



Building
Equitable
Learning
Environments
Network



THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF YOUTH ORGANIZING COACHES



**Empower Youth
Essential**



**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), 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 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, UChicago Consortium, 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 to without identifiers to protect anonymity.

NEP offers a technical assistance model which increases the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities through equity leadership coaching. As part of the BELE Network, the National Equity Project works alongside school districts who seek external collaborators to codesign 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 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 NEP combined with context expertise of learning partners actualize the following **BELE Essential Actions**:



Make systems human-centered



Invest in staff



Transform teaching and learning



Measure what matters



Empower BIPOC² youth



Create equitable policies



Partner with caregivers and communities

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 codesigned 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, 2022). 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 NEP'S learnings around the [BELE Essential Action: Empower Youth](#). This Essential Action provides guidance on how to 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.

Components of this essential action:

- Create structures to collect and respond to student feedback about their learning experiences
- Create structures for all students, especially those furthest from power and not typically involved, to participate in decision-making at the school, district, and state levels
- Understand and affirm students' identities -- personal, cultural, racial, and academic
- Co-design learning experiences and systems for school improvement with students, especially BIPOC and other underserved students
- Prioritize the well-being and mental health of students by providing resources and support
- Nurture and build students' agency and critical consciousness, especially BIPOC and other underserved students, by giving them opportunities for self-directed learning and leadership.

The National Equity Project (NEP) believes that in order to best serve students, we must integrate their lived experiences and perspectives, both inside and outside of school, into the redesign of schools.

Through the BELE Network, NEP seeks to support students and adults in the process of reimagining schools by shifting power dynamics in school decision making. Given that students are those most impacted by the decisions of education leaders, it is critical that they are integrated into the conversation.

When shaping the experience of school, educators – from superintendents to classroom teachers – must share power with students. Listening to, understanding, and being responsive to student voices ensures they can engage in ways that support their learning and development and ultimately allow them to be healthy and whole. When learning experiences are being designed – whether in an individual classroom or district-wide – it is critical that students have a seat at the table and their input is taken seriously. Students will cultivate a strong sense of agency, identity, and leadership skills by learning to advocate for themselves and their peers.

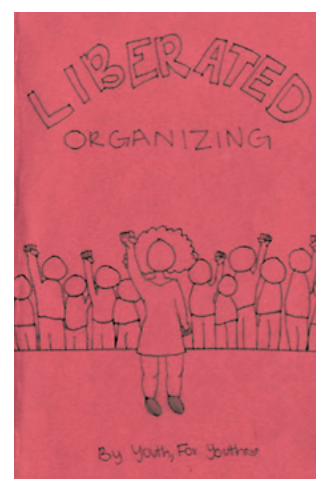


NEAR-PEER MENTORS AND YOUTH ORGANIZING COACHES: ONE MODE OF EMPOWERMENT

Districts can engage students as co-designers and decision-makers in a number of ways. In this brief, we focus on one key way that NEP advocates for school districts to listen to, understand, and be responsive to student voices through the role of a Youth Organizing Coach. In NEP’s model, the Youth Organizing Coach is a paid contractual position whose primary responsibilities are to connect with students, share knowledge around youth organizing and navigating oppressive systems, and support students to address specific needs in their schools. Youth Organizing Coaches are assigned between one and three school districts and work to support middle and high school students in their assigned districts. Youth Organizing Coaches are college students who commit approximately 10 hours per week during the school year and summer months to the work of youth empowerment. They facilitate monthly youth affinity spaces, work with NEP district coaches and school district staff to best support the needs and demands elevated by the students, and to plan and facilitate an Annual Youth Leadership Symposium where students from across NEP’s BELE Network convene to learn about the history of student led social change movements and identify their most pressing concerns and demands in their own districts. Youth Organizing Coaches conduct their work virtually and, for those who live near the districts in their portfolio, in person.

The structural role of the Youth Organizing Coaches is multi-faceted. As high schoolers or recent high schoolers themselves, Youth Organizing Coaches act as near-peer mentors to students, building youth’s skills in advocacy, liberation, and activism from a relatively similar positionality. They can relate to students and students can relate to them, especially given that all were virtual learners during the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced that unique moment together as students. The NEP Youth Organizing Coaches crafted two Liberated Organizing Zines, “By Youth, For Youth” (2021) and “We Need A Change” (2022) that lay out the fundamentals of youth organizing and clearly puts forth why and how young people should “take an active role in transforming our world.” As paid staff members, Youth Organizing Coaches also act as professional liaisons between the students and the adults schools, representing the students and their interests in adults-only spaces (e.g., staff meetings, committee meetings, etc.) and communicating school-level constraints and considerations to students (e.g., legal requirements, budgetary considerations, etc.). Finally, as NEP contractors, Youth Organizing Coaches are members of the NEP BELE Coaching Team, including District Coaches, who work collaboratively to best support the needs of each district as they grow toward being equitable, liberatory systems for students.

The experiences and perspectives of NEP Youth Organizing Coaches during the two-year course of the BELE Network have elucidated four key insights for how the role of the Youth Organizing Coach can be activated to encourage or advance a culture of youth voice and youth activism in schools and support education leaders to partner more meaningfully with students to lead change. Qualitative data shared below are drawn from a series of interviews and focus groups with NEP Youth Organizing Coaches.



INSIGHT

1

Students need to feel affirmed in school to voice their experiences.

For Youth Organizing Coaches working on behalf of equity in schools, building trusting relationships with students and validating their identities is key. Youth Organizing Coaches commit to getting to know students as people first and students second. According to the Youth Organizers' Liberated Organizing Zine, "Relationships are quite literally the foundation of a community" and the ability to foster a unified and collective voice must begin with building trust between Youth Organizing Coach and the students and among the students themselves. Building trust and fostering trusting relationships with students means respecting and affirming the breadth of students' identities, not just the ones traditionally deemed relevant by the curriculum. Youth Organizing Coaches aim to create spaces where students feel comfortable bringing their whole selves into the classroom and beyond. According to one NEP Youth Organizing Coach, they routinely ask themselves when working with students: "How can I bring in your other identities into the space and show you how your identities are of value?" For some students, this is their first experience of all aspects of their identity being seen and valued in an institution; this provides them with a felt acquaintance with what might be possible and what they can rightfully expect from their schools and districts.

“ *Why should students feel like they are one person at the school and outside of that school they are a whole other person?*” — Youth Organizing Coach

Being a source of support, validation, and encouragement for students to feel comfortable enough to express their true feelings and needs is a vital role played by Youth Coaches. As near-peer mentors who prioritize the centrality of relationships in service of student empowerment, Youth Organizing Coaches can unlock a campus' potential to embrace students as the stakeholders of their schools. One Youth Organizing Coach shared how they can play a distinct role from other adults in the school: "Students are the stakeholders of their schools. They're the ones who know what it feels like to be a student, and a lot of the time they don't feel comfortable talking to adults about that stuff. They often feel jaded—we tried to talk before and we weren't listened to, so now who do we have to trust? So it felt really good to be [the] people that they could trust and to be in their corner."

“ *As a youth organizer...our role is not trying to change the school, but let me get to know you as a person or a student. We ask ourselves, how can I bring in your other identities into the space and show you how your identities are of value.*” — Youth Organizing Coach

INSIGHT 2

Students need opportunities to provide feedback on their holistic school experiences (classroom and non-classroom environments).

Discussion about students' school experiences are often limited to their classroom experiences, but classrooms live within a larger school culture and ecosystem. Students' experiences in social spaces can weigh heavily on their well-being and in-class experiences. Youth Organizers understand the significance of listening to student feedback, not just about classroom experiences but also about how it feels to be in social spaces such as lunchrooms and bathrooms, and importantly their experience of engaging with their peers and how all these factors shape their learning experiences within schools.

Youth Organizing Coaches recognize that providing opportunities for students to provide feedback on their holistic school experiences must go well beyond the common school practice of collecting survey data and not acting on it. It's about empowering students to share their voices and perspectives on what is and isn't working in their school environments. By creating space for these discussions, Youth Organizing Coaches aim to foster a sense of ownership and agency among students. This can, in turn, lead to more meaningful and effective changes in school policies and practices that better support the needs of all students.

A central tenet of the Youth Organizing Coaches approach is that young people can and should rely on each other as community members and fellow activists. One of the ways that Youth Organizing Coaches encourage students to share about their out-of-classroom experiences is to share those experiences with each other. According to one Youth Organizing Coach, "our emphasis is not just one individual student but encouraging students to have a discussion with their peers." By growing students' interest in and capacity for engaging in peer-to-peer discussions about their experiences, Youth Organizing Coaches aim to create more inclusive and socially supportive environments.

“ *There is just value in having young people lead young people [because] at the end of the day, there is value in seeing yourself in the person that's leading.”* — Youth Organizing Coach



INSIGHT**3**

Students need invested advocates who can act as liaisons with adults to more effectively participate in school and district-level decision-making.

Empowering students to be active in decisions that affect them within their schools means integrating their presence and perspective at decision-making tables. Meaningful integration of students into mostly adult spaces brings major logistical and cultural considerations, including coordinating schedules, accounting for transportation, and recognizing the varied constraints on students' lives in and out of school. Meaningful integration also requires an authentic willingness of adults in the space to share power with students and seek their participation as an added value to discussions. Positioning a Youth Organizing Coach as an allied liaison for students can make a major difference in how involved students are ultimately able to be in decision-making.

As effective as Youth Organizing Coaches can be as liaisons, their ability to convene students and help them navigate adult decision-making spaces is helped significantly by the presence of a supportive “connector”—a permanent school staff member who can themselves act as a liaison between the Youth Organizing Coach and the students and the Coach and the adults in the district. The presence of a permanent staff person advocating for and logistically supporting the joint efforts of the students and their Youth Organizing Coaches, is critical to the success of the work; without it, the impact of their efforts is significantly limited. One Youth Organizing Coach affirms that, “We need the connector who can connect us to students and to the district. [When you have that connector] the difference is astronomical.”

As paid staff who are close in age to students, Youth Organizing Coaches have one foot in each world, bridging and communicating students' interests to adults and representing adults' considerations to students. In order to make student participation in decision-making structurally impactful, Youth Organizing Coaches need to provide students with context and help them familiarize themselves with the language and procedures used at the administrative level. As one Youth Coach explained, “sometimes students are brought into the work without knowing what it is .. we shouldn't be asking students to dump out their experiences then ask them to leave...like no one told them why they are there.” To counter this, Youth Organizing Coaches can help adults set up clear expectations and provide students with the necessary context so that they can meaningfully engage in the decision-making process.

Youth Organizing Coaches also work to equip the students to productively receive resistance from the adults in their school when they voice a perspective that draws negative reactions. As one Youth Organizing Coach stated, “Whenever students bring up concerns, teachers push back. As organizers, we try to equip students with language and give them moments of pause.” Helping students understand the underlying systems of power that operate in schools—and society at large—is one way Youth Organizing Coaches can contextualize the resistance or defensiveness students sometimes experience from adults and inform their paths forward.

INSIGHT 4

When identifying students to participate in student-adult decision-making spaces, look not just to vocal and highly engaged students but to students who are more reserved and not typically involved.

In order to have meaningful student-adult decision-making spaces, it is important to consider the students who are not typically involved, who are more reserved. Unfortunately, there are often no particular structures in place to bring in those who are farthest from power. Instead, it is typically students who have good relationships with teachers or who hold positions of power on campus who are selected for these spaces. This often results in a lack of diversity and representation in decision-making spaces. Students who are farthest from power and closest to marginalization are often left out of these spaces, and educators may be protecting their own power by not reaching out to them.

Youth Organizing Coaches, grounded in the principles of intersectionality, community activism, and with a clear understanding of how systemic oppression operates, encourage adults and students in their districts to “always put the needs and experiences of our society’s most marginalized at the very forefront of everything we do” (Zine).

To create truly inclusive and equitable decision-making spaces, it is important to actively seek out and include students who do not fill the traditional profile of an “engaged student.” This may require educators to step outside of their comfort zones and actively engage with these students, rather than relying on the same few students who are always involved. By doing so, decision-making spaces can become more representative of the student body as a whole and better serve the needs of all students.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To build equitable learning environments, partnering with youth is essential. Schools should be spaces that are not just designed for students but with and by students to ensure that their voices are centered, needs are addressed, and their holistic well-being is prioritized. Moreover, the focus is on empowering all youth, not just those already engaged or seen as involved. To truly advance equitable learning environments, the voices and perspectives of those furthest from power should be the voices most sought.

Integrating Youth Organizing Coaches has great potential to help schools and districts unlock their potential to be spaces of youth empowerment and liberation. Outside of the formal role of the Youth Organizing Coach, districts can activate other near-peer mentorship opportunities in order to help students build trusting relationships for navigating the adult world of education. Investing in near-peer mentors, and/or training adult staff in the dynamics of sharing power with students, can support the goal of positioning students not just as the recipients of decisions but as active participants in the process. By valuing and incorporating the perspectives of all students, co-constructing decision-making spaces with them, and recognizing their full humanity, student-serving institutions can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive schools that support the learning and development of all students.

