



# PUBLIC EDUCATION IN A STRONG DEMOCRACY

OUR NETWORK'S VISION  
FALL 2024



PARTNERSHIP  
FOR THE  
**FUTURE** of  
**LEARNING**

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# Introduction

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Schools and school systems must foster relationships and build community to promote student learning and build a vibrant, multi-racial democracy.

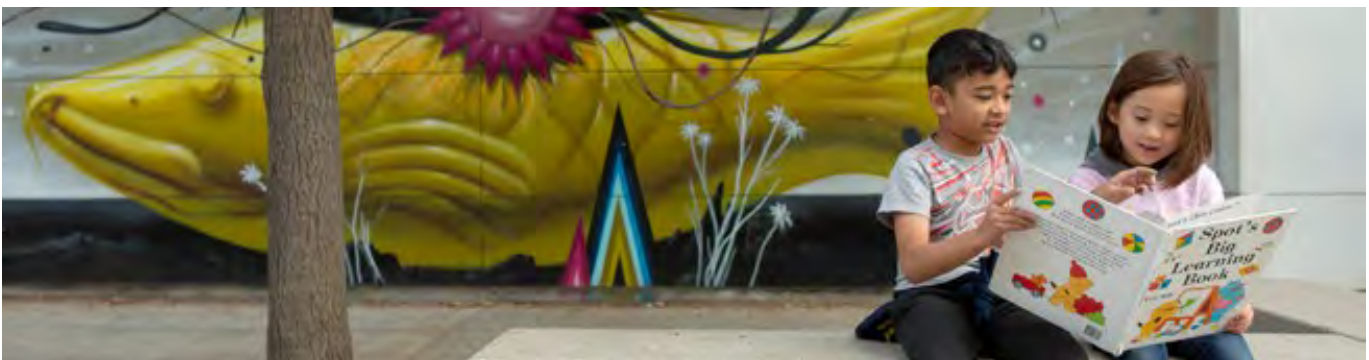
Nearly a decade ago, the Partnership for the Future of Learning set forth a vision to guide the education field forward. This founding vision, [Updating American Public Education](#), offered a view of what young people, families, and educators want in U.S. public schools, coupled with knowledge from the science of learning and development about how to create schools where young people grow and thrive.

Since then, the Partnership has grown into a robust network of organizers, advocates, policy analysts, communicators, researchers, students, caregivers and parents, educators,

funders, and system and union leaders. Partners have advanced high-quality public education through a range of strategies, from advancing community schools and equitable financing to project-based learning and supporting student, educator, and caregiver leadership in schools.

As we look to the future, our network builds on the many ways we are working to create racially-just and academically enriching, safe and restorative public schools. We reaffirm our founding vision of student-centered learning, and expand it with a systemic lens and a sharper focus on the voices of communities navigating historical and ongoing under-investment. This includes those marginalized because of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, income, immigration status, multilingual background, religious beliefs, national ancestry, caste, and geography.

At the heart of our vision is the idea of *belonging*. From classroom practices that activate student agency to schools that cultivate a sense of connection, schools and school systems must foster relationships and build community to promote student learning and build a vibrant, multi-racial democracy. Our vision lays the groundwork for school systems that truly center the people served in order to fulfill the democratic purpose of public education.



# Our Vision of Public Education

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The central role of public education is to prepare children and youth for fulfilling lives — ready for further learning opportunities and a wide range of social and economic endeavors in a rapidly changing world. It is to support students’ development as people and to equip them to engage with diverse viewpoints, build caring relationships, make informed decisions, and solve problems as thoughtful contributors to a society in which we all thrive.

**For an education system to be public, it must serve *all* children no matter their station in life, learning needs, background or beliefs.** To do so, a public education system must be connected, responsive, and accountable to students and their families and communities. What follows is our vision for what that requires at the school, district, state, tribal, and federal levels.

## Meaningful Learning

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Students learn best when they feel safe, cared for, engaged in meaningful work, and challenged to grow. Successful schools create learning experiences that are personally significant, culturally relevant, and build on student interests and strengths. They instill a lifelong joy of learning. Rather than emphasizing testing and competition, such schools foster creative thinking, help develop academic knowledge and skills, cultivate social and emotional competencies, and provide a variety of ways for students to learn and demonstrate what they know. Funding is readily available and wisely used. Educators are well prepared and supported as highly-skilled facilitators of learning. Culturally responsive counselors and trauma-informed strategies build belonging, physical and psychological safety, and shared investment in the well-being of the school community. School facilities are healthy environments and conducive to learning. School leaders leverage technology and vital resources to enhance learning, protect privacy, and ensure every student has what they need.

## Strengthening Democracy

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At its best, public education exemplifies democratic ideals and strengthens democracy. It serves the needs of students and families and helps build a society that is socially connected, culturally diverse, and economically prosperous. Students graduate equipped with a wide array of skills and knowledge and a sustained commitment to their communities’ well-being. They are prepared for emerging opportunities and challenges with a strong sense of agency and a shared stake in the future. And they have learned what it means to participate not only in their local communities but also in a larger democratic society through the daily practice of reaching across differences in backgrounds and beliefs to build understanding and relationships with their peers. This kind of educational preparation is not partisan — it is essential to a strong democracy.



# Serving All Children

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What will it take to move from the *individual successful* high-quality schools we find around the country to *successful systems* of high-quality public schools that serve all children well and equitably, prepare them for the future, and strengthen the society in which we live? Fulfilling the purpose of public education takes the combined efforts of agencies and partners at the local, tribal, state, and national levels. Each entity plays a crucial role in offering schools the flexibility, incentives, and resources needed to help students succeed.

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**Six essential principles** serve as guideposts for every school system to realize our vision, informing the funding and organization of teaching, content, technology and other supports to deliver high-quality and inclusive schooling for all children. These must be understood in the context of addressing the histories and enduring impacts of violence and discrimination against Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other students of color, students with disabilities and those identifying as LGBTQ+.

Each principle highlights a distinct aspect of a supportive and effective educational environment. Together, they offer a roadmap for policy and practice that allows each community to create a system of high-quality public schools that serves students, their families, and their communities, and contributes to a strong democracy. When implemented across communities, these principles enable public school systems to truly serve all children.



# Six Essential Principles

## JUSTICE

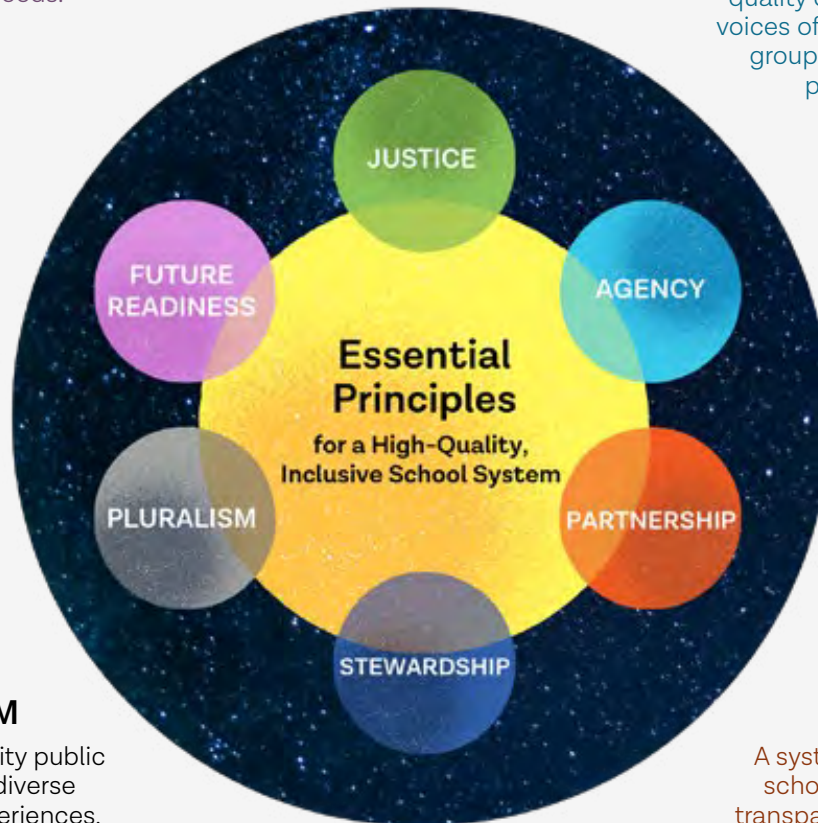
A system of high-quality public schools creates fair and welcoming environments. It goes beyond acknowledging historical and current injustices to addressing them with a liberatory practice based in healing and restoration. It bases decisions about staffing, curriculum, teaching, and assessment on valuing and supporting every student to succeed.

## FUTURE-READINESS

A system of high-quality public schools cultivates innovation and adaptability. It prepares students to solve problems and navigate changing contexts, and supports educators to innovate to meet evolving societal needs.

## AGENCY

A system of high-quality public schools builds the power of students, families, educators, and communities to shape their futures. It recognizes how leadership shows up everywhere and not only in formal roles. It prioritizes the perspectives of those who most depend on public schools for high-quality education and amplifies the voices of systemically under-invested groups to influence educational priorities and practice.



## PLURALISM

A system of high-quality public schools embraces diverse perspectives and experiences, creates settings for sharing and learning across groups, and enables belonging to develop. It brings people together in ways that honor their full humanity, foster dialogue and deep listening, build relational trust, and support communities to articulate and work toward a shared vision.

## STEWARDSHIP

A system of high-quality public schools promotes collective investment in—and action for—school and student success. It fosters authentic multi-generational relationships, aligns priorities with community values and needs, and builds reciprocity so that everyone sees their role and responsibility in ensuring equity and continual improvement. In turn, it is supported and resourced by families, community members, state agencies, and government leaders.

## PARTNERSHIP

A system of high-quality public schools fosters collaboration, transparency, and responsiveness. It values student input and invites co-creation in the classroom and in the school, and involves students, families, caregivers, educators, and community organizations in shared decision-making. It encourages communication and the flow of clear, useful information, and addresses the concerns of students, families, and educators.

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A system of high-quality public schools, guided by these six essential principles, operates with inclusive and participatory democracy in its daily functions. It upholds the perspectives of those whose voices are often marginalized in the educational process and helps schools to do the same. It respects teachers, administrators, and staff as highly skilled professionals with voice in educational decisions. It draws student perspectives into the design of learning experiences and integrates parents, caregivers, and the broader community into the process of setting systemwide and school-level priorities and learning practices. And, it joins community efforts to dismantle the structural barriers to family wellbeing and community health.

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# Call to Action: Protecting and Strengthening Public Schools

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Our network's vision for the future is one where everyone recognizes that public education benefits everyone, and this belief guides every decision—from policy and funding to teaching and leadership. When our public schools and institutions thrive, so does our collective well-being.

Yet today, the very idea of a public system of education has come into question, and more broadly, so has the role of public institutions. This is happening amidst compounding stressors, from a global pandemic to educator shortages, book bans, school vouchers, and expiring federal relief funds, as well as the transformative impact of artificial intelligence. These pressures add to the challenges public education has long faced to serve all communities well. They undercut the principles of a high-quality inclusive school system and prevent schools from preparing students for the future.

The United States is at an inflection point for public education. In such a moment, we who care about public schools must not shy away from these challenges. Instead, let us join forces to protect and strengthen our public school systems as we reimagine them for the future. This network vision needs all of us. The Partnership plays a unique role in the education ecosystem, as one of the few spaces where people with a wide range of goals and perspectives sit side-by-side. We bridge divides, ignite collaboration, catalyze collective action, and fiercely resist attempts to undermine our power to achieve our vision.

Join our network in creating an energized, *all-in* movement for public schools that puts children, families, and educators first. Through the principles of *justice, agency, partnership, stewardship, pluralism, and future readiness*, we are building an inclusive high-quality public education system and a more just multi-racial democracy for us all.

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