tools, and learnings as a demonstration of what can be when everyone is at the education R&D and innovation table.

# Conclusions and Next Steps

**I**n closing, we return to the the driving question we opened with:

*What if the solution to inequities in education resides in foundational shifts—in our mindsets, in our proximity, in our collaborations—and ultimately, in the co-research and development of learning centered in and led by those most impacted?*

Our work in progress—and indeed, that of others in the field of inclusive R&D—shows significant promise. As such, we must continue this work to ensure that the promise translates into both solutions to educational challenges that meet the needs of students from historically and systematically excluded communities, and shifts in the system where co-leadership, co-research, and co-design with students, families and community become the norm in education R&D.

The research findings and detailed vignettes presented in this paper begin to show:

- The pressing and complex educational challenges district-community teams are tackling with Inclusive Innovation: recruitment and retention of teachers of color; student mental health and racial trauma; teacher training to understand and support social justice discourse; student confidence and ability to express themselves through writing; disproportionate disciplinary action, among other challenges

- The willingness and depth of understanding those with formal authority need to have about their own positionality to truly value context expertise and honor student voice and leadership in R&D processes from the start, with implications for shared power and decision-making

- R&D outcomes that district-community teams defined in terms of student well-being, access, belonging, identity, and agency, in addition to learning

- Novel solutions that centered the needs of those most impacted by the challenge because their perspectives helped define the problem, specify the solution components and design, and guide solution implementation

- The capacities that emerged or were strengthened through participating in Inclusive Innovation

To further realize this promise, fundamental shifts in individuals' mindsets and relationships—particularly among those in positional power—to intentionally create a rightful place to include those most excluded in the R&D process, to understand root causes of educational problems from the perspective of those most proximate to the challenge, and to embrace co-designing solutions centered on the needs of students furthest from opportunity—are arguably necessary to enable broader systemwide shifts. Such changes in worldview obviously take time and will not happen on their own.

Capacity to engage in R&D, then, must be intentionally developed. Participants reported that engaging in Inclusive Innovation helped develop or deepen certain mindsets and skills. Based on our early experiences and learnings, we are further codifying the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that participants can explore and practice through the Inclusive Innovation model v2.0. We also are very aware that all types of R&D participants need to learn how to engage in new ways through collective leadership, co-research, and co-design: district and school leaders, practitioners, students and families, community members, entrepreneurs and solution providers, researchers, and facilitators.

With Inclusive Innovation v2.0, we will continue to interrogate our own adherence to the Inclusive Innovation tenets; iterate on continuous improvement processes around implementing the model, facilitating district-community teams to engage in and sustain R&D, and supporting others in leading their own Inclusive Innovation work; and conduct new rounds of research with particular emphasis on the impact tenets, **Reimagining Progress** and **Building Capacity**.

Most importantly for us, our work will continue in concert with colleagues dedicated to cultivating the field of R&D. Transforming education R&D to be more inclusive of those closest to the challenge is an undertaking that requires **collective action**. We have much to learn from each other and greater influence as a collective.  The new narrative will take all of us to ensure that the ingenuity of schools and communities is central in R&D to truly transform education opportunities and learning for students from historically and systematically excluded contexts.

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