



# Helping Teachers Support 'Whole Learners'

Going Beyond Academics to Foster Student Success

By Lija Farnham and Aviva Altmann

“We know why kids don’t learn. It’s either poverty, low attendance, negative peer influences.... But one of the things that we never discuss, or we rarely discuss, is the value and importance of human connection. Relationships.”

RITA PIERSON, TEACHER (FROM HER TED TALK “EVERY KID NEEDS A CHAMPION”)

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Decades of effort and billions of dollars have been invested in our public school systems to improve learning and reduce gaps in outcomes between students. Educators who have been at the helm of reform know that no silver bullet solution exists to address these gaps. Yet, philanthropists, school districts, charter school operators, and nonprofits continue to search for answers. What, they ask, can we do to realize better results for students, especially for low-income students and students of color who face significant systemic barriers and predictable and worsening outcomes?

Voluminous research, evidence from leading educational initiatives, and advice from thought leaders and educators pointed us in the same direction. The most promising intervention is right in front of our noses and present in every classroom: the *teacher*. Specifically, it’s teachers creating equitable learning environments informed by the science of learning and development. (Bridgespan’s 2015 article “Rethinking How Students Succeed” published on the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* website introduced our thinking on the role of the teacher in cultivating effective learners.<sup>1</sup>)

At their best, teachers create classroom conditions that support “whole learner” development by cultivating genuine, trusting relationships with their students, and structuring challenging and supportive classroom learning environments.<sup>2</sup> A growing body of research confirms that teachers can foster social, emotional, and academic skills, mindsets, and habits among their students (e.g., [a sense of belonging](#) and [a growth mindset](#)).<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we don’t prepare teachers adequately to do any of these things. The current system perpetuates a primary focus on academic content mastery, largely ignoring the significant research base that

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ROBERT C. PIANTA, DEAN, CURRY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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1 Lija Farnham, Gihani Fernando, Mike Perigo, & Colleen Brosman, with Paul Tough, “Rethinking How Students Succeed,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, February 17, 2015, [https://ssir.org/up\\_for\\_debate/article/rethinking\\_how\\_students\\_succeed](https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/rethinking_how_students_succeed).

2 Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012; Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

3 The “whole learner” approach builds on work by the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#), the [Science of Learning and Development](#) initiative, and the [Mindset Scholars Network](#), among others.

indicates such content mastery will not be possible without a more holistic approach to student learning. But we can do better, says Robert C. Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia: “For too long, [we] have not attended to the explosion of information on relationships as core assets in fostering students’ learning and development. We now know enough to change that.”<sup>4</sup>

The challenge that confronts every district and school is how to take something that is human and unique in nature—a supportive relationship between a teacher and a student—and replicate it in every classroom. A number of leading nonprofit organizations have taken on this challenge and succeeded in systematizing approaches that prepare teachers to put relationships front and center. This is not wishful theory. Rather, it is powerful practice. Supportive relationships combined with rigorous academics produce breakthrough results grounded in practical, daily interactions, and practices. We highlight three nonprofits that put this kind of practice into action.

The [BARR Center](#), [EL Education](#), and [Equal Opportunity Schools](#) have developed successful, yet very different, approaches that help teachers create relationship-centric, supportive classroom and school cultures. Each now operates in over 100 schools and plans to grow. We believe they hold the promise of working at much greater scale—in particular, because they are embedded within existing public school structures and processes versus being one-off or add-on programs.

While BARR, EL Education, and Equal Opportunity Schools have distinct approaches, they share three essential characteristics that aide their success. They create a “positive disruption” that leads to change; focus on the whole learner by helping educators to develop and anchor on a fuller picture of each student; and foster the development of supportive relationships among educators. We have chosen one example, drawn from more detailed case studies of the three nonprofits, to illustrate each of these points.

## Creating a positive disruption that leads to change

“Schools ask us to come in and focus time and attention on kids,” explains Ron Berger, chief academic officer of EL Education. It began as a school transformation model and has expanded nationally to provide districts with a comprehensive language arts curriculum and aligned professional development. “We tell them, it’s not just about kids; it’s about us as adults. Our vision of building student character is predicated on a school culture that changes how adults interact with each other and with kids.”

Memphis teacher Tracy Haynes describes how that disrupts classroom business as usual: “EL Education’s curriculum has changed me as a teacher, pushing my



Students and their teacher at Hollis Innovation Academy, an EL Education school in Atlanta, GA. Credit: EL Education

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4 Richard Lee Colvin, *Supporting the Whole Teacher: Developing educators’ social and emotional skills lays the foundation for success with students*, Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/supporting-the-whole-teacher/>.

own growth mindset. It pulled me off the stage and put my students on the stage. They're leading conversations and thinking through their own answers and processes. Even if they don't get it right the first time, they keep trying."

EL Education, originally called Expeditionary Learning, emerged in 1991 from a collaboration between The Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA.<sup>5</sup> The organization advances a three-dimensional

definition of student achievement that puts character side-by-side with mastery of knowledge and skills and high-quality student work. Its curriculum—informed by lessons from years of school transformation work—is not just about delivering rigorous content. Teachers serve as coaches and facilitators of learning, different from a traditional instruction-centric model with a teacher lecturing at the front of the classroom. In fact, 80–90 percent of the curriculum is comprised of teacher guides, versus the typical worksheets and assignments.<sup>6</sup>

Because implementing the curriculum requires a fundamentally different approach than what most teachers are used to, new schools ideally go through several months of professional development, classroom observation, and co-teaching. A report from *Mathematica* found that English language arts teachers who participated in EL Education's professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year.<sup>7</sup> This is true for both new and veteran teachers—demonstrating the potential of this kind of professional development to transform teacher practice. And after two years, the program had positive effects on students' English language arts achievement.

EL Education's approach requires a lot from teachers and school leaders. "These materials look and feel very different than materials we've used in the past," says April Imperio, executive director of K-12 Literacy and Early Learning with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD). The district began using the language arts curriculum in 2018 in all of its K-8 classrooms. In Detroit, as it does in many other communities where it supports implementation, EL Education partnered with district leaders to plan and organize a multiday comprehensive teacher institute prior to the beginning of the school year. The district partners with EL Education to provide ongoing professional learning, coaching, and other direct supports that are critical in helping teachers and schools as they manage the technical and adaptive changes required of implementing new high-quality instructional materials.

While emphasizing how much excitement there has been among DPSCD teachers about the curriculum, Imperio is also candid about the challenges. "The other side of all the

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TRACY HAYNES, TEACHER, MEMPHIS

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5 The Bridgespan Group has assisted EL Education with strategic planning.

6 EL Education's curriculum can be found on its website at <https://curriculum.eleducation.org/>,

7 Sarah Dolfen et al., *Evaluation of the Teacher Potential Project*, Mathematica, June 28, 2019, <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/evaluation-of-the-teacher-potential-project>.

excitement is the anxiety that comes along with change for school leaders and teachers. You're coming up against years of work implementing other curricula that did not align to the rigor of the standards. Teachers have been wondering—will this work?" EL Education's Amy Bailey, managing director of district partnerships, describes an interaction with a teacher at the Detroit institute. "What he was hearing did not necessarily align with what he already practiced as a teacher, and he eventually said, 'I'm scared, I don't know if I can do this.'" But Bailey has seen this kind of doubt in teachers across the country, and views the questioning and uncertainty as a step toward change. "He *can* do it—because otherwise he wouldn't even be asking the question."

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“Teachers often report that initially when they look at the curriculum, they believe it’s too hard for their students, but as they see the changes in their students, and students feel it, the classroom environment starts to shift.”

AMY BAILEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR, DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS, EL EDUCATION

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As a part of the ongoing professional learning plan, “we brought principals together to calibrate on quality implementation ‘look fors,’” explains Imperio. Now that teachers were using the curriculum, Imperio says, “there were opportunities to reflect on the early stages of implementation and how the curriculum was supporting teachers with the district’s vision of excellent instruction for literacy.”

Bailey points out that engaging with a curriculum as different from standard practice as this one can be challenging. All the more reason why the coaching and ongoing engagement with principals, as well as other elements of professional development, need to continue, whether delivered by EL Education or the school district itself. “Teachers often report that initially when they look at the curriculum, they believe it’s too hard for their students,” says Bailey. “But as they see the changes in their students, and students feel it, the classroom environment starts to shift. When you walk into a classroom where implementation is moving forward, the change is palpable.”<sup>8</sup>

## Anchoring on the “whole learner”

To help students cultivate motivation and perseverance and build authentic relationships, educators need to understand their students beyond just academics—their interests, strengths, aspirations, and mindsets. This fuller picture of each student helps to overcome biases and foster genuine, caring, trusting relationships. Consider how Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) helps educators see their students as whole learners in an effort to open up access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes for students of color and low-income students.

Over 90 percent of all US high schools offer at least one AP course, but within these schools, students of color and low-income students are systematically under-enrolled.

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8 You can read more about EL Education’s approach in Bridgespan’s case study “EL Education: Helping Teachers to Foster Learning and Build Character,” <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/el-education-foster-learning-build-character>.

More than three-quarters of a million high school students qualify for—but are missing from—these advanced classes.

Since its founding in 2010, EOS has helped more than 540 schools in 29 states identify and enroll upwards of 36,000 of these “missing” students, and support their success in rigorous academic programs. San Jose Unified School District, for example, more than doubled the number of students of color and low-income students in AP and IB with no drop in exam pass rates.



San Diego Unified School District participants work in small teams to compete in the drawing contest, as part of the fourth Equity Leader Lab session. (May 2019) Credit: Chris Wojdak Photography/Equal Opportunity Schools ©2019

Many schools have not systematically thought about the extent to which historically marginalized students are discouraged from taking advanced classes. Hence, EOS works with each school to understand its unique dynamics and prepares a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators to develop and implement a set of strategies in service of equitable outcomes for their students. To that end, EOS collects and shares enrollment data and results from a survey of students and staff. In addition, the Student Insight Card, which includes a student’s aspirations, strengths, learning mindsets, barriers to learning, academic track record, and teachers’ recommendations, is an especially important tool for helping schools identify and support missing students. The Insight Cards help educators to tailor outreach and build trusting relationships with students whom they previously only knew mainly through an academic lens.

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**BERNADETTE MERIKLE, SENIOR DIRECTOR,  
STRATEGY FOR RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT, EOS**

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trust anyone,” says Bernadette Merikle, EOS’s senior director of strategy for racial equity impact. “Time and time again what we find is that students have multiple trusted adults. And for those students who don’t, we can work on that.”

In the second year of EOS’s work with a school, as a more demographically representative group of students enters advanced courses, teachers and school leaders continue to develop this fuller picture of students. Teachers use the Student Insight Cards as a reference point to connect with students on a personal level, support them to address barriers they may

EOS data gathering reveals, for instance, that in most schools “[missing] students’ aspirations for college tend to be higher than staff estimates,” says Adam Kay, EOS’s former director of effectiveness and learning. “This highlights the barriers students face in pursuing AP classes. They think: ‘I don’t feel encouraged, I don’t feel welcome.’” In fact, teachers typically rely on grades and test scores to identify students for AP or IB classes. “When they do so, they tend to exclude a lot of students,” says Kay.

EOS also asks students to list the adults they trust. “People are afraid that students will say, ‘I don’t

be facing, and assess progress. “When teachers finally receive their first semester grades from the students enrolled, that can be powerful,” says Kay. “A number of teachers come around in their predictions that some students will fail or struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

## Fostering the development of supportive relationships among educators

High school teachers typically interact largely with colleagues in the same discipline, such as math or English. BARR breaks down these departmental silos by forming cross-disciplinary teams that change the way teachers interact with each other and with students. The concept took shape in response to the need to help more ninth graders succeed in their first year of high school.

Twenty-one years ago, Angela Jerabek nearly quit her job as a ninth-grade counselor at St. Louis Park High School in suburban Minneapolis. She felt discouraged over the high number of ninth graders failing at least one course, and helpless to remedy the problem. Encouraged by her school’s principal, she channeled her frustration into developing an innovative program that builds connections between students and teachers to help both succeed. She called it Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). BARR focuses on ninth graders because they face a make-or-break transitional year from middle school to high school. Research shows that students who succeed in the ninth grade tend to graduate. Many who struggle eventually drop out.

Today, BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, and Jerabek is CEO of a fast-growing organization. Over the next three years, the number of BARR schools is expected to more than double with financial support from the US Department of Education. BARR stands out as the sole project out of 172 federal education innovation grants to progress through randomized controlled trials to win funding at three levels: innovation, development, and scaling up. BARR raises test scores and pass rates, and it reduces absences and suspensions. Fewer students ultimately drop out because they feel more engaged and challenged at school. The effects are particularly large for students of color, male students, and students from low-income families.

One of the most striking aspects of BARR’s approach in schools is how it builds relationships among educators—requiring at least three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students. That means, for instance,



Students participate in the Lollipop Moment I-Time—an activity in which students and staff reflect on a time someone did or said something that made a difference in their lives. They then write letters to those people and school staff will assist with sending them if students choose to. Credit: Zachary Smith

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9 You can read more about EOS’s approach in the case study, “Equal Opportunity Schools: Helping Teachers Close the Classroom Equity Gap,” <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/equal-opportunity-schools-close-classroom-gap>.

the same students have English, math, and social studies together. A large high school may have multiple teacher teams, each with a distinctive student cohort. This team and cohort approach requires significant retooling of the way schools handle class assignments. But it's critical for the BARR model. These cross-disciplinary teams change the way teachers interact. In a typical high school, teachers meet periodically for departmental professional development discussions. BARR breaks down the departmental silos and shifts the conversation from a strictly academic focus to a whole-student perspective.

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“[Our teachers] are increasingly accountable to their peers—and that is so powerful.”

JOSH TRIPP, FORMER MATH TEACHER, CURRENT PRINCIPAL, BUCKSPORT HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

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That more complete view of students takes shape in weekly team meetings, called block time, where teachers share observations of each student's strengths and challenges. Block time centers on what Jerabek calls one of the BARR model's "defining pillars": real-time data. The team works off a spreadsheet that builds a picture of each student by reviewing a variety of in-school factors, including progress in class, attendance, and behavior. The team also discusses factors outside the school, such as extracurricular interests, personal health, issues with other students, or troubles at home. All this data collection allows the team to flag challenges early and work together to solve problems.

It is not unusual for teachers to express skepticism of the BARR model when first introduced. Josh Tripp, a former math teacher and now the principal of Bucksport High School in Maine, remembers his initial hesitation. "Our graduation rate was only 73 percent, so we had to try something. I was on board," he recalls, "but I was a little skeptical of the social and emotional learning piece. I was that math teacher saying, 'do I have to give up 30 minutes of my week and not do math?'"

The BARR approach requires all teachers in the cohort to participate and play equal roles to ensure the success of the block-time meeting. Tripp says that teachers at his school now realize if they don't get their data together, the meeting isn't productive. "My colleagues are sitting here, thinking, 'why didn't you do all the stuff that needs to be done?'" says Tripp. "They are increasingly accountable to their peers—and that is so powerful." Bucksport High School's graduation rate is now 90 percent.<sup>10</sup>

## What will it take for all teachers to experience these approaches?

BARR, EL Education, and Equal Opportunity Schools demonstrate the power and potential of building teacher capacity to create supportive relationships and learning environments for all students. In different ways, each program helps teachers see and respond to students as whole learners. Not only are these three programs effective, they are readily scalable by *tapping into existing structures and resources* rather than adding new ones.

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10 You can read more about BARR's approach in the case study, "The BARR Center: Helping Teachers Connect with Each Other and Their Students," <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/barr-center-teachers-connect-and-with-students>.

EL Education distributes its curriculum without charge, which could free up district curriculum budgets to cover professional development to support implementation. EOS helps schools improve opportunities for students of color through schools' existing Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. And BARR helps students succeed by building relationships among existing educators rather than, say, adding or replacing staff. By working to improve existing systems rather than create new ones, these approaches can succeed faster, cost less, and sustain themselves in the longer run.

But what will it take for these and other effective whole learner approaches to take root in every school and district? We offer a few ideas—first and foremost, to change the ways teachers are trained and developed.

Educators and policymakers need to recognize and understand what science tells us—that factors like a student's sense of belonging and self-management skills are critical drivers of learning. “While teacher-student relationships are often characterized as the ‘soft’ side of schooling, in fact they are foundational to student success, especially for students who have been traditionally underserved by public schools,” concluded a recent study by FutureEd at Georgetown University.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, teachers play a critical role in creating the kinds of relationships and environments that either contribute to or hinder student success. That means we need to make significant changes to how we train teachers. This could include spreading models like the three highlighted here. It could also include applying the common characteristics of these three approaches to existing teacher preparation and professional development models. Many school districts currently spend millions of dollars each year—totaling billions of dollars nationally—on teacher professional development. Yet, research shows that the vast majority of that professional development is low-quality and **does not lead to sustained change**<sup>12</sup> and improvement in teacher practice.

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In short, funding that is already available but being spent on ineffective approaches should move toward professional learning models that help teachers to foster the development of their students as whole learners. And a number of approaches have already proven their worth in hundreds of schools across the country. But hundreds of schools fall far short of addressing the real need. Education leaders, funders, and policymakers should think hard about what it will take to turn promising approaches into something transformative—for teachers and students all across the country.

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11 Craig Wacker and Lynn Olson, *Teacher Mindsets, How Educators' Perspectives Shape Student Success*, FutureEd, Georgetown University, June 2019.

12 *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development*, TNTP, 2015, <https://tntp.org/publications/view/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development>.

*Lija Farnham is a partner in Bridgespan's San Francisco office and coauthor of "Rethinking How Students Succeed." Aviva Altmann is a manager in Bridgespan's San Francisco office.*

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## THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

**BOSTON** 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

**JOHANNESBURG** Bridgespan Africa Initiative, 10 The High St., Melrose Arch, 2076, Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 012 9280

**MUMBAI** Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address), 9th Floor, Platina, G Block, Plot C 59, Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, 400051, India. Tel: +91 022 6628 9624

**NEW YORK** 333 Seventh Avenue, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

**SAN FRANCISCO** 88 Kearny St., Ste. 200, San Francisco, CA 94108 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 4500



[www.bridgespan.org](http://www.bridgespan.org)

[contact@bridgespan.org](mailto:contact@bridgespan.org)

[contactindia@bridgespan.org](mailto:contactindia@bridgespan.org)