

# Schooling for and with Democracy

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## Introduction

It feels like ours is a time when the United States is riven by such deep social, cultural, and intellectual fractures that our democracy is imperiled. The value of public leadership and government in our society is consistently questioned, and in this context, our public school system is challenged to prove itself in the face of growing privatization efforts.

In the twenty-first century, with roots in both the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), the twin concerns of economic opportunity and equity have become interwoven politically with American education, driving the dialogue around school improvement and a dire need for “reform.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, we have doubled down on standardized testing of basic skills and knowledge and tracked life outcome data across generations, the results of which continually resurface in our country’s shameful access and achievement gaps. On national and international assessments, some of which are praised for better targeting higher order thinking skills than many other standardized tests we require, our flat and middling performances reinforce the concern that America is simply falling behind. More recent remedies, such as charters and school choice, accountability and evaluation policies, and new standards and curriculum, have generated a lot of debate but, I would argue, have not fundamentally changed the difficulties our public school systems must address, the daily work of our schools, or the results.

To be fair, the societal expectation that publicly funded schools impart basic skills, develop reasoning, and prepare our children to earn a living has

1. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

been held throughout the history of our governmental support and oversight of schooling; however, other goals have carried similar weight with the populace spanning centuries, such as exposure to arts and literature, the development of social skills, physical and emotional health, and citizenship preparedness (Rothstein et al. 2008). In progressive circles, a focus on the whole person reaches most of these other goals, from the arts to character building and social-emotional well-being. Our larger public school policies of the last half-century, even when intended to promote equity, have not embraced these goals as fully as those focused on academic skills, knowledge, and economic competitiveness. For this reason, we need to lend critical voices and pursue active movements to push back against all types of accountability measures and harmful disciplinary approaches that narrow the purpose of public schooling and make those working and learning in our schools feel less human. American schools have never been just about skills and jobs, gaps and workforce development. The longer we let this narrative continue, the more at risk our nation truly becomes.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that building stronger schools that foster well-rounded, healthier, and better equipped students of all backgrounds and abilities is not the same thing as the teaching and learning of our children to be productive citizens. Too often in our schools we are betting that if we achieve all the other goals—if they are covered in our curricula and programmatic options—then our students will leave our schools ready to actively contribute to and improve our democracy. And there is certainly an element of truth to this sentiment, since the alternative is a less informed and less discerning citizenry. But even if high school graduates are anointed “college and career ready,” to what degree do students know how to be contributing members to American society if they are not actually practicing democracy as they grow and develop in school? How will we ensure our future citizens become judicious, vocal, collaborative, and active individuals if we are not educating both for and with democratic participation? Here, the word *for* means in service of the health and strength of our democratic society. And *with* means using the ways in which democratic institutions work to develop the habits needed for meaningful participation.

It is this goal of our public school system—that of a citizenry practiced in democracy through schooling—that I believe is the least critically discussed and tended to by our democratically elected and educational leaders. Maybe it is just an irony that in our democracy, this goal of building “citizenship readiness” is poorly resourced and deprioritized; perhaps, though, it is an intentional deflection to keep the connection loose between how we educate our youth and who has power to make decisions affecting the course of

our country. Either way, the relationship between our communities' commonly resourced schools and the health of our democracy has mattered since the beginning of the American public school system more than 150 years ago, and it matters as much today as ever.

To dig more deeply into these issues and questions in the current context of public schooling, I reached out to 10 practitioners leading schools under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE; see app. A for a list) in the hopes of setting up interviews around the topic of schooling for and with democracy. From what I know of the ways these schools work, and from what can be read in their school missions and visions (see app. B), these educators are consciously working each day to lead school communities that prepare and strengthen our citizenry for a more democratic United States. It was my hope that through listening to how the leaders describe the relationship of their respective schools with democracy, patterns would emerge worth discussing and sharing more widely.

### **Interviews with School Leaders**

Each school leader I approached was amenable to being interviewed. I ended up visiting all 10 schools, listed below, and speaking with 13 school leaders from these communities, including the principals and some assistant principals.

1. Castle Bridge School (grades pre-K–5)
2. Earth School (grades pre-K–5)
3. The Neighborhood School (grades pre-K–5)
4. Arts and Letters School (grades pre-K–8)
5. Community Roots Charter School (grades pre-K–8)
6. Institute for Collaborative Studies (ICE; grades 6–12)
7. Harvest Collegiate High School (grades 9–12)
8. Humanities Preparatory Academy (grades 9–12/transfer)
9. City-As-School (transfer high school)
10. James Baldwin School (transfer high school)

All of the school leaders expressed a belief about education serving as a powerful vehicle for individual and social advancement. However, they frame and enact this belief in different ways.

I could have visited many other schools in New York City with similar values and a social justice orientation for their work. Given various constraints and the desire to begin with schools I know well, I limited myself

to this initial group. Accordingly, it is important to note that the information I collected and analyzed is shaped by these factors:

- I did not visit any schools in three of the city’s boroughs (Queens, the Bronx, or Staten Island), whereas 8 of the 10 schools I visited are located in Manhattan.
- Four of the 13 school leaders I interviewed are people of color.
- The student populations of the schools, according to NYCDOE 2016–17 School Quality Guide statistics, vary in percentages of students of color (from 45% to 95%), students with disabilities (from 7% to 32%), and English-language learners (from <1% to 30%).

I visited schools that, in total, work with children of all ages in the NYCDOE. I also visited schools that offered different options for families and students, including a charter school with grades pre-K–8 and three transfer schools in the upper grades. Here is a more detailed description of school types:

- Half the schools enroll students in pre-K through fifth grade.
- I visited no stand-alone middle schools (i.e., grades 6–8 only), although 3 of the 10 schools enroll students in grades 6–8.
- Two schools enroll students starting in grade 9 and serve them as they progress toward graduation—what one might call “typical” high schools.
- Two schools are *transfer high schools*, which interview and admit students who are usually off track to graduate and have decided to leave a typical high school for this new setting.
- One school uses a blend of both typical and transfer school enrollment processes.

When I sent my initial email communication to the school leaders, I asked to meet with them individually and/or with key leaders in their schools to talk about the connection between democracy and their community’s approach to schooling. The objective of the interview was to surface the beliefs and practices of the school, which are made manifest in the culture and structures and drive both student and adult behavior, in relation to participatory engagement in their community and our larger society. I used the same set of questions for each interview (see app. C). However, the conversations did not always follow the same progression of questions and were not typically linear because many of the ideas we discussed are connected to each other.

The interviews occurred from February through October 2017 and lasted between one and two hours each; in a few cases, the school leader and I conducted short walkthroughs of classrooms (because of scheduling challenges, I was not always able to visit during school day hours). I took notes during each interview, reread and revised them for clarity, and sent them to the respective school leaders to ensure they reflected our conversations accurately. I then analyzed the interview notes for patterns and differences across questions.

### **Connecting Democracy and Education for Students and Adults**

The school leaders articulated many educational commitments their communities keep that connect their approach to schooling and the concept of democracy for both kids and adults. As a foundation, it is important to share some commonly held goals and core practices to ground the next section, which discusses specific themes that emerged as patterns across the interviews.

These schools all evince a deep commitment to inquiry-based experiential learning with students actively engaging in their school, local, and city communities through projects and activities that have authentic roots in the real world. Equally important is the opportunity for students to demonstrate their learning and growth through multiple and meaningful modes: in oral presentations, in writing, through artistic expression and performance, over weeks and on demand in the moment, individually and in groups, and in front of their peers as well as outside experts and stakeholders. This process also requires learning to give and take feedback for improvement in the service of achieving one's goals.

For students in these schools, learning through interactions with the community is a reminder that their goals are not necessarily the same as everyone else's or related to the needs of the collective. This allows the students to better understand the role they must play as active community members, which these schools believe is a responsibility of all their students and adults. As human beings and citizens of a democracy, students have rights as well as responsibilities, and for our society to be as strong as it can be, children need to develop the ability to advocate for their rights as well as those of others, especially those most vulnerable in the community. To be such active advocates, students must learn to hold and consider others' perspectives unlike their own. This means interacting with people who have differences in more than surface-level ways. And when there are the inevitable disagreements, staying respectful and in a listening stance, while considering their own biases and interests, will yield a better outcome for all. The habit of being flexible thinkers and revising their thinking, based on evidence, is crucial in this regard.

As students grow and develop, these schools apply the lens of perspective taking to history and our society. The schools work to ensure that students learn to be skeptical and to wield inconvenient truths in the face of commonly held assumptions and those in positions of power. Students are taught to question authority, peacefully, and to provide alternative solutions supported by strong analyses. Revisions to the structures, policies, and ways of our institutions, from schools to businesses to homes to government, are understood to be critical for the sustainability and improvement of our democracy.

## **Six Patterns of Schooling for and with Democracy**

Reviewing the notes from the interviews, I found six larger categories of beliefs and practices that cut across all the schools and connect to educating for and with democracy.

### Content and Learning Experiences

*Theme:* We intentionally develop informed citizens who are grounded in democratic values with an understanding of how our democracy works by an exploration of issues we have faced and currently face as a nation of constitutionally empowered people.

These schools are not unlike others in that they use and create curriculum that engages students in “social studies” and the ways our government works in relation to how other nations govern themselves. However, the content that these schools choose to form the basis of the learning experiences for students is intentionally developed both to connect students to the people and institutions in their world and to align to the school’s democratic values and processes.

In early childhood grades, it was common to hear descriptions of units of study that explore the school and local communities, such as units on families, parks and playgrounds, and architecture, described by the leaders of all the elementary schools. This experiential learning, through firsthand observations, drawings, and notes and interviews of family members and local businesspeople, generates information about and connections to the social webs that exist around the children. As I will describe in more depth later, there is also an expectation that students will develop the ability to think critically about what they are seeing, hearing, and learning through these community explorations, such as at the Neighborhood School, where students reflect on

what it means that many of the buildings they visit and explore in New York City were designed and built by white men.

As the students age into upper elementary and middle school grades, the curricular explorations across these and the other schools focus on key issues related to the foundation of our democracy, such as the American Constitution and immigration, and the journeys of marginalized groups, for example, the plight of Native Americans and the civil rights movement. From exposure to this content, a concept emerges like “bystander versus upstander,” which was mentioned in a vast majority of interviews. In addition, the way our democracy works better for some than others is also surfaced. In light of these types of learning experiences, one class of students at the Earth School developed an essential question: Can one person make a difference? They then pursued examples and evidence to support their position.

For the older students, those approaching and in high school, the school leaders each described curriculum that goes more deeply into seismic issues affecting our shared history and democracy, like slavery, while providing students the choice to pursue content that reflects their interests and passions. Certain aspects of how our constitutional democracy functions (e.g., the three branches of government) are required by state standards, and they are certainly “covered” by these schools. Yet the approach to learning this content generally requires students to engage in inquiry-based projects and extended papers, such as researching and debating the causes of the American Civil War.

The content that yields insights into ourselves as individuals and as a society is not always derived from social studies. All of the schools working with students in middle and high school grades create opportunities for students to look at issues of social equity through the lenses of literature, mathematical modeling, and scientific experimentation. At Community Roots, students discuss whose voice you hear, and whose you don’t, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In each of the schools with grades 9–12 included in this sample, students must complete authentic performance assessments of their own devising in math and science, and so they could, for example, collect data on water quality in different parts of the city and map it to home income levels.

At City-As-School, into which high schoolers transfer after struggling in other settings, the expectation is that all students spend half of their week in classes within the school walls and the other half in coursework situated in place-based internships—with veterinarians, public health and education organizations (including schools), judges and law offices, and a myriad of other organizations (there are up to 85 different intern opportunities for students to consider and navigate). Alan Cheng and Rachel Seher, the principal and assistant principal, respectively, described how this structure for experi-

ential learning is inherently participatory, forcing students to engage with the authentic world. As with the other schools in this sample, it is through follow-up discussion and analysis with teachers and peer students that this learning is situated in the appropriate historical or current social context. Students can then make connections to questions and concepts of justice and equity and reflect on who they are and what they believe.

It is this last step that I believe makes the curriculum and learning experiences at these schools particularly powerful. Because of the commitment to teaching for a stronger democracy, the enacted curriculum—from extended units of study for the youngest to in-depth projects for the eldest students—is grounded and regrounded in democratic values, which inculcate the habits of involved community participants. Any school could just as easily teach the same books and topics, assign the same projects, and arrange the same field trips and internships as these schools. However, these school communities work hard to generate coherence between their beliefs and practices to establish congruence of democratic values and ways of being. The vigilance with which these schools hold to their commitment to democracy results in their community becoming held by this core value.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, learning about our democracy’s history and structures more readily translates for students and adults into rich experiences that can be used later on, transferred and transposed into life situations that call for an informed citizenry to shape and improve the community and society.

This is schooling for and with democracy. The following sections, which delve into the value of diversity and critique, participation and activism, will provide additional dimensions of this assertion.

## Diversity and Humanity

*Theme:* We intentionally develop empathic and inclusive citizens who perceive strength in diversity by appreciating others in light of differences and feel their individual value is validated by the ways of the larger community.

One of the strongest, most evident themes from across the school leader interviews was the commitment to and importance of diversity. Internally, a diverse student body—most often defined by the leaders in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status but also including learning ability, phys-

2. While this phrasing may seem odd, Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2009) describe the notion of people and organizations being “run” by values, like operating systems, in their seminal text, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*.



ical capability, sexual orientation, and political beliefs—is expressed as a necessity central to the success of their missions. Accordingly, half of the 10 schools have actively sought participation in the NYCDOE’s Diversity Pilot program (Research Alliance for New York City Schools 2017). The remaining schools have various enrollment strategies that they describe as tools they use, the best they can, to attain and maintain as diverse a student body as possible in the face of growing interest in their schools by middle- and upper-class families, which tend to be white. This has proved particularly challenging in neighborhoods or admissions catchment areas that are gentrifying. Given New York City’s dubious distinction of possessing one of the most segregated school systems in the country (Kucsera 2014), the great value many of these school communities place on diversity has catapulted them to the forefront of school integration efforts.

This value is also clearly evident in the way these schools cultivate learning experiences and interactions. Universally, diversity is described by the school leaders as an essential opportunity to explore each other’s humanity and broaden one’s understanding of difference. This requires the prioritization of inclusivity, which is apparent at Harvest Collegiate High School. One of the school’s three core values is commitment to diversity (along with commitment to peace and growth), and Principal Kate Burch described her perspective on the connection between democracy and difference as believing that a strong community doesn’t exist without diversity; if you share from your own experience and expect to be respected, you must also accept and honor that other people come from difference places. This, she says, requires people learning to listen to each other. She noted that the adults and veteran students in the school work to model these progressive and democratic ways for the newer and struggling community members. Accordingly, the school is defined by tolerance and has few issues with bullying. Harvest Collegiate has also worked hard to build a bridge to a nearby special education program for students with autism. All of the dozen or so students from this program are fully integrated into the school’s regular classes with additional paraprofessionals and services for a handful of the students who need more supports. In this way, the staff and students are working to develop the skills required for meaningful inclusion, building habits of empathy, awareness, and acceptance of difference.

Teaching these skills and concepts begins early in the elementary schools in the sample. The Neighborhood School, for example, has built a “little creatures” curriculum for pre-K and kindergarten children that uses care for small animals, like snails and stick insects, to focus on big questions like, “How do you take of each other?” Castle Bridge and Earth School use a “teddy

bears” curriculum with this age group, which is a therapeutic approach developed by Lesley Koplow (2008) at Bank Street College of Education. Each student receives a stuffed toy bear to name and develop a backstory around; they then explore their own and others’ emotions and lived experiences through an imaginative teddy bear society in their classroom. Teachers are supported in how to leverage these interactions to help children work through issues and traumas and co-construct a stronger classroom community.

A common thread among all of the schools educating young children was highlighting and working from the assets of each individual, including what some refer to as “funds of knowledge” (González et al. 2005). Surfacing each child’s interests and learning about each child’s home culture allow for this kind of strengths-based approach. It also provides entry points into exploring difference and how difference is treated in the larger world. Principal Allison Keil of Community Roots described how, during the “family study,” kindergartners explored what types of families are represented in books, which left them wondering why they could not find books depicting families from various cultures represented in their own school community or books about a family with two moms. The class then wrote to publishers to ask why these books could not be found, an idea that stemmed from the school’s diversity working group. This committee, composed of adults, had made suggestions to teachers to develop a stance around taking action as social issues surfaced in the curriculum studies.

The diversity working group also built a scope and sequence of terms and concepts over time, aligned to child development, for awareness and consistency across the school, such as when teaching the word “race.” From this work, gender difference was also a concept that the school began intentionally integrating into the kindergarten curriculum. Interestingly, the educators of Community Roots have partnered with Arts and Letters, which is also a grades pre-K–8 school in Brooklyn, to build their own diversity working group to address their own issues in this area.

As students grow older in these schools, they are offered more concrete ways to express their commitment to diversity and humanity as the schools explicitly integrate social-emotional learning structures. Partnerships with organizations like Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility at Arts and Letters and Earth School have resulted in students collaborating on classroom constitutions, which are intended to help align shared values of the community and individual behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

3. Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, <http://www.morningsidecenter.org>.

Adults, too, need structured support to adapt in the face of difference. Numerous school leaders in the sample discussed how, as at Harvest Collegiate, issues generated by learning diversity—in the form of students with emotional and learning challenges captured (or sometimes not) in individualized education programs—have required investments in professional learning for teachers to build varied ways of reaching all students. It was heartening to hear how these schools are looking at their core values and genuinely questioning how well they are holding to them when presented with evidence of students not yet succeeding in their classrooms. However, one school leader noted that there is more work to be done with families, especially white families, that are raising concerns about the behavioral issues of other people's children through the lens of special needs when those students are also children of color. The implication is that anxieties around race are being displaced by a focus on disability. Whether or not this is true for any individual in the community, the school leader is clear that a commitment to inclusivity will guide their efforts to carefully surface and confront the concerns.

This example draws attention to the role of public schools in helping our larger democratic society tackle the unresolved issues of race- and class-based segregation. The way these schools function, grounded in a democratic purpose, ensures they are positioned to create the space and learning to address these sensitive and urgent issues in real time. Forged in such experiences, the adults and children of these schools become skilled and confident in navigating intense social conflict through democratic exchange. How can educational communities that do not intentionally take an approach to schooling for and with democracy possibly succeed in producing citizens who can tackle these kinds of societal ills?

James Baldwin School, Humanities Preparatory Academy, and City-As-School all take in students who transfer from other high school settings in which they struggled for one reason or another. As a result, there is a wide variety of capabilities, achievement levels, and skill levels across their student populations that requires an educational approach to teaching to and with diversity. And there is generally a need to reconnect these educationally alienated students with the routines of schooling and rebuild their identities as learners, which requires forging trust and persistence. This relates to another commonality across the conversations with school leaders: any and all of this hard work to deepen the commitment to diversity and humanity rests on the power of relationships built between students and adults, students and students, and adults with other adults in the community.

Principal Peter Karp of ICE described how strong relationships and group work are the cornerstones of how the school develops students as community

members. He said students must treat each other well so they know they are safe and can take risks in their collaborative learning. Students move through grades 6–12 in class rosters of around 25 that stay the same for the year but change year after year. This means that within a year, students in a cohort learn deeply about their classmates and how to work productively with each other, and across the seven years at ICE, students are exposed to all their other peers in this same way.

As at Harvest Collegiate, staff at ICE believe the act of listening is an essential part of educating for democracy. Classroom culture involves lots of discussion and making meaning collectively from texts, evidence, media, and opinions. Students need an appreciation of diversity to be able to consider alternative perspectives. They must also demonstrate their learning through complex collaborative projects, which means engaging in research and interactions with various people (including adults inside and outside the school community), navigating the needs and abilities of group members, and making choices and trade-offs along the way with each other after pursuing various avenues. Listening and reflectivity are core components of success. And for students to continue developing in this community, the condition of emotional safety for taking risks, mentioned earlier, is possible only if students understand and acknowledge each other's humanity.

These schools, as a whole, shared ways in which their students are known and, through strong relationships, validated as human beings. Arts and Letters Principal John O'Reilly described his school's commitment to humanity repeatedly in the interview as ensuring that, through various structures like morning circles, each child's name is said and heard and that there is equity of time for each child's voice in protocols like those for roundtables, in which children are supported, starting in the third grade, to present evidence of their learning to their peers and community adults.

### Critique and Reflection

*Theme:* We intentionally develop inquiry-minded citizens who evaluate and discuss complex issues using evidence to construct arguments and who reflect on their own choices, involvement, and emotions in relation to the issues.

Across the board, from pre-K through high school graduation, these schools all share the conviction that choice is an inherently democratic concept since it represents individual voice. Choice is thus prioritized and honored as much as possible in the curriculum crafted by teachers and in partnership with students. The message, though, is that choices should be informed ones and that

the choices one makes will have an impact on others. All of the elementary schools use a form of project or work time that allows students to pursue chosen projects, for example, in the form of dramatic play or block building for little ones over long periods of the day and week. However, not every child can always get her or his choice of activity. Liberty is mitigated by equity, as fairness and justice are introduced through the notions of sharing limited resources and taking turns.

In this way, using choice becomes a greater force than merely fostering student empowerment. The director of the middle school at Community Roots, Erin Carstensen, remarked that so many opportunities for their growth are missed if you constantly tell kids what to do. When teachers and staff help students reflect on their choices, they do so to deepen critical powers: If your choice made someone unhappy or hurt in some way, why do you think that happened? What should you do now? And what can be done to make sure the same outcome doesn't happen again?

Another way critical and reflective abilities are developed is exemplified by how the Neighborhood School teaches the concept of "logical consequences." This phrase, Principal Dyanthe Spielberg relayed, is used by staff across the school and helps students reflect on the impact of their choices and behavior and what should happen as a result. Sometimes students are too upset to use reason in the moment. As do other schools in this sample, the Neighborhood School invests in mindfulness exercises through yoga and "peace corners," which are quiet and comfortable marginal spaces in classrooms for students to achieve calmness (these areas are often decorated with pictures of each student's family and loved ones). As students get older, they are asked to listen to their breathing and consider the question, "What is your intention?" to resolve conflicts among themselves, using the same language of logical consequences as the adults.

What is fascinating to me is that the connection these schools make among the social, emotional, and cognitive parts of one's self reflects recent evidence from neuroscience that has established emotions as the rudder for our thinking: human beings, in fact, only think about things they care about (Immordino-Yang 2015). Conversely, if one is not emotionally present, then cognitive engagement cannot occur.

Exploring what one cares about in nuanced and complex ways is a hallmark of these democratic schools. The intention is to use curriculum and learning opportunities that stem from students' interests to build the intellectual muscles of critique and self-reflection. This is quite clear in the schools that expect students to demonstrate mastery through project-based learning, many of which have constructed promotion and graduation systems that supersede

a focus on testing. Building this kind of curriculum is not easy, though, and so schools like James Baldwin School partner with organizations such as Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, while Community Roots leverages resources from Expeditionary Learning as well as Facing History and Ourselves, and Humanities Preparatory Academy follows the project design elements provided by the Buck Institute for Education.<sup>4</sup> Relevance to students is a key criterion for strong projects, as is the level of rigor for next-level readiness (be that middle school, high school, or college and careers).

The schools with grades 9–12 in this sample (Humanities Prep, City-Asschool, ICE, James Baldwin School, and Harvest Collegiate) are members of the New York Standards Performance Consortium, a group of around 50 secondary schools that graduates students through a portfolio of performance assessments in English language arts, history, science, and math, along with the requirement to pass just one of the New York State Regents tests, the English language arts examination.<sup>5</sup> By planning backward from the shared rubrics these schools use to evaluate student performance, the project-based curriculum is guaranteed to be challenging, with a high bar for quality theses and hypotheses, research design and evidence collection, and analyses and making inferences and explaining all of this work in writing and speaking.

I was previously a teacher in one of these schools, Humanities Prep, but it has been more than 15 years since I supported students through this rigorous process. The principal of James Baldwin School, Brady Smith, reminded me that the majority of students do not enter these consortium schools with past experiences that align with project-based and democratic schooling. And especially for transfer schools like James Baldwin School, there is a tremendous amount of urgency to move students along at a fast pace (i.e., many students enroll already far behind, “overage and undercredited,” as they say). It is for this reason that the adults and veteran students must act as models of critical thinking and self-reflection. Through this kind of enculturation, new habits will form. At Harvest Collegiate, the school works to develop seven “Habits of Heart and Mind” in students. After experiencing the four-year curriculum, seniors are asked to write essays reflecting on their development in light of the habits. They have written things like “I’ve become less angry,” an in-

4. For more information, see Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, <http://www.education.org> and <http://www.nycoutwardbound.org>; Facing History and Ourselves, <http://www.facinghistory.org/>; Buck Institute for Education, [http://www.bie.org/blog/gold\\_standard\\_pbl\\_essential\\_project\\_design\\_elements](http://www.bie.org/blog/gold_standard_pbl_essential_project_design_elements).

5. New York Standards Performance Consortium, <http://www.performanceassessment.org>.

indicator of emotional growth. They have also expressed thoughts such as “I have deeper relationships now” and “I can listen to people better,” which are both signals of growth in the school’s habit of perspective and also platforms on which to build a stronger community and democracy.

### Participatory Governance and Justice

*Theme:* We intentionally develop confident and vocal citizens who are practiced in shared decision making and restorative justice processes.

Emphasizing the development of all children’s voices is a strong theme across all schools, as is expecting each community member to use that voice to build a stronger and more just community. At Castle Bridge, a diverse dual-language Spanish and English school serving grades pre-K–5, this commitment manifests at every layer—whole school, classroom, and individualized routines—and expectations evolve as children develop. Monday morning community sings bring together the entire school, all children and staff and any available families, to let voices ring and commune in music with English or Spanish lyrics. At the classroom level for the younger students, the practice of “Friday recital,” for which they are prepared by the teachers, requires each child to individually stand up in front of the entire class and sing a short song, tell a joke, or share a favorite book. As students mature, they are supported to take ownership over larger responsibilities in class and out, such as guiding more of the dialogue around their learning in family conferences with their teachers and parents. During these conferences, the student’s level of participation as a community member is specifically addressed. This explicit assessment and discussion of how the student contributes to and treats others in the school gives regular concreteness and importance to expectations around equity and fairness.

In this way and others, at all ages in the school, the fostering of self-expression and confidence as one finds one’s voice is connected to the notion of participation and justice. In-depth time for completing multiday projects is prioritized for children, enabling them to pursue their passions and interests individually and in groups. Subsequently, because resources are limited (e.g., only a handful of students can work in the blocks area at one time) and needs and ideas diverge over the course of long-term projects, tensions arise between children. Teachers use conflicts to teach turn taking, patience, de-escalation and negotiating skills, and foundational concepts and language of conflict resolution. This intentionality toward leveraging conflict is worth contrasting with authoritarian classrooms, in which teachers make most of the decisions,



control behavior more tightly, and, crucially, lose the chance to build habits of social problem solving in students.

For stickier situations at Castle Bridge, as in the other schools, there are more formalized restorative practices with adult intervention and supervision. Still, as children grow older, adults work to gradually release responsibility so that the students use the skills they have developed to deal with their own conflicts. This is not easy and can seem to visitors to represent a lack of focus on “academic learning” or “lost instructional time.” However, as Principal Julie Zuckerman said, “To others, this may not appear efficient in the short run, but keeping kids out of prison is certainly a net gain in the long run.” Although this may sound hyperbolic, Castle Bridge has a policy in place to provide at least 10% of its enrollment slots to children affected by incarceration: breaking the school-to-prison pipeline is a serious priority.

At Humanities Prep, which has a blend of students entering in ninth grade as well as transferring in from other schools, there is a similar devotion of more time and energy now to generate a socially positive return on investment later. The alternative disciplinary practice of “fairness committee” (Hantzopoulous 2013), a restorative deliberation process that empowers students to formulate with their peers proportional consequences for actions that have transgressed community values, was developed when the school started more than 20 years ago. Although teachers may guide this process, student participants own it, with the transgressor required to come to consensus with the other committee members on the consequences. One other thing worth noting is that students can bring adults in the community to fairness, opening up the possibility of cross-generational accountability to the school’s core values, which are respect for humanity, the truth, the intellect, and diversity and a commitment to peace, justice, and democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Other conflict resolution approaches are utilized at Humanities Prep, such as mediations and restorative circles, always with student ownership at the heart of the process. To paraphrase an exchange with Principal Jeannie Ferrari and Assistant Principal Rob Michelin, the moral leadership of their students is just as important as their academic performance. To that end, the school is organized in a multitude of ways to engage students in intellectual debates about ethical and social issues affecting them as teenagers and citizens, as well as members of the school community (Hantzopoulous 2016). As at Castle Bridge, pressures and supports for Humanities Prep students

6. James Baldwin School and Harvest Collegiate were founded by former members of the Humanities Prep staff and either share these exact core values or have developed similar ones.



to build oral speaking experiences and to find their voices occur informally and formally in regular class and advisory discussion routines as well as during student council activities and town meeting-type structures.

When relevant issues are raised that the students can in fact address, they are empowered to act. For example, concerns were raised about some older students intimidating younger ones in some of the bathrooms that are shared across the campus that Humanities Prep inhabits with other schools. A group of Humanities Prep students conducted a survey of students within the relevant schools about the issue and brought the data to a cross-school committee to review and discuss the outcomes. This led to a meeting of students between the schools, with the Humanities Prep students sharing their concerns and seeking solutions, resulting in a shared understanding of agreements and expectations around behavior and consequences for all students across schools with regard to the shared bathrooms.

### Action Taking and Change Making

*Theme:* We intentionally develop involved citizens who are experienced in analyzing, planning, and implementing authentic efforts to improve their community and make social change for increased equity.

The impact of the actions of the Humanities Prep students depicts the overlap between some of these patterns of practicing democracy. Their agency and participation in the life of the school led to steps that ameliorated a problematic situation, which connects well with this theme of action taking and change making. It was not surprising for the Humanities Prep staff to find their students organizing themselves in September 2016 for a peaceful protest about police brutality. The NYCDOE had been expressing concerns about student walkouts, which is what the students wanted to do; so the students planned and executed a “sit-in,” quietly lining up against the hallway walls to leave space for people to pass and then taking turns to read prepared statements. They purposefully timed this protest around lunch so that they could indeed stage a “walkout” at a juncture of the day that would not generate backlash against the school.

All the other school leaders shared similar tales of how their students learn to enact social change efforts within and outside their communities. In the case of Community Roots working to strengthen itself, fifth-graders are given the chance to apply to be a *community builder*, which means acting as a support for students (and teachers) in grades K–2 during noninstructional times like recess and lunch. The students accepted into the program are provided

training in basic mediation skills, and if they are successful in using these techniques when the little ones eventually tangle on the playground or in the cafeteria, the older students can then apply for an internship as a classroom helper with the younger ones. These interage interactions tighten the connections among the students and truly build a stronger community.

At Earth School, an intentional progression is designed into the curriculum with supports for students so that they grow into activism for increased equity locally and more globally. In their last two years at the school, the fourth- and fifth-grade students explore themes of rights and responsibilities in light of the American Constitution, including research on topics such as women's rights groups. This classroom learning often spills into the student interest clubs that the school runs called "Community Open Work." In one case, as the fourth- and fifth-grade classes delved into the online resources of the educational website BrainPOP, they noticed the absence of content connected to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues.<sup>7</sup> The organic inquiry about why this was the case, when issues of other rights groups were represented, became the main focus of a student club's activities. This activity led to student-driven activism, which persisted over the next two to three years. Students reached out to BrainPOP to engage in a dialogue and learned that the absence of LGBTQ content was not accidental. Despite writing letters and even reaching out to other school principals to raise awareness and align grassroots power in favor of pushing for change, BrainPOP continued to resist. More recently, after the white supremacy marches and murder of a protester in Charlottesville, Virginia, BrainPOP relented. Now there is a video about Harvey Milk and the quest to expand civil rights activism to include the LGBTQ community (Traci K. 2017).

There are also examples of activism at Earth School that connect to the larger educational policy affecting their community. In New York City and in the State of New York over the past decade, a rising tide of families and schools have been concerned about the growing role and influence of high-stakes standardized testing; joining and organizing public demonstrations and marches, Earth School's students, faculty, and families are leading contributors to what has become a historically large "opt-out" movement in New York State (Harris 2015). This is not only a learning opportunity for the students about the issue at hand—the rationale for and against educational testing policies—but it also creates an authentic entry point for living democratic practice and, as Principal Abbe Futterman said during our interview,

7. BrainPOP, <http://www.brainpop.com>.

for going beyond cheap talk, which any school can offer, and working to build the habits of democracy that we want to see in our students.

Similarly, the members of the aforementioned New York Standards Performance Consortium in this sample (Humanities Prep, City-As-School, ICE, James Baldwin School, and Harvest Collegiate) have had to be active politically to attain, maintain, and sustain the policy waiver from the New York State Board of Regents that enables their schools to graduate students via a performance assessment system rather than the battery of standardized tests. Because this waiver continues to come up for reauthorization every few years, the students, staff, and families are consistently in a position of engaging in the relevant democratic aspects of outreach, activism, and government.

The schools involved in the NYCDOE's diversity initiative, which I mentioned earlier, are also putting their money where their mouths are. Through the engagement and involvement of their staffs, students, and families, these school communities are truly on the leading edge of the dialogue around race and class and schooling in the city, which is desperately needed. None of the school leaders expressed that this would be an easy thing to see through; in fact, consensus was that there are many hard conversations to come with families and teachers if they are to turn the value and opportunity of increased diversity into realization and community appreciation of truly integrated school settings.

### Adult Modeling and (Re)Making

*Theme:* We intentionally create parallel democratic experiences for students and adults so that the kids can hear about and see models of the kinds of learning and processes of making and remaking the community that we want them to develop and to remind adults of how challenging it is to foster and live these democratic ways.

Every school leader interviewed made mention, in one way or another, of how important it is for the adults to experience and model the kinds of democratic ways of living they expect their students to learn and develop. I will describe just a few.

At Arts and Letters, the staff members engage in many of the key activities they structure for their students, including presenting evidence of their work to each other—an authentic audience—at adults-only roundtables (a practice that starts for students in third grade), pursuing inquiry projects in groups (i.e., in teacher teams), and conducting a restorative circle for all 38 staff members (fifth- through eighth-graders also do these activities, whereas stu-

dents in the younger grades experience morning and closing circles). As a result of this commitment to parallel adult democratic practices, shifts in small but important ways have occurred in the school's approaches and beliefs. For example, two years ago the teacher grade-level teams expressed a desire to choose their team leaders to have more ownership over their teamwork on culture and student support efforts. Principal John O'Reilly said that the voice of staff also generated a tweak in a line of the school's belief statement, which he paraphrased as, "Commit to cultivating flexible thinkers with a rich questioning of the world and ourselves." The last two words were added to better represent the commitment the school already has shown to reflective practices.

The notion of "laboratories of democracy" is salient for the leadership of James Baldwin School, which has a consensus-driven adult culture and related set of structures. Over time, the school developed a piloting system to try out new ideas. In one case, a teacher-created social and emotional learning curriculum was tested in two of the school's eight crews (i.e., advisories). The outcomes of this experiment were brought back to the larger group for analysis, and, ultimately, the staff decided not to move forward with the curriculum at scale.

Since City-As-School launched in 1972, the staff and leadership have been iterating its systems to strengthen the school's culture, structures, and student and adult learning. In terms of democratic practices, the school leaders point to two important tensions they consistently try to keep in mind. First, most staff members did not have a democratic educational experience growing up as students. Second, the school exists and functions in an intensely antidemocratic ecosystem, the NYCDOE, which operates in many ways through compliance mandates and structures. Over the past five years, the school has enacted multiple structures to raise consciousness and educator participation in more democratic ways. Aside from distributed leadership roles of team facilitators (i.e., department chairs) and various committees to move the work of the school, more staff has been invited into decision making. In addition, over the past two years, the school's leadership cabinet has decided to pursue an inquiry question around deepening democratic shared decision making. With the support of an outside facilitator, Dr. Cecelia Traugh, dean of the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education, the cabinet has transformed one of its monthly meetings into a study group for this inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

8. For more information on this process at City-As-School, see the article by Rachel Seher, Cecelia Traugh, and Alan Cheng in this issue.

Although not explicitly discussed, the belief of the school leaders is that the more staff members are drawn into these participatory experiences and their voices drawn out during them, the more they will see these experiences as a model for the way they should interact with their students.

At ICE, having everyone involved in community decisions, or at least as many people as possible, was described by the school leader as a key to making the community work and was a clear attempt to live democratic ideals. The goal, he said, is for leadership to listen and create opportunities for improvement efforts led by staff and students to foster shared ownership. This is clearly stated and understood by adults and kids alike. But then he asked and answered his own question: Should that then translate to their next school community or the larger community? I'm not sure, but that's the bet.

### **The Seventh Pattern: Implicit Understanding of the Purpose of Democratic Practices**

This last point is related to one other pattern that surfaced during these interviews, although it was more of an absence as opposed to a presence of something. Each school leader acknowledged and described throughout the interview how his or her school community and culture, classroom practices and curricula, and adult and student governance structures address issues and skills of democratic participation to one degree or another—and, importantly, each school has participatory systems, which often include families, for iterating and improving all these pieces of the school. Yet, in general, the school leaders also acknowledged that, in the day-to-day work, there is a lack of an explicit connection made between, on the one hand, the cultural, structural, and instructional efforts to build committed, tolerant, and engaged citizens (of all ages) and, on the other hand, the concept and language of practicing democracy.

In short, democracy is rarely named when it is happening—when the habits, mind-sets, and skills for being a participant in a democratic environment are being practiced. As one leader put it, they don't "close the loop" between how they go about developing stronger citizens and whether anyone knows—in relation to the idea of democratic participation—why exactly they're doing what they're doing, why they're learning what they're learning, and why they approach learning as they do in this school. In various ways, I pointed this out during the interviews, with care to make clear that I was not making a value judgment as much as an observation. Some of us wondered together in the moment, What should we make of this? How explicit should we be in our schools about this connection?

In the responses I heard, it was clear that the school leaders felt that this disjuncture was not a serious problem but more of a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, the leaders agreed that this is an important issue to consider. I was left with the impression that building out what the continuum of implicitness to explicitness looks like in practice with adults and children could help educators better understand how to strengthen the relationship between schooling and democratic practices.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to questions I posed earlier, To what degree do students know how to be a contributing community member if they are not actually practicing democracy as they grow and develop as discerning individuals in school? How will they be ready if we are not educating both for and with democratic participation?

These schools are taking these questions seriously. They are helping to strengthen our democracy through a critical study of our country's democratic practices and those of their schools and by practicing democracy in small and big ways. Through their values and beliefs, they demonstrate a deep commitment to move the work forward of educating for and with democracy. The themes and supporting evidence of practice pulled from the school leaders effectively paint the picture:

1. **Content and Learning Experiences:** We intentionally develop informed citizens who are grounded in democratic values with an understanding of how our democracy works by an exploration of issues we have faced and currently face as a nation of constitutionally empowered people.
2. **Diversity and Humanity:** We intentionally develop empathic and inclusive citizens who perceive strength in diversity by appreciating others in light of differences and who feel their individual value is validated by the ways of the larger community.
3. **Critique and Reflection:** We intentionally develop inquiry-minded citizens who evaluate and discuss complex issues using evidence to construct arguments and who reflect on their own choices, involvement, and emotions in relation to the issues.
4. **Participatory Governance and Justice:** We intentionally develop confident and vocal citizens who are practiced in shared decision making and restorative justice processes.

5. Action Taking and Change Making: We intentionally develop involved citizens who are experienced in analyzing, planning, and implementing authentic efforts to improve their community and make social change for increased equity.
6. Adult Modeling and (Re)Making: We intentionally create parallel democratic experiences for students and adults so that the kids can hear about and see models of the kinds of learning and processes of making and remaking the community that we want them to develop and to remind adults of how challenging it is to foster and live these democratic ways.

All school communities should consider these models of education, in which democratic values intentionally and coherently bind the school culture, structures, and instructional approach. We need public schools to develop and engage their community members in these ways across the country, not just in New York City. Even school communities that hold high academic and behavioral expectations for all students and that create supports and pressures for adults and students to attain and achieve at those high levels must question whether their dedication to equity of individual opportunity and testing outcomes by demographic subgroup is enough to improve and sustain a healthy American democracy. To be clear, this is not an “either/or” decision. Our students and our country need a “both/and” approach: teaching and learning for and with democracy includes both citizen readiness and college and career readiness. The shared beliefs and practices documented through this process can provide a template, touchstone, or compass for school communities.

Of course, this is no easy task. As mentioned by a few of the interviewed school leaders, the district ecosystems in which their schools exist can actually make this difficult endeavor even more challenging. Accordingly, public school officials should commit themselves to learning more about how these models work and to opening up policy conversations regarding how to foster conditions for adults and children to adopt and adapt these kinds of “for” and “with” democratic schooling practices, not the least of which should be discussions about the implications for schools of high-stakes standardized testing versus other assessment systems. Discussions are also needed about the construction of balanced and inclusive accountability policies, which could include more progressive and meaningful tools such as school quality reviews grounded in community beliefs of how children and adults learn best (Knecht et al. 2016).

Education system leaders, along with philanthropic foundations interested in improving our public schools in the service of our democracy, should call attention to the work of these kinds of schools and align more resources to documenting and sharing more widely what this important work looks like with guidance for how other school communities can make it their own for their context. Local community leaders—in business, nonprofit, religious, and higher education settings, who are all working to teach and strengthen our citizenry—should be offered ways to contribute to and shape this democratically educational enterprise. There are varied ways to use policies and partnerships to foster participatory structures—here are just a few that are highlighted from these interviews:

- Through field trips and interviews, helping young children learn how local government offices and businesses serve their community
- By external reviewers joining authentic performance assessment roundtables and oral defenses not only to hear but also to evaluate the learning and teaching occurring in local public schools
- By offering community internships for older students when they are ready to engage in and reflect on the democratic and market-based society they will enter

However, given the additional pattern surfaced from these conversations with school leaders, regarding the implicitness of the societal purpose of schooling for and with democracy in these schools, three other questions are worth pursuing: (a) How well do students and adults know that they are learning, within their school settings, to be stronger participants in our larger democratic society? (b) To what degree is making this connection explicit in school communities important? (c) What does such a connection look and sound like in different contexts and across a continuum of implicitness and explicitness?

It is my position that school communities intentionally and explicitly working to address the bridge between building habits of democratic participation in the school context and exercising those habits in society are closing an important loop, as one school leader suggested. Otherwise our schools miss an important chance to further strengthen the relationship between our public school system's role in citizenship readiness and the health of our democracy.

The leaders I interviewed described their schools as communities that have a deep moral belief in the link between education and democracy: the more



well-rounded and educated our populace is, the stronger our democracy will be. The way these schools approach the relationship is to go beyond teaching about democracy and move in the direction of teaching for democracy and with democracy, so that the experiences these students and staff have in practicing democracy translate into the habits necessary to enhance our local, state, and national governing bodies. If we want a more equitable society for all members of our democracy, this is the kind of education all our public schools must embrace.

I want to thank the school leaders for opening their doors and minds to me. This has been an incredible opportunity to listen and learn from some of New York City's most powerful educational leaders. Moving forward, it is my plan to continue this dialogue with them and to include others, but this time as a group. We haven't yet had a chance to explore these themes or questions together. As I told each of them separately, before I draw too many conclusions, it would be much more democratic to organize a discussion to hear everyone's voice and to argue and debate and build off each other's thinking—as they do in their schools. If any other insights come from this path of inquiry, it will surely be from the fruit of those exchanges, and it will have many coauthors.

## **Appendix A**

### **Schools Visited**

The 13 leaders I interviewed are at the helms of 10 New York City public schools that span pre-K to high school. Their names are listed below, along with the grade span of their schools, the borough location, the local district of the larger New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to which they are assigned (the Affinity District is a special supervisory and support structure for networks of secondary schools that are affiliated with an approved partnership organization, such as the New York Performance Standards Consortium), and whether or not they have an agreement around enrollment with the school district or charter authorizer.

1. Julie Zuckerman, principal; Castle Bridge School (grades pre-K–5); Manhattan School District 6; enrollment agreement through the NYCDOE Diversity Pilot to maintain targets of specified populations.
2. Abbe Futterman, principal; Earth School (grades pre-K–5); Manhattan School District 1; enrollment agreement through the NYCDOE Diversity Pilot to maintain targets of specified populations.

3. Dyanthe Spielberg, principal; The Neighborhood School (grades pre-K–5); Manhattan School District 1; enrollment agreement through the NYCDOE Diversity Pilot to maintain targets of specified populations.
4. John O’Reilly, principal; Arts and Letters School (grades pre-K–8); Brooklyn School District 13; enrollment agreement through the NYCDOE Diversity Pilot to maintain targets of specified populations.
5. Allison Keil, principal and codirector, and Erin Carstensen, codirector of the Middle School; Community Roots Charter School (grades pre-K–8); Brooklyn, situated in School District 13 but authorized by the NYCDOE; enrollment policy defined in charter to maintain diversity.
6. Peter Karp, principal; Institute for Collaborative Studies (grades 6–12); Manhattan, Affinity High School District.
7. Kate Burch, principal; Harvest Collegiate High School (grades 9–12); Manhattan, Affinity High School District; enrollment agreement through the NYCDOE Diversity Pilot to maintain targets of specified populations.
8. Jeannie Ferrari, principal, and Robert Michelin, assistant principal; Humanities Preparatory Academy (grades 9–12/transfer); Manhattan, Affinity High School District.
9. Alan Cheng, principal, and Rachel Seher, assistant principal; City-As-School (transfer high school); Manhattan, Affinity High School District.
10. Brady Smith, principal; James Baldwin School (transfer high school); Manhattan, Affinity High School District.

## **Appendix B**

### **Schools’ Missions, Visions, Beliefs, Philosophies, and Core Values**

All of these links were last accessed October 27, 2017.

1. Castle Bridge School (grades pre-K–5): “School Mission and Vision,” <http://castlebridgeschool.org/about/school-mission-and-design/>.
2. Earth School (grades pre-K–5): “Mission,” <https://sites.google.com/a/theearthschool.org/theearthschool/multimedia/mission-and-guiding-principles>.
3. The Neighborhood School (grades pre-K–5): “Mission Statement,” <http://tnsny.org/docs/mission>.

4. Arts and Letters School (grades pre-K–8): “We Believe,” <http://www.artsandlettersbklyn.org/what-we-believe/>.
5. Community Roots Charter School (grades pre-K–8): “Philosophy,” [https://www.communityroots.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=279704&type=d&pREC\\_ID=632214](https://www.communityroots.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=279704&type=d&pREC_ID=632214); “Core Values,” [https://www.communityroots.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=279704&type=d&pREC\\_ID=645173](https://www.communityroots.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=279704&type=d&pREC_ID=645173).
6. Institute for Collaborative Studies (grades 6–12): “Vision Statement,” <http://www.iceschoolnyc.org/ice-vision/>.
7. Harvest Collegiate High School (grades 9–12): “Our School” (mission and vision), <http://harvestcollegiate.org/our-school/>.
8. Humanities Preparatory Academy (grades 9–12/transfer): “What We Do” (mission), <https://humanitiesprep.org/what-we-do/>; “What Are Core Values?” <https://humanitiesprep.org/corevalues/>.
9. City-As-School (transfer high school): “Our Philosophy,” <http://www.cityas.org/about/our-philosophy/>.
10. James Baldwin School (transfer high school): “Our Mission Statement,” <http://www.thejamesbaldwinschool.org/mission-statement.html>; “What Are Core Values?” <http://www.thejamesbaldwinschool.org/core-values1.html>.

## Appendix C

### School Leader Interview Questions

I asked all interviewees the following questions, in one form or another.

1. What are your school’s beliefs about how children learn to be strong citizens? (a) In school and in their community? Adults—teachers, other staff, and families? (b) For both adults and students?
2. How do you talk about the connection between schooling and democracy? The language and concepts? How does that change over the age range of children as they develop, if at all?
3. What does learning democracy look like in practice across your classrooms? Outside the classrooms in the school community? How does that align with child development if applicable?
4. What impact does a diverse school community have on practicing democracy here (ethnicity and race, socioeconomic status, inclusion settings for students with disabilities, etc.)?

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