



Building
Equitable
Learning
Environments
Network



COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES AND CAREGIVERS: CONDITIONS FOR BUILDING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS



**Partner with
caregivers and
communities**



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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), the National Equity Project (NEP), and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) 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 initiatives in our BELE partner districts show evidence of social and emotional learning (SEL) in service of equity and excellence, including for students, educators, and school and district leaders. 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, UChicago Consortium, and our partner districts 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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As part of the BELE Network, CASEL works alongside school districts who seek external collaborators to co-design sustainable models for equitable learning environments adaptable to their local context. Coaching assistance, network resources and tools, and research capacity are aligned 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 adaptive and scalable. Underpinned by a collaborative approach, these research-practice partnerships allow cultivated relationships with districts already committed to develop solutions to the ever-present challenge of equitable learning for all students.

As organizations committed to the testing of innovative strategies and actions that are in service of building equitable learning environments for young people and adults, BELE Network partners co-designed a set of design principles known as Essential Actions to guide districts in their programs and initiatives prioritizing equity efforts. The BELE Essential Actions describe the processes ("how") to make changes necessary ("what") to realize the systemic transformation needed to create resilient school systems that foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of all young people and their communities. This shared framing can help ensure that ALL students, and particularly those students who have been historically underserved, meet universal goals of whole child well-being and academic excellence (BELE Network, 2023).

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 are afforded high-quality educational experiences.



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

BELE Network learning partners 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 evidence-based, systemic SEL implementation, NEP approaches systems improvement through coaching, facilitation, and training grounded in their Leading for Equity Framework. UChicago Consortium reinforces this work by conducting and translating academic research that best supports learning and positive development for students and adults in diverse learning settings. Despite the differences in approach, this partnership is predicated on the reality that all organizations use a set of action-oriented principles that align with the BELE Essential Actions in guiding their coaching and technical assistance to districts.





HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS LEARNING BRIEF

This brief will share learnings from BELE district partnerships around the fourth Essential Action: *Partner With Caregivers and Communities*. This fourth Essential Action focuses on the critical importance of cultivating and sustaining relationships with caregivers and community stakeholders. Given the roles parents and caregivers play in a child's education as their first educators and their primary educators, this Essential Action focuses on building partnerships that cross the boundaries of schools, communities, and homes.

When school and community educators build relationships and make conscious and continued efforts to learn from families and communities, they become more adept at creating educational experiences for students that are nurturing and grounded in an understanding of the whole child. These efforts should be sustained year-round and prioritize designing schooling experiences with input from families and using school resources to support the families and communities themselves. These engagements will lead to greater alignment on opportunities and support for students in every facet of their lives.

This Essential Action suggests several pathways toward enacting authentic partnership with:

Caregivers

- Partner with caregivers to ensure that policies and practices are equitable and supportive of the unique needs of their students.
- Build trusting relationships with caregivers that foster understanding and appreciation across cultures and other differences.
- Align around a shared vision of student and community success and well-being.
- Prioritize the well-being of students and their families in policy and resource allocation decisions, especially BIPOC and other underserved families.

Communities

- Identify and partner with community members and organizations to ensure continuity of support for students and families.
- Build partnerships with community members and organizations, including local government agencies, that foster understanding and appreciation across cultures and other differences.
- Respond to communities and their needs and wants when making policy and resource allocation decisions, especially marginalized communities.
- Share information and resources with community partners and collaborate to create a web of support for students, families, and schools.
- Create structures for consistent engagement with community partners—including other community members, community organizations, and local government agencies. ([BELE Network, 2023](#))



The following brief explores how an elementary school in one of CASEL's BELE districts worked to build authentic caregiver and community partnerships throughout a year-long project to transform an existing mural. This brief highlights three key conditions to create genuine partnerships among caregivers, community stakeholders, educators, and school leaders when collaborating on this project:

1. Schools build and sustain important partnerships through authentically engaging caregivers and community members in consequential ways grounded in local knowledge and an understanding of the school's place and role in the community.
2. Schools can structurally establish opportunities for collaboration as a lever for equity and sustain it through intentional, schoolwide professional development.
3. School leadership must build reciprocal, meaningful partnerships with caregivers that center around a vision of the school as a community school, rather than a school within a community.

OVERVIEW: THE KING MURAL PROJECT

In the spring of 2021, while schools across the U.S. were grappling with the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, King Elementary¹, a small school located in the Southeast, was dealing with an additional problem: what to do with a mural in the front hallway that showed students segregated by race and reduced to stereotypes. The mural showcased portraits of real King students, all of whom had since graduated, grouped over symbolic landscapes: Black students portraits were shown over an African savanna, the Latine students on a beach where a sombrero leaned casually upon a cactus in the background, Asian students were portrayed alongside a Chinese-style dragon winding through the tiers of a red pagoda, and White students were depicted in front of the Statue of Liberty.

When Dr. Lena Matthews became King's principal in 2017, her father, a former administrator, pointed to the mural while visiting one day. "What's going on there?" Dr. Matthews recalled him saying. Dr. Matthews, who identifies as a White woman, had several casual conversations with teachers and school staff over the years about their perceptions of the often ignored mural. By her fourth year as principal, she had become increasingly vocal about the mural's troubling representations with her staff. Not only had she become more comfortable with asserting her own opinion—that the mural should be removed—but the increasing civil unrest across the U.S. provided a greater sense of urgency.

After the 2020 murder of George Floyd, and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Matthews and the King staff engaged in many frank conversations about racial equity and justice—conversations critical to the lives of their predominantly Black and Brown student and staff populations. Through these conversations, they realized that current issues "in the world did not match what we saw on the wall." Dr. Matthews noted that in 2012, the mural was likely meant to honor King's diverse students, but "the question now is who does it really honor?" This question of honor, a sense of curiosity, and the local community's history of civic engagement intertwined to become the impetus for a new mural—a project that began over 2021's spring break.

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



As Dr. Matthews was sparking conversation about the impact of the existing mural and building awareness of the need for something new to take its place, the social and emotional learning (SEL) specialist at King heard about Dr. Matthews' plan. She and the rest of the SEL department wondered how they could involve this mural project in a broader effort to foster community connections and embed SEL—for King's students, for students districtwide, and for staff and community partners—throughout the process.

King's home district has had a long-standing collaborative relationship with CASEL. The mural project was therefore supported with BELE resources and personnel networks toward engaging the community, particularly caregivers, as decision-makers related to the project's goals. One of the King and district teams' primary interests was to learn how schools could create authentic partnerships with the community and caregivers and what that partnership looked like in practice. The team invested in leveraging that partnership to help co-create classroom and schoolwide learning environments that supported the thriving of all students.

The project spanned over a year, from the initial planning meetings to the unveiling celebration in May 2022. One of the first steps in the process was to bring on a local community artist, Ava Anderson, to help with the bulk of the mural execution and painting. In collaboration with CASEL, the district's SEL team, Dr. Matthews, and Ms. Anderson worked consistently over the year to involve students, teachers, district departments, families, and community stakeholders in the planning and execution of the new mural. All told, 13 organizational partners—from the district's grants department to caregivers—were involved in the project.

To garner caregiver participation, the school held two focus groups with parents and caregivers, organized by the school's parent liaison and co-led by the district's SEL director and Ms. Anderson. The sessions were designed to gain insight into caregivers' hopes for the mural project, and many of their ideas were incorporated into the final design. The conditions for building authentic partnerships with caregivers and community members are not limited to the scope of a mural project, and they provide a particularly salient example of BELE Essential Action 4: *Partner With Caregivers and Communities*.



CONDITION

1

Schools build and sustain important partnerships through authentically engaging caregivers and community members in consequential ways grounded in local knowledge and an understanding of the school's place and role in the community.

King Elementary's home district, Garnet Independent School District, has worked consistently to develop strong ties with caregivers and the community it serves. Over a decade ago, thanks to nearly \$900,000 in private funding, the district launched its Parent Academy. The Parent Academy is a free, year-round parent engagement and support program for community caregivers. It offers workshops for parents seeking to build relationships with schools, educators, and the district. They also work directly with the district's SEL department to develop and deliver SEL 101-style courses to caregivers.

Additionally, the academy partners with over 70 local community organizations aimed at developing caregiver agency and capital. Many of their workshops and events are caregiver-led, making them important sites for learning, capacity-building, and partnership. Through initiatives like the Parent Academy, school districts can build strong partnerships and caregiver agency (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

King is housed within a largely middle-class community, with the population identifying as 50 percent White, 34 percent Black, 8 percent Latine, and 5 percent Asian (U.S. Department of Education). The area was an important site in Black history as home to some of the first sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. Given this history, Dr. Matthews, King's principal, noted, "You would think that in a community like ours, issues of equity and inclusion and diversity would come naturally, but it doesn't always."

The community itself is quite segregated, as evidenced in a 2017 district-commissioned equity audit by the Groundwater Institute. The results of the analysis on racial inequity were troubling, indicating the need for a systems-level reckoning. The district displayed de facto racial segregation: White students tended to be in schools with majority White peers, and Black students tended to be in schools with majority Black peers. For decades, research has shown that opportunity gaps tend to grow faster in more segregated school districts, suggesting that more equitable systems will result in more equitable student outcomes (reardon et al., 2023). Recent research into equitable student outcomes indicates that when schools are desegregated, Black students had increased graduation rates and attendance, improved health, and higher earnings as adults (reardon et al., 2023). Given the positive effects of desegregation, it is not surprising, then, that the Groundwater Analysis's findings pushed Garnet district officials to examine possible pathways to create more equitable schooling systems within the district, including leveraging caregiver involvement.

One of the strongest evidence points for increased caregiver involvement came with the 2022 Bond, an agreement that secured 2 billion dollars in funding to fully renovate 19 schools and rebuild 22 schools. King Elementary was chosen to be one of the rebuilt school sites, and the district and school hosted several events to garner caregiver feedback on the design of the new building. Dr. Matthews noted that they wanted "the buildings to be important to the community so that they don't just serve as school houses, but they also serve to some extent as community centers." The architects were present at these meetings, and, as much as possible, incorporated caregiver input into the final building design.



These efforts on the part of King and the district to involve parents and caregivers in school structures recall an important sub-bullet for Essential Action 4: “Respond to communities and their needs and wants when making policy and resource allocation decisions, especially marginalized communities” (BELE Network, 2023). The fact that caregivers have been involved in the literal co-design of their children’s new school buildings is a critical example of how caregivers can be integrated into the systems of schooling.

The Groundwater Report revealed that King Elementary’s student body differed considerably from the surrounding community in terms of their racial/ethnic identity and socioeconomic status. While the larger community was 50 percent White and middle-class, the student body was only 3 percent White and lived in one of the most impoverished areas of the U.S.

As a White woman, Dr. Matthews continually recognizes and reflects on the role her racial identity plays in her leadership.

“ I know who I am, I know what my background is, I know that my background does not mirror the demographics of our current community, and rather than me struggling with that and feeling bad about that, I still have to understand the power dynamics that come with that, but then also be intentional about removing myself from situations so that others can be first, front and center.” — Dr. Matthews, Principal of King Elementary

Her commitment to “intentionally build capacity and ownership” through centering voices that are not her own has fostered a greater sense of agency within the King community.

One of the ways she has followed through on these goals as they apply to caregivers and community stakeholders is through hiring staff—in particular, a full-time community liaison and translator—to aid in building these critical relationships. These hiring decisions were made in large part because Dr. Matthews recognizes that parents are the experts on their children, and that centering that expertise is essential to creating powerful school-family partnerships. Without full-time staff charged with building and maintaining caregiver-school relationships, King would remain in Dr. Matthew’s mind yet another “agency” providing a service rather than an integral part of the community.

After the 2020 murder of George Floyd and before the start of the mural project, Dr. Matthews and the King staff engaged in many honest conversations about racial equity and justice—conversations critical to the lives of their largely Black and Brown student and staff populations. These conversations led to initiatives beyond recognizing Black history in February, to holding “Social Justice Fridays,” where students and staff wore Black Lives Matter t-shirts and openly discussed issues of race and equity. Posters highlighting diversity, Black families, and empathy continue to adorn King’s hallways today. These conversations and artifacts are critical to building a connection between home and school, caregiver and school staff, particularly given the community’s history.



Ishimaru's (2021) research defining just schooling indicates that "an equity- or justice-focused approach to engaging families and communities acknowledges and reckons with both deep-seated histories and ongoing dynamics of racism and, in some cases, generational community trauma, in relation to formal U.S. schooling" (p. 37). Mapp and Kuttner (2013) echo this need for schools, districts, and educators to reckon with local history and the ways in which that history has been systematically exclusive. Caregivers, they note,

can face many personal, cultural, and structural barriers to engaging in productive partnerships They may not have access to the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the complexities of the U.S. educational system, or they may have had negative experiences with schools in the past, leading to distrust or to feeling unwelcome. (p. 7)

Schools can build and sustain important partnerships by authentically engaging caregivers and community members in more consequential ways, grounded in local knowledge and an understanding of the school's place and role in the community. The work King's staff has done to fully integrate the community with the school and to build authentic relationships with caregivers and community members necessitates a reckoning with history.

When Dr. Matthews began her initial conversations with school staff regarding the pre-existing mural, she knew she would eventually need to become a passenger, albeit an active one, in the planning and execution processes for the new mural. Going into the project, these conversations yielded a critical, shared understanding that current issues "in the world did not match what we saw on the wall." To create a new mural that reflected and affirmed the identities of the King community, not only would the district play a collaborative role, but caregivers and the larger community would, too. The project's initial goals were to foster a communitywide sense of belonging, related to the school's prioritization of transformative SEL (tSEL) as a lever for equity and excellence (see Figure 1, next page). CASEL supported this effort with resources and personnel networks toward engaging the community and caregivers as decision-makers related to the project's goals.



Figure 1 Transformative SEL Focal Constructs



As planning for the project got underway, the team’s goals were primarily to learn how to build authentic partnership with the community and caregivers and discover what that partnership looked like in practice. These goals resonate with another sub-point of Essential Action 4: “Align around a shared vision of student and community success and well-being” (BELE Network, 2023). Through the mural project, Dr. Matthews, the King staff, and every planning team member worked to develop a shared understanding and representation of their community.



CONDITION

2

Schools can structurally establish opportunities for collaboration as a lever for equity and sustain it through intentional, schoolwide professional development.

Initiatives for building caregiver capacity and reciprocal school-home relationships should be “aligned with school and district achievement goals and connect families to the teaching and learning goals for the students” (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 9). At King, collaboration and collaborative problem-solving are established through Dr. Matthew’s efforts to structurally integrate support systems for students, staff, and caregivers. The school’s mission statement is a clear enunciation of the value King Elementary’s staff places on collaboration, school climate, SEL, and community partnerships. It reads, in part, “The staff is committed to creating a school climate which will stimulate students’ emotional, ethical, physical, academic, cultural and social development. We further believe education is a process which requires a partnership between the home, school and community to enable children to fulfill their potential as learners.”

Dr. Matthews also carefully ensures that all school resources are tailored to support King’s mission, vision, and goals. Whether that resource is a partnership with CASEL, a community artist, or a physical donation, Dr. Matthews is clear: If it doesn’t serve and advance King’s mission, it is irrelevant. “It’s taken me some time to realign those resources in ways that align to our school goals,” she notes, “not to dismiss anything that’s offered or shared or donated, but to make sure that when people are committing time and resources, that it matches and supports the work that we’re trying to do.”

Other community partnerships exist that further the school-to-community connection: with a local church, the neighborhood association, a public library branch, and a recreation center, among others. These community organizations provide resources for students and staff, and in turn their input is sought when making decisions that are particularly relevant to their continued partnership with the school.

These structural and systemic efforts to build school-community partnerships—from the school’s mission statement to the alignment of resources—are key conditions to sustain the work (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

The structural support for King’s mission is sustained mainly due to relatively stable staffing, the collaborative nature of staff relations, and the district’s large-scale focus on the importance of adult SEL. Collaboration has been cultivated through this adult SEL work, which took place before engaging in the student component, and is sustained through formal and informal avenues that

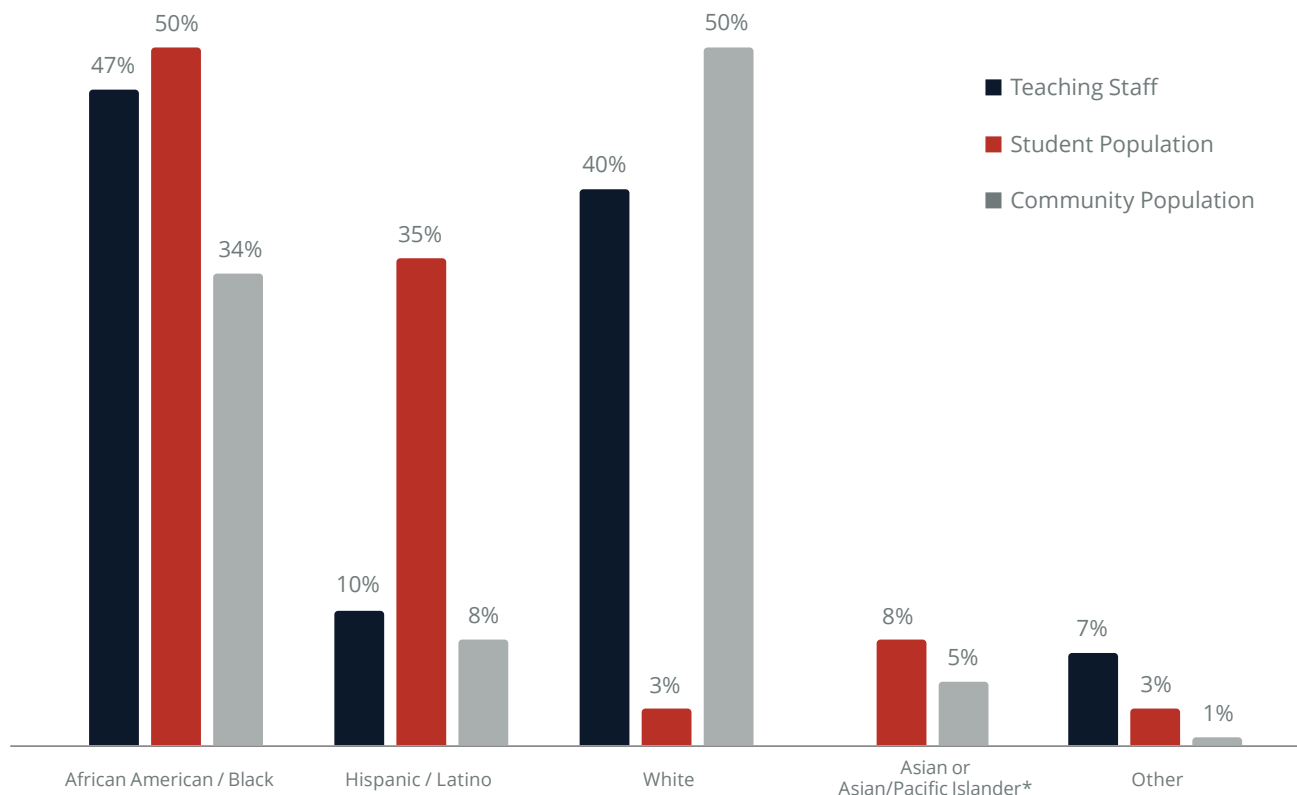


build trust among leadership and staff. If SEL skills are not intuitive to a particular educator, or if they simply need some sharpening, there are structures in place to help them build those skills, including professional development focused on SEL and equity.

SEL in service of equity and excellence—the cornerstones of CASEL’s BELE work—has been intentionally embedded into King’s professional development. Sessions have focused on individual and collective cultural competency, equity and excellence in education, and civic justice more generally.

Given the local history and the demographic makeup of school staff and students, professional development of this nature is critical to growing connections within the school’s walls and with the larger community. As King’s teachers are predominantly Black (see Figure 2 below), it is an important tool not only to create more equitable, culturally affirming environments for students but also to acknowledge the lived experiences of staff members and to grow the cultural competencies and sensitivities of staff who may be less familiar—or comfortable—with conversations about equity, justice, and civic engagement. When members of a school community are able to see themselves as part of the larger community, cultural competence can become a norm.

Figure 2 Racial Demographics of King Elementary Students, Staff, and Community



*A blank bar indicates frequency missingness via data source.



During the 2022-2023 school year in particular, Dr. Matthews and the King staff worked to create “a staff culture that is stronger, but also models for students respect and joy,” so that students in turn could demonstrate and model respect and joy. “Not that we don’t have that [already],” Dr. Matthews notes,

but we need to be more intentional about creating environments around respect and joy. . . . What we hope is by being a better collaborative staff, we will also be better educators, will model better character for our students, and it will in turn make our school community a more warm and inviting place for families, for students, and for each other.

By collaborating to build adult SEL skills and modeling those skills for students, the King staff have strategically created “an environment where all kids feel like they can be themselves, they’re accepted, they belong, [and] they’re part of our school community.”

The King mural project is an excellent example of how partnerships are built when collaboration is a norm. The district’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Department created the initial connection between King and the SEL Department by assigning each school an SEL lead. King’s SEL advisor and the district’s SEL director had worked closely with CASEL for many years and immediately brought in CASEL as a partner for the mural project work once the objectives became clear. In turn, the CASEL team brought Ms. Anderson on board, who involved students, teachers, and caregivers in the mural planning and implementation processes.

Two teams planned the work locally: the district planning team and the school-level team. The planning team focused on aligning the scope and aims of the project to the district’s vision and policies, and the school-level team was in charge of delivering instruction founded in the five focal constructs of transformative SEL (tSEL): identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity.

Caregivers as Collaborators in the Mural Project

In the winter of 2022, the school-level team held two focus groups with parents and caregivers via Zoom to capture their thoughts on—and hopes for—the mural project. These focus groups were co-facilitated by Dr. Matthews, the district’s SEL director, and Ms. Anderson. The two sessions presented the same content but were held at different times of day to accommodate caregiver schedules. These sessions were designed to gather insight into caregivers’ thinking about the mural project, as well as the future of the school as an equitable space where they feel a sense of belonging, their identities are validated, and they feel empowered to advocate for themselves and their children.

Participation was high among the 14 attendees, filled with robust conversation about King and the new mural design. When asked what words came to mind when thinking about King, responses varied from “inclusive,” “welcoming,” and “teamwork,” to “student-centered.” All participants on the two calls were continually reminded that the sessions were “all about hearing” their voices and opinions—reminders that kept them engaged. One parent shared, when asked about hopes for the future of King Elementary, that the school “continue[s] to be connected to and interactive with the larger community.” Statements like these point to the work that Dr. Matthews, King’s teachers, and the community liaison have done in the last few years to build community and caregiver connections.



These focus groups are just one example of how the King staff has worked to build relationships with caregivers based on reciprocity and caregiver agency. As a focal construct of tSEL, agency refers to “perceived and actual capacity to effect change through purposeful action” (Jagers et al., 2021). When caregivers recognize their agency, they in turn understand the important role of their voice and choices in not only their child’s experience of school, but their own. When the relationship between school and home is reciprocal, this work builds caregiver agency, as there is a “presumption of expertise” on both sides (Ishimaru, 2021).

Mapp and Bergman’s (2019) updated Dual Capacity Framework for School-Family Partnerships highlights many essential conditions, particularly reciprocal trust and an asset-based approach to partnership. These conditions, among others, frame King’s overall efforts to build authentic partnerships and are evidenced in the work of the focus groups. The framing of the two focus groups to garner caregiver input emphasized caregivers as experts with experiences worth listening to. Many of the ideas that came from these two focus groups—from using many colors to represent the community’s diversity to positive quotations—can be seen in the new mural.

When reflecting on the focus groups and the school’s efforts to involve caregivers at a larger scale, Dr. Matthews does not mince words.

“ Society is oppressive in communities like ours. You just dump things on people, and they don’t get asked often: What is your opinion or your thought, right? Because there’s so many other people making decisions for them.” — Dr. Matthews, Principal of King Elementary

More often than not, caregivers are asked to participate in inauthentic opportunities, instead of being invited to participate in consequential decisions (Ishimaru, 2021). Terriquez (2011) names these “plug-in” opportunities, as they do not allow for meaningful interactions that work to build partnerships.

Dr. Matthews’ awareness and recognition that, when it comes to impactful and important decision-making processes, the thoughts and opinions of caregivers and community members in lower-income communities of color are frequently not sought out, is foundational to building authentic partnerships. If one cannot recognize the many ways systems are designed to accommodate White, better resourced populations over minority populations, then relationship-building with low-income and racial ethnic minority populations will be futile—even in places where minoritized groups are in the majority.

Only when these intergroup and systemic roadblocks are recognized and named, and efforts to address their removal are underway, can BELE Essential Action 4 occur. The actions of Dr. Matthews and her team work to address another aspect of Essential Action 4: “Build mutually trusting relationships with caregivers and other community members that foster understanding and appreciation across cultures and other differences” (BELE Network, 2023).



CONDITION**3**

School leadership must build reciprocal, meaningful partnerships with caregivers that center around a vision of the school as a community school, rather than a school within a community.

Dr. Matthews does not live in the community surrounding King, but she was born and raised there. She initially inherited her knowledge of the local context from her father, a former administrator greatly affected by what he witnessed throughout the Civil Rights Movement. She notes, “some of those areas that he emphasized—acceptance, inclusion—are things that translated over to me.” One of her core beliefs as an administrator and educator is that of civic responsibility. “If I don’t like the way the world is,” she says, “then I can acknowledge that I’m in a position of power as a privileged White person, and I can either use that for good or evil.” These beliefs and her local knowledge are foundational to her investment in the community and King’s caregivers.

Though Dr. Matthews’ commitment to partnership-building may be a condition for similar work, a precondition to this work is the relational trust she has built with her staff since her tenure began in 2017. Various aspects of this trust are illustrated in data from a staff SEL implementation survey taken just before work on the mural began in the winter of 2020-2021 (see Table 1 below). By that point in her tenure, 100 percent of King’s staff noted that they trusted Dr. Matthews at her word, that she takes a personal interest in the professional development of King’s teachers, and that they feel safe to discuss their feelings, worries, and frustrations with her. Nearly 88 percent of the staff noted that she models social and emotional competence in the way she interacts with staff.

The same survey illuminated important connections between King’s leadership, and caregivers, and community stakeholders. When asked if parents are involved in meaningful decision-making, 48 percent stated “sometimes,” and 47 percent indicated this happened “most of the time” or “always.” Community partnerships also proved important, with 63 percent of staff reporting that these partnerships promote students’ social and emotional skill development either “most of the time” or “always.” Since this staff survey was administered right before the mural work began, this data illustrates important preconditions to allow for the continuation of King’s justice work and the furthering of reciprocal trust.



Table 1 Staff Perceptions of King Leadership

Staff SEL Implementation Survey Winter 2020-2021	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	
I trust the principal at his or her word	0%	28%	72%	
It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal	0%	39%	61%	
The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers	0%	22%	78%	
My principal models social and emotional competence in the way they interact with staff in our school community	13%	38%	50%	
At this school, parents are involved in meaningful decision-making	47%	37%	11%	
At this school, community partnerships (e.g., businesses, non-profits, community members) promote students' social and emotional skill development	21%	42%	21%	
At this school, community partnerships support students and families during challenging times (e.g., school or life transitions, food insecurity)	11%	53%	32%	
Staff Perception Survey February 2022	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
These leaders demonstrate care for our well-being	13%	44%	31%	
I trust that King's leaders will make good decisions	19%	50%	26%	
I feel these leaders recognize my contributions to the King community	13%	56%	28%	
Leaders here actively work to share power	16%	66%	13%	



A more recent staff perception survey, administered in February of 2022, asked different questions that focused more deeply on trusting leadership. This data shows that 75 percent of King’s staff trust that Dr. Matthews and her leadership team make good decisions and that they care about the staff’s well-being. Seventy-nine percent of King’s staff reported that King’s leadership actively works to share power, and 84 percent feel recognized for their contributions to the King community. Overall, data from the two surveys indicate a high level of trust that Dr. Matthews actively works to sustain. Leadership trust is consistently shown to be of critical value for educators, as well as leader care and support (Hardison, 2021; Louis et al., 2016). When these aspects of leadership are present, there can be a spillover effect on school climate and culture as a whole—leading to a more positive and caring schooling environment (Grissom et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2016).

As part of her investment in caregiver and community partnership, Dr. Matthews makes efforts to continually examine how the school aims to build those partnerships. “If we make this policy decision, or we make this practice part of our school culture, or this is how we invite families to an event,” she offers as examples, “what does this say around our biases related to families or our biases about children because of their family structure?”

These questions of personal bias are ones Dr. Matthews asks of herself, and of the school’s staff as well. To her, community knowledge, investment, and care are schoolwide objectives. Prior to the old mural being painted over, Dr. Matthews had conversations with teachers about how they viewed the depictions of students. “What would I say to you,” she asked them, “if I walked into your classroom and saw your students like this? That you have the White students front and center and you have everybody grouped by some preconceived notion about their race or their ethnicity?” To her, community knowledge, investment, and care are schoolwide objectives.

Dr. Matthews views parents as partners in their childrens’ education, a viewpoint reflected in the staff’s perceptions of the school as a whole (see above survey data). She eschews the idea that schools are solely responsible for the education of children while parents are responsible for everything else. Noting the importance of intentional work around breaking down preconceived notions of a school/home boundary, she says:

Unless there’s intentional work around that, families feel like we are the experts, they are not. And therefore they drop their children off, we educate them, and then we return them more educated than when they came to us. And that is not the way that it should be because that’s a one-way exchange.

All of the efforts Dr. Matthews leads at King to build reciprocal, meaningful partnerships with caregivers center around her vision of King as a community school rather than a school within a community.

One of the hallmarks of Dr. Matthews’ leadership style is her consciousness that she does not have to be in the driver’s seat for every decision, event, or committee, nor should she be. A school leader’s awareness of when to step back can often be more powerful, and much harder to do,



than knowing when to lead. In her tenure at King thus far, Dr. Matthews has entrusted key team members, in particular the full-time community liaison, with leading caregiver engagement work and fostering community partnerships. These staff members have the autonomy to work with agency, knowing that this is a priority for Dr. Matthews and the district.

Through the relational trust built between school leadership and staff, investment in community-building efforts like the mural project comes with relative ease. “A lot of principals think that they need to go in and they need to call every family member,” Dr. Matthews states, “but sustainability over time with parent involvement has to transcend beyond one individual principal’s leadership.”

By building a culture of community involvement with sustained effort rather than one-off efforts spearheaded by a single individual, Dr. Matthews and her leadership team have worked to ensure King’s future as a community school. She is careful to say that most times, the principal is the wrong person to initially attempt to bridge any school-to-home gaps, noting:

I don’t think the principal is the right first person to do that, because typically principals are new to their communities, and you don’t want that distrust to be a barrier. So, having somebody else initially invite families in that does have that trust with the community, and then the principal building that once families are present, does a lot.

School leaders who understand that their role is not necessarily to be front and center, or to initiate all partnerships, are in an optimal position to create sustained change to the systems of schooling. When it came to the mural project, Dr. Matthews relied on the community liaison, Ms. Garcia, to spread the word to caregivers and community members. It was Ms. Garcia, not Dr. Matthews, who reached out to parents about the project’s focus groups, and Ms. Garcia who planned the bulk of the culminating event: the mural’s unveiling in May of 2022.

From the early stages of project planning, the team knew they wanted to host a big unveiling event upon completion. They envisioned a celebration on the front lawn of the school with activities for students and their caregivers, a band to dance to, and food. The actual event did not stray far from their vision: Caregivers and their children played impromptu games on the lawn, painted tiles at a station run by the school’s art teacher, danced to a community DJ’s music pumped through outdoor speakers, and ate food supplied by a caregiver-owned restaurant. The mural was prominently displayed, hanging from the pergola shading the front door.

The event was well attended with over 100 people present. Dr. Matthews and Ms. Anderson gave short speeches about how the project came to be, its importance, and their hope that it would sustain conversations about identity and belonging—two of the focal constructs of tSEL—among King staff and caregivers. The community liaison and Dr. Matthews noted that it was the most well-attended event since the pandemic, pointing to not only the large number of caregivers present, but also community members and district office staff. CASEL team members also joined in on the celebrations. The unveiling event was clear evidence of the team’s original goals for the project, of authentic partnerships built with caregivers and the community.



A NOTE ON THE ROLE OF PANDEMIC POLICY IN PARTNERSHIP-BUILDING

As evidenced by the use of Zoom to hold the mural project's focus groups with caregivers, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated many shifts to build school-home-community partnerships. For the bulk of the pandemic, no visitors were allowed to enter the building, as per district policy. This meant that caregivers who were familiar with the old mural did not see it being painted over, and those who had never seen the mural were in the dark about the project until the community liaison reached out to schedule the focus groups. Despite the disruption to the growth of these partnerships, the policies developed for safety during the pandemic aligned with another aspect of Essential Action 4: "Prioritize the well-being of families and communities in all policy and resource allocation decisions, especially traditionally underserved and BIPOC families" (BELE Network, 2023).

Opportunities for Enhancement

While the overall purpose of this brief is to highlight the conditions needed for building authentic partnerships with caregivers and community members, it behooves us to touch on two opportunities for enhancement evidenced throughout the mural project.

- 1** Take care to build in time for meaningful engagement among project stakeholders—beyond caregivers and students. If it is critical for each stakeholder involved to attend every meeting, clarify these and other expectations from the beginning of the project or initiative. This transparency and clarity of collaboration ensures no expectation gets lost in the complexities of the process.
- 2** Consider other avenues to directly or indirectly enhance the work of building collaborative partnerships. For example, a few enhancement ideas considered by the King project teams that did not come to fruition were: a staff book study focusing on the core constructs of identity, agency, and belonging; a family-led community art exploration; student field trips to see community art; and building on the tSEL-centered instruction completed in a previous service-learning project in partnership with a local high school. Many of these avenues would have tied directly to the mural, cementing the school's intention to keep the work going beyond the scope of the project.

Both of these recommendations recall the importance of various aspects of tSEL—identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity—in particular the critical nature of how these concepts interact. Though collaborative problem-solving plays a central role in relationship-building, similar work will ultimately stall:

- If attention to stakeholder identity is absent,
- When agency—individual or collective—is not activated,
- If it is clear that one or all stakeholders feel they do not belong in various interactions, or
- If there is a noticeable lack of curiosity when framing and reframing the work.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In reflecting on the mural project as a whole, Dr. Matthews expressed that it was a validating experience. In her view, it was a manifestation of her efforts to build collaboration and community and caregiver partnerships. “The more voices you have at the table,” she noted,

you get a sense really of the progress that you’ve made, or lack thereof, in building a school community that is diverse and accepting of diversity and wanting to honor the community It’s nice to have people that are ... your cheerleaders [who] validate the things that you’re doing or the work that you’re doing. And not me, but our school community as a whole.

The conditions for work such as this, building authentic partnerships with caregivers and community members, are not limited to the scope of a mural project. Even without an explicit goal or outcome like a mural, districts that value local history and caregiver knowledge—and follow through with action—are better positioned to develop and sustain meaningful partnerships. Schools that value collaboration among staff and leadership are more likely to value collaboration that transcends school walls and bridges any home-school boundaries. School leadership that creates welcoming structures for caregiver and community involvement is likely to build a culture of partnership that is sustainable through time. Though the conditions highlighted in this brief are certainly not the only conditions necessary for BELE Essential Action 4: *Partner With Caregivers and Communities*, they are a great place to begin.



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