



Building
Equitable
Learning
Environments
Network



DISTRICT-LEVEL LEARNINGS FROM THE FIELD: REDESIGNING SCHOOL DISTRICT SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES FOR HUMAN THRIVING



Make systems
human-centered



NATIONAL
EQUITY
PROJECT

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ABOUT THE BELE LEARNING SERIES

The Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) network is a diverse collaborative of organizations working to advance equity in education. These organizations range from academic institutions to fellow intermediary organizations. BELE partners share a bold vision of thriving youth, families, caregivers, and communities—and of education systems that are co-created with those they are intended to serve—to foster academic, social, emotional, and cognitive growth and well-being. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the National Equity Project (NEP) are part of the BELE Network research and learning team, and are responsible for documenting the network learnings, which are grounded in seven “Essential Actions” and reflected in shared annual aims.

Within BELE, we are producing a series of briefs documenting insights from our efforts to understand how the implementation of equity initiatives in our BELE partner districts show evidence of social and emotional learning (SEL) in service of equity and excellence and equity leadership. These briefs highlight the conditions necessary to begin and sustain the work of systemic transformation.

In this series, we explore our learnings with our partner districts, aligning each paper to one of seven BELE Essential Actions. These Essential Actions describe the changes and processes necessary to realize systemic transformation and are meant to give educators, caregivers, and practitioners concrete actions for centering student experience in education.

The goal of this learning series is two-fold:

1. To share our action research agenda, and the collaborative learnings of CASEL, NEP, and our partner districts¹ regarding the conditions necessary to create and cultivate transformative and equitable learning environments.
2. To provide education practitioner-facing recommendations for those looking to begin equivalent work in their district or school.

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¹ All learning partners and districts will be referred by pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

As part of the BELE Network, CASEL and NEP work alongside school districts that seek external collaborators to co-design sustainable models for equitable learning environments adaptable to their local context. They align coaching assistance, network resources and tools, and research capacity with district practitioners' expert knowledge of their learning communities, key stakeholder relationships, and access to learning environments to formulate, implement, and test student and adult-level frameworks that are both scalable and adaptive. Underpinned by a collaborative approach, these research-practice partnerships allow cultivated relationships with districts already committed to the work of equity to develop solutions to the ever-present challenge of equitable learning for all students. Technical assistance from CASEL or NEP and learning partners help to actualize the following **BELE Essential Actions**:



Make systems human-centered



Invest in staff



Transform teaching and learning



Measure what matters



Empower BIPOC youth



Create equitable policies



Partner with caregivers and communities

These Essential Actions describe the changes and processes necessary to realize systemic transformation and are meant to give educators, parents/caregivers, and practitioners concrete actions in centering student experience in education. They are designed to support teachers, principals, district and state leaders, community leaders, and young people to use the power we each carry to help create a more equitable, humanized system that supports the learning and development of young people and allows them to be healthy and whole.

CASEL and NEP both offer technical assistance models increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities. While CASEL's approach to this level of capacity-building is through systemic social emotional learning implementation, NEP approaches systems improvement through their Equity Leadership coaching. Despite some differences in these approaches, this partnership is predicated on the reality that both organizations use a set of action-oriented principles that align with the BELE Essential Actions in guiding their coaching and technical assistance to districts.

This shared framing can help ensure that ALL students meet universal goals of whole child well-being and academic excellence (bele.org, 2018). These actions are supported by extant literature and field-based evidence serving as a set of practices, processes, and conditions that the BELE Network has collectively identified as imperatives for transforming the education system and ensuring that all students, regardless of background or origin, are afforded high-quality educational experiences.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS LEARNING BRIEF

This brief will discuss learnings around the first **Essential Action: Make Systems Human-Centered**.

This action focuses on “Designing schoolwide systems and structures to center the humanity of students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support human well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development” (bele.org, 2022). In order to create an equitable, humanized system that allows young people to be healthy and whole, we must design systems and structures that center the humanity of students and educators by promoting positive relationships, collaboration, and student-centered learning.

In practice, this means reviewing all systems, structures, and practices from discipline and grading policies, physical environments, and scheduling, to curricular decisions, resource allocation, and overall decision making—from the classroom to the superintendent’s office—to ensure that the experiences, voices, and humanity of students remain at the center. We include the following guidance:

- Align all school efforts, structures, resources, and people around a shared vision of equitable learning and development.
- Employ structures and resources to create learning communities that foster relationships and offer personalized support for both adults and students.
- Ensure schedules and learning opportunities are designed and organized to prioritize student experience and learning goals.
- Ensure curriculum and content in all subjects is culturally and socially inclusive; celebrates the contributions of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people; challenges stereotypes; and disrupts existing systems of oppression and racial hierarchy.
- Repair the harmful impact of discipline systems that include surveillance, policing, and exclusion.
- Implement behavior systems and expectations that are responsive, restorative, empathic, and support student learning and development
- Adopt grading and testing policies that prioritize well-being and engagement and recognize the knowledge and skills students gain.
- Create decision-making processes that provide all stakeholders with opportunities to be heard.

Our findings for this brief were generated from our co-designed work with school district partners, specifically focused on three key conditions needed in beginning to redesign human-centered educational systems that allow for equitable learning practices, and human thriving:

1. While district departmental teams can philosophically state their readiness towards equitable practices, cross-departmental collaboration within a school district serves as an accelerator to this work.
2. District leaders must be clear about the “Why” (Why is this important for equity?) and “How” (How does this work connect to the community?) in order to foster the learning community’s investment and perseverance in systems-change work.
3. The collaborative inquiry model enables cross-departmental collaboration that fosters data-informed strategic planning and decision-making.



CONDITION

1

While district departmental teams can philosophically state their readiness to pursue more equitable practices, cross-departmental collaboration within a school district serves as an accelerator to this work.

While an explicitly communicated priority to advance equity and excellence is necessary in a district's strategic plan, a district's interdepartmental infrastructure is the keystone to effectively executing this commitment to equity.

To begin the process of systemic transformation in education, BELE network partners have found that even if a commitment to equity is evident in multiple areas within a district and supported by various personnel, the work itself cannot be executed without a collaborative departmental infrastructure. We define a collaborative departmental infrastructure as a district having organizational processes and resources to support initiatives, such as human capital, departmental communication systems, and budget and resources. These conditions were particularly evidenced in our early partnerships with a set of large, urban districts located in demographically varied regions of the U.S., all of whom expressed, in the language of their strategic plans, a commitment to both equity and aspects of SEL.

Each BELE partner district shared their district's strategic plans and external communications highlighting equity efforts in the district. All plans were documented as qualitative artifacts by the BELE Research and Learning team. Of these original districts, the districts who were best positioned to leverage existing district systems were also able to execute and align their equity work to what was stipulated in their strategic plans. One district in particular called for "authentic human connection," founded on caring relationships, evoking the SEL core competencies of relationship skills and social awareness for example. The plan highlighted attention to equity, noting that "an equitable world requires an educational system that intentionally disrupts." The language of this district's strategic plan did not shy away from explicit mentions of the cornerstones of BELE work, and that of the Essential Action of redesigning systems and structures, in particular.

Despite a district's stated commitments, they needed additional communication and infrastructure to bring these statements to fruition. A member of CASEL's practice team who worked closely with a partner district noted that the district had the support of its superintendent, with an explicit focus on SEL and equity in their strategic plan, but "without cooperation from all departments," the work came to a halt. The departmental leaders charged with spearheading the work experienced a high level of internal distrust. Another CASEL coach noted that this distrust was present before the BELE partnership began, which made it increasingly difficult to "even begin to negotiate this type of work."

The language of a strategic plan presents a district's will to accomplish the goal SEL in service of equity and excellence, but the district's organizational infrastructure presents the way those goals will be achieved.



A district's strategic plan plays a critical role in establishing a commitment to redesigning systems and structures in service of human thriving; however, without the necessary aligned leadership and a demonstrated capacity for opportunities and willingness for cross-department collaboration, a district cannot meet its vision and goals around equity. BELE partners have found a number of useful guidelines to form the necessary infrastructure:

- Stable district leadership with understanding and buy-in of partnership at the superintendent and cabinet levels.
- Established departments/personnel:
 - The SEL department ensures SEL standards and practices are defined, implemented, and sustained. Critically, this department also must act as a nexus point for the seamless integration of equity, research, and academic learning.
 - A district's equity department ensures practices, programming, and policies center equity in a comprehensive manner. In smaller districts, there may not be an equity department, however a demonstrated culture of centering equity in planning is evidenced.
 - A research and evaluation (R&E) department provides the technical assistance, insight, and content for data-informed conversations and strategic planning necessary for the district to be accountable for the work and tie it to student outcomes. In smaller districts, there may not be an R&E department, but instead a demonstrated culture of data-informed decision-making through continuous improvement.
 - The teaching and learning department supports the academic integration of SEL and equity by preventing the siloing of interdepartmental visions, goals, and initiatives.
- A demonstrated willingness, capacity, and opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration.

We have found that if the high-level initial conditions (i.e., strategic plan and departmental infrastructure) for the work of systemic transformation are in place, the next step is to ensure the departmental teams are not only able to articulate their readiness for equity initiatives but also willing to collaborate across district departments. While executive leadership may be capable of setting up the infrastructure that encourages cross-departmental collaboration, district department leads must possess a collaborative mindset and think about their work as systemic and integrated rather than segmented or siloed across departments.

At NEP, buy-in from partner superintendents was found to be critical to any promising progress toward the systematization of equitable practices that were described in district applications. Specifically, buy-in from a superintendent was evidenced by deep or frequent engagement with district-level equity-focused efforts (e.g., attending and participating in equity-focused professional development offerings, developing teams and infrastructures to analyze data through a DEI lens). NEP coaches described these districts as “moving towards systematized equitable practices at a moderate and positive pace.”

Yet, importantly, in districts where a superintendent may not have deep or frequent engagement with equity initiatives, they often had an operationalized proxy; that is, a district lead who has been deputized to act in the interest of equitable practices by the superintendent. This type of deputization is indicated by an individual who has access to decision-making power. This deputization helps to support the district to support, lead, and build a cross-functional district team in the interest of creating equitable conditions.

Each of CASEL's and NEP's districts completed an application form, citing their readiness to undertake the BELE Network's complex systems-improvement work across both philosophical and structural criteria. The philosophical criteria were designed to assess the general mindset of the district—their equity stance and bolstering commitments. These criteria, and the districts who indicated either readiness or in progress, can be found in Appendix A. Districts met the various philosophical criteria, indicating an equity mindset, a readiness to explore community identities, commitment to data collection and reflection, and to the time commitment necessary for deep systemic work.

On the other hand, structural criteria are intended to capture a snapshot of inner and outer workings of the district—the systems in place to support and enact the equity mindsets expressed. Districts that were unable to sustain the BELE implementation work lacked two notable criteria: stable district leadership and buy-in, and the capacity and willingness to collaborate cross-departmentally.

In the early stages of our work with each BELE district, CASEL coaches worked with district departmental leads to develop their problem of practice (PoP), identify root causes of their PoP, and map out their implementation plans. Throughout the process, the BELE Essential Actions were highlighted and centered, and the work carefully considered which actions were relevant. In our meetings with particular districts, it became clear that department leads were not communicating with each other, and some were unwilling to engage with the work—or engaged with it in their own ways, rather than cross-departmentally. Tensions between the directors became apparent, and over time, key stakeholders began to disengage in the work.

In the two districts that remained CASEL-BELE partners through the 2021-2022 school year, Peridot and Garnet, CASEL's team evidenced both their philosophical and structural readiness as the implementation work progressed. Our research-practice partnerships allowed us to gather the following specific learnings regarding cross-departmental collaboration and the actions necessary:

- Led by the SEL director at Peridot ISD, members of three departments—SEL, Research and Evaluation, and Equity and Wellness—**regularly met to advance the implementation work**. These meetings took place with and without CASEL member involvement (i.e., the district was able to own the on-the-ground work). Each team member had designated roles and responsibilities in the implementation work.
- When in the planning stages, the equity and SEL leaders **looked across their existing departmental initiatives** to find places where aspects of the BELE work were already happening or was a natural fit. This allowed them to connect what was already happening in the district to the BELE initiative and to disseminate this information to schools once the work began.



- BELE partners' ***previously established relationships***, the superintendents' firm equity stance and support of systems change, and the cross-departmental readiness and previous collaborative efforts all laid the foundation for the BELE implementation work. The necessary structure for Garnet's work was already in place.
- Each BELE planning meeting and the implementation work itself were ***a natural continuation of work already happening*** in BELE districts—the districts' directors naturally came together and pivoted into the BELE work.

In each of these districts, infrastructure and cross-departmental collaboration allowed all parties involved to see how aspects of the BELE work were already happening, and how coming together could unsilo each department and bolster both their equity and SEL work more generally.



CONDITION

2

District leaders must be clear about the “Why” (Why is this important for equity?) and “How” (How does this work connect to the community?) in order to foster the learning community’s investment and perseverance in this work.

While many districts have a strong desire and passion for seeking equitable conditions in student learning environments, they are also faced with a confluence of challenges that regularly divert attention, resources, and energy from this priority. For this reason, district leaders must have a clear understanding of the purpose (“Why?”) and process (“How?”) and develop strong communication touch points within their teams and the learning community at large to protect and sustain efforts around equity.

Years of research documenting the learning experience and outcomes of students have laid an adequate foundation for addressing the question of “Why invest in equity?” (Chapman & Ainscow, 2021, Gamoran, 2013; Auguste et al., 2009). However, in working with our learning partners, a necessary but more difficult question to answer surfaced—“Why is this (e.g., program, policy, initiative, etc.) important for equity?”—followed by its fulfillment through the question “How does this work connect to the community?”

These questions are just as important for the leaders engaged in equity as they are for the communities they work with. Reflecting on and answering these questions are critical to an equity district leader developing a personal definition of equity. Coaches have noted that without a personal definition of equity, “things get messy quickly, [so] even [for] good leaders without this [personal definition]... it gets challenging when [the] political landscape is not predictable.”

NEP coaches found that when a district equity lead developed “a personal definition of equity,” they were more grounded in the work and in turn better equipped to navigate an ever-shifting and weaponized sociopolitical climate. NEP coaches support district leads to develop a personal definition of equity that recognizes how power differentials contribute to the complexity of human experiences, including their own, and how this shows up in the work they are charged to lead.

During our three-year partnership with Garnet District Schools, CASEL engaged in capacity-building in support of a foundation for systemic SEL in the district. Garnet was committed to equity for their students, demonstrated by its prominence in their strategic plan, coupled with an SEL lead well equipped both to bridge SEL and equity and develop team goals that fostered an environment for students and educators alike to thrive.

However, within a year, the team experienced a major shift in leadership alongside deeply felt challenges related to the pandemic that seemed to exacerbate the inequities already present in the district. Prior to her departure, the former lead laid out a plan of action for the team, strongly aware of how the selected annual SEL goals would fulfill the district’s commitment to closing the equity gap. The team was aware of the equity-centered SEL goals, but never clearly informed or included in dialogue about why the selected goals were important for equity.

Since the team was unable to articulate the “Why,” there was a lack of clarity about how the work connected to the community. Although the SEL team was building connections with schools and providing the fundamental skills needed for SEL, they were unable to show how the work they were doing contributed to the goal of equity-centered SEL, and eventually stopped viewing it as their priority. This created a disconnect for both the incoming leader and remaining SEL team, who were unable to communicate internally (as a team) or externally (to schools and school leaders) about how SEL and equity were connected and in what ways this was evident through the developed goals. This scenario led to disengagement and, subsequently, to unmet goals by both the leader and her team.

The district above experienced challenges (i.e., frequent leadership transitions, disruptions related to the ongoing COVID crisis, and poor communication) that are very common in today’s educational arena and are unlikely to go away anytime soon. The example above is just as applicable to cross-departmental teams, which have even less training and experience on how to collaborate, further highlighting the importance of naming and sharing the “Why” and “How” of the SEL/equity efforts.

District leaders who develop their own personal definition of equity and are clear about the “Why” and “How” of equity-related efforts for themselves, their team, and the learning community at large meets several needs:

- ***They reduce confusion and misconceptions about equity:*** District leads who identify and convey how equity is being defined and what it looks like to work towards equity for both the team and the learning community aid the effort.
- ***They reduce process and planning inefficiencies:*** Cross-departmental teams can more clearly see the connections between the work and the intended outcome, as well as when they are heading off track.
- ***They encourage including stakeholders in the process:*** Asking about the community provides an opportunity to seek input, feedback, and solutions from all stakeholders and ensures planned efforts/actions are always attached to the impacted stakeholders.
- ***They support persevering despite challenges:*** Knowing and communicating the specified “Why” and “How” serves as a blueprint, anchoring and buffering against common obstacles that deflect from equity priorities. When faced with new initiatives or issues, district leaders and their teams have clarity about where to set focus, are grounded in the work, are reinvigorated, and have opportunity for reflection.



CONDITION

3

The collaborative inquiry model enables cross-departmental collaboration that fosters data-informed strategic planning and decision-making.

A defining feature of the research-practice partnership between CASEL and learning partner districts is the use of the collaborative inquiry model. This model is an effective way to engage educators in thinking more critically about their practices and developing efficacious and sustainable solutions for equity-centered changes in their learning environments. It is a grounding pillar of the framework guiding BELE work.

The collaborative inquiry model is a method educators employ to “identify common challenges, analyze relevant data, and test out approaches” within dedicated professional learning communities to find solutions that enhance student learning (David, 2008; Donahoo, 2016). Our time learning with partners revealed that leaders require dedicated space, time, administrative support, and resources to become more adept in the skill set of collaborative inquiry, especially when collaborating across departmental lines. Like with most learning, more complex and systemic forms of equitable practices and mindsets are more likely to be internalized by staff and educators when leaders can meaningfully engage and then model them.

For CASEL, a supportive environment and meeting time set aside for district leads, known as “Deep Dives,” became a space for modeling the practice of collaborative inquiry while allowing partner districts to build capacity and hone skill development. For 90 minutes each month, across several time zones, district leads representing a trio of departments (SEL, equity, and research and evaluation) in several districts committed to taking a ‘deep dive’ into the problems of practice as part of our research-practice partnership.

For six months, CASEL coaches and researchers gathered on video calls and collaboratively planned, assessed, inquired, and reflected on strategies and efforts toward eliminating disparities and accomplishing goals in their respective strategic plans. District leads shared and learned about the challenges occurring in their peers’ contexts, finding points of similarity when applicable, followed by time to focus on district-specific challenges.

As interdepartmental teams, partner districts were challenged to work together on various action planning steps, and, for some, it was a time for developing “the muscle” of working across their siloed departments towards a single effort. The space also supported department leads exploring professional identities outside their lane while employing the perspectives and competencies of their colleagues in collaborative problem-solving. When leaders entered the space with district pressures at the forefront of their minds, the CASEL team modeled collaborative inquiry by asking deep, reflection questions that allowed them to “pause and take time to reflect, [and] to make the connections between those dots,” which was not always afforded in their more fast-paced work environments.

“ *Our role has been in a lot of ways to raise questions that they ordinarily wouldn’t ask themselves ... So when we simply say, ‘Oh, do you have family members involved in your process?’ even if the answer is no...[it] provokes them...for ‘...wait, we need to do that’... so I think there’s a lot to the inquiry position that we assert.* ”
—BELE Partner Coach (CASEL)

Guided by the CASEL team, district leads became practitioners of the collaborative inquiry model as they thought through root cause analyses, developed their problem of practice, and formulated data-informed strategic priorities and goals. Though technical assistance was provided through coaching tools and resources, district leadership trios (comprised of district leads from SEL, equity and research and evaluation) were encouraged to embody a mindset and posture of collaboration and co-learning, viewing themselves as the drivers of the work and lenders of their expertise regarding their local contexts, to best inform the inquiry process.

Participants recognized that the work done between these monthly Deep Dives was critical to the success of their time together. As a result, they took the lead in creating meeting agendas, highlighting discussion topics salient to their context/communities, and providing comprehensive contextualization of the data under discussion. Deep Dives provided a space where a district’s research, SEL, and equity department could convene and create synergy around a distinct problem that focused on creating learning environments that meet the needs of all students.

“ The questions that we [CASEL] ask really helped to shape the thought process around the work, and I think it’s on us to continue to ask those forward-thinking questions, *because when you’re in the district doing the work, you’re not always thinking outside of what’s right in front of you*, or what to do in the next day or the next week. ”
—BELE partner coach (CASEL)

By setting aside intentional space and time that supports collaboration between interdepartmental leads through Deep Dives, district leaders were able to:

- **Establish a learning community** that spanned across departments, perspectives, and knowledge bases.
- **Slow down and practice critical reflection and inquiry** of processes, practices, and procedures related to equity efforts that might otherwise be overlooked in more fast-paced environments.
- **Feel empowered to be the drivers** of equity work, providing the contextual framing for holistic problem development and resolution.
- **Build and/or enhance continuous improvement capacities** through collective data gathering and interpretation that supported intensive root cause analysis and other data-informed planning, which could then be extended to leaders and educators in their respective schools.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our youth deserve an educational experience where adults offer not only high expectations, but strong support and care for their well-being. We have an opportunity in this moment—with the inequities of the current system visible for all to see—to center the experiences and humanity of young people by ensuring that our decisions, actions, and designs are informed by their voices, needs, and aspirations. In doing this, we must critically examine the systems that educators are in and where they truly “walk their talk” when centering equity in district systems and structures.

District leaders and educators alike benefit from being intentional and setting aside time to gain clarity around their definitions of equity. Doing so supports their strategic vision and implementation in developing equity-centered environments. The complexity of remediating inequity compels a collaborative stance. A commitment by leadership to develop the conditions and structures (e.g., collaborative inquiry) for synergy is likely to create a ripple effect across the larger community and sustain the work.

An important factor for longevity in equity work is remaining adaptive and responsive to the learning environment, while navigating limitations and obstacles that regularly occur in districts and schools. Centering the learning community makes the work transformative and liberating. Districts demonstrate structural readiness for equity work by their capacity and willingness to own the on-the-ground work and to meet regularly across critical departments (i.e., equity, SEL, research, and evaluation) to advance implementation plans. This complex work becomes easier when it grows naturally from in-progress initiatives within the district, initiatives that can be connected cross-departmentally.



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APPENDIX A

SNAPSHOT OF THE BELE ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

THE BELE NETWORK ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

The BELE Essential Actions are designed to support teachers, principals, district and state leaders, and community partners to use the power we each carry to help create a system that supports the learning and development of all youth, makes space for them to thrive, allows them to be healthy and whole, and, ultimately, enables them to use their own power to lead. All educators – and every student, caregiver, and community member – should be able to see themselves and their work in each of these Essential Actions. The Essential Actions are the shared responsibility of every member of the educational system to advance in their own spheres of influence.

We have an opportunity in this moment to center the experiences of young people by ensuring that our decisions, actions, and designs are informed by their voices, needs, and aspirations. Ultimately, the goal of our collective work is an equitable, just, and supportive education system that prioritizes students' school experience — our central focus because how students experience school dictates their engagement, their effort, and their learning.

Building such a system requires all of us to:



Make systems human-centered

Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support human well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.



Transform teaching and learning

Create learning conditions that transform students' daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students' cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.



Empower BIPOC youth

Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students, especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities, to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.



Partner with caregivers and communities

Partner authentically with students' communities – including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners – to transform their daily experiences, create a network of support that holds up students and their families, and allow all to be healthy and whole.



Invest in staff

Create the conditions that allow all school and district staff – including everyone from teachers and paraprofessionals to deans and coaches; from counselors and social workers to food service workers, custodians, security people, and bus drivers; from school leaders and office personnel to district administration and support staff – to engage in collaborative inquiry, collectively reflect and act on data, and co-design learning experiences so they can effectively center the voices and humanity of students.



Measure what matters

Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback on their experiences, as well as those of school staff and students' caregivers, and use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments



Create equitable policies

Adopt district & state policies that advance equity by centering students' experiences, voices, and humanity.

APPENDIX B

BELE-CASEL DISTRICT CRITERIA

BELE-CASEL DISTRICT CRITERIA

District Criteria	Yes/ No	Please provide additional supporting details particularly if the criteria are not in place
Theoretical/Philosophical Criteria		
Commitment to identifying, dismantling, and replacing unjust and oppressive systems, structures, and practices.		
Intentional and proactive stance towards creating equitable learning spaces that center the student experience and support the co-construction of learning conditions		
Prioritization of affirming identity, agency, and belonging into the classroom and school environments as evidenced by district plans, policies, and/or goals		
Commitment to continuous improvement and an asset-based mindset with regards to data collection, reflection, and evidence-based decision-making		
Commitment to a multi-year implementation model		
Structural Criteria		
Stable district leadership with understanding and buy-in of partnership at the superintendent and cabinet level		
Established departments/personnel: SEL, Equity, Research & Evaluation, Teaching and Learning		
Infrastructure: a demonstrated capacity for opportunities and willingness for cross-department collaboration		
Willingness to obtain a fully executed MOU and data sharing agreement with CASEL/BELE		
Cohort of secondary school sites, with aligned leadership, primed to engage in the systemic implementation of the established BELE framework		
Targeted problem of practice with an action research agenda and data plan*		
Willingness to engage actively at COi and BELE convenings/events and disseminate key learnings		
*We will work with you to identify a district-focused problem of practice. If you have one in mind, please feel free to enter it within the chart.		

APPENDIX C
NEP DISTRICT CRITERIA

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the vision your district is holding for a more racially just and equitable education system? What are you willing to 'stop doing' to 'not return to normal' and start doing to create a new way? Please share your district's current Racial Equity goals, commitments or priorities as articulated in your Strategic Plan/ Framework, and/or Board Policy.
- 2 Please share how your district currently supports youth/student leadership and/or how you are currently partnering with BIPOC students to lead change.
- 3 Share a story, example, or metaphor that illustrates your vision for an equitable school system and some of the challenges you are facing in your efforts to realize that vision. How do you think participation in a Network of school districts focused on Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) can help you to advance the priorities and goals of your district?
- 4 Does your district have prior experience working with NEP or another equity-focused partner to advance racial equity? If so, please describe the nature of this experience and how participating in an NEP facilitated network will build on prior work
- 5 What kind of data does your district currently collect to monitor student learning, experience, and equity? (including quantitative and qualitative data). Provide links where appropriate.
- 6 Different from traditional professional development, the BELE Network approach requires both a commitment to implementing a set of changes known to create conditions for equitable whole child learning [[BELE Essential Commitments](#)] and a commitment to identifying and interrogating the systems, dynamics, and underlying assumptions and mental models that undergird our approaches.
Which of these Essential Commitments is most aligned with the direction you are heading as a district? What are some examples of mindsets, practices, or policies that you will need to change to make progress on equity?
- 7 An important driver of the work will be cross-department, cross-role learning and collaboration. You will be required to strategically form a BELE Design Team that will include classroom teachers, resource specialists, counselors, site and central office administrators, students, Board members, and family/caregivers who will learn new ways of working together to learn from each other and from selected school sites to evolve more equitable and responsive approaches and lead work in their spheres of influence.
Please share your reflections about this approach, your initial thoughts about who you would recruit to participate on this team and any concerns you have about barriers to supporting student leadership or challenges to cross-role collaboration.
- 8 Is there anything else you would like us to know about your district's desire to participate in this NEP Network?
- 9 Please share the names and roles of people who contributed to and/or reviewed and signed off on this application:

