

A FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING PUBLIC EDUCATION



POWERING A
BREAKTHROUGH FOR
PUBLIC EDUCATION

For an education system to be described as 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. (See the Partnership's vision, [Public Education in a Strong Democracy](#), for what that requires.) The Partnership network has developed this tool for those who believe in the importance of public education and are committed to protecting, strengthening and reimagining public schools and systems for the future.

This framework was developed through a conversation series with partners holding a wide array of views. It responds to longstanding fissures in the education reform community about the publicness of charter schools. The intense polarization around public charter schools has created a wedge between people who support and oppose them. Competing views and experiences of charters, their effectiveness in supporting student success and their impact on school systems have divided communities, advocates, practitioners, and policymakers and led many coalitions, including the Partnership, to side-step the issue. But the growing existential pressure on public education today demands a different approach.

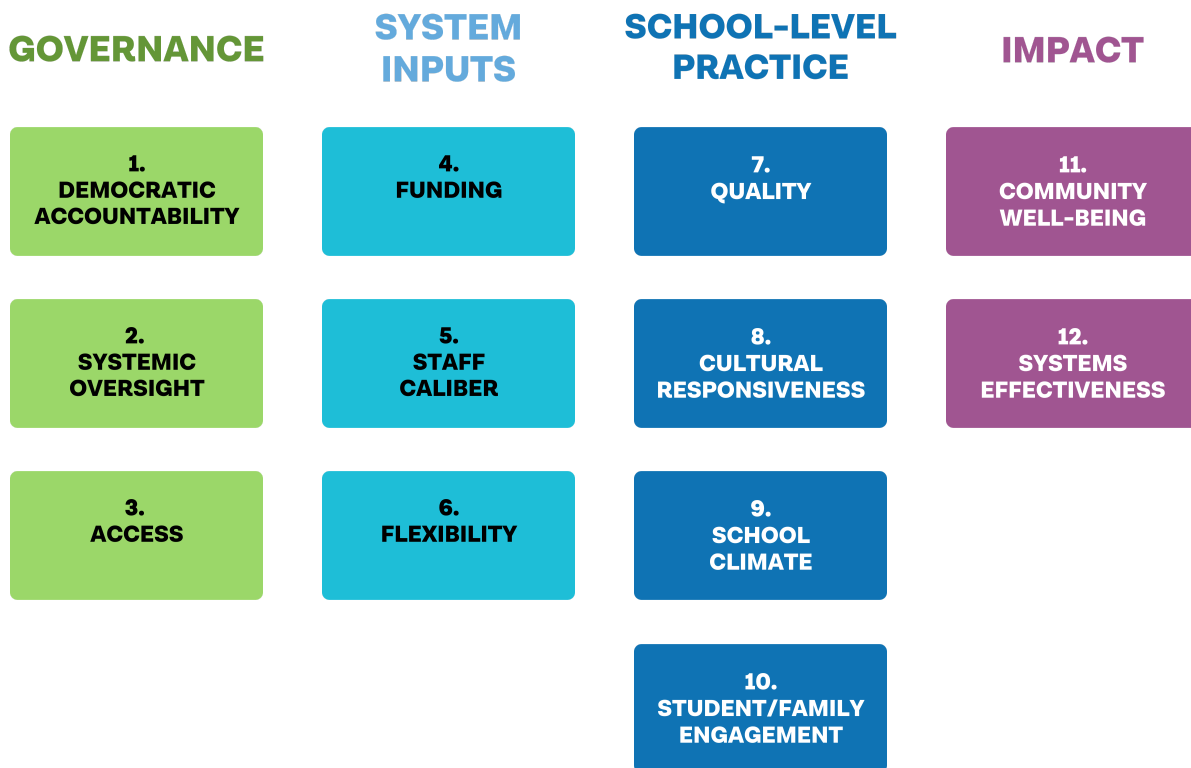
Imagine if we were able to move the wedge that divides us, to build coalitions across our shared values so that we can more powerfully push back against those who don't have our communities' best interests at heart?

The purpose of this framework is to advance efforts to strengthen public education. It is a tool for alliance-building among people and organizations that may hold different views on charter schools but share a deep commitment to realizing the ideals of public education. The framework offers 12 guiding values to ensure that a public school system is public. For each value, there is a non-exhaustive set of applications to inspire thinking about how these values can be applied in your local context and tension points to grapple with in doing so.

A Framework for Strengthening Public Education

This framework is aspirational for all public schools, including charter and typical public schools. It is unsettling because in truth, schools that are fully and truly public—in the sense that they embrace all elements of “publicness”—are extremely rare, even within neighborhood public schools. For example, practices such as catchment areas, within-school ability grouping, forced competition for funding, and exclusionary discipline act to exclude some students from the breadth of opportunities to learn that are available to other students. But the below key features of publicness in governance, inputs, practices and impact nonetheless capture a set of ambitious standards against which we can measure publicness and push *all* schools to improve.

Guiding Values of A Public School System



Guiding Values

1. DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Public schools and the entities that govern them should be inclusive of and transparent, responsive and ultimately answerable to the communities they serve.

2. SYSTEMIC OVERSIGHT

Public schools should be held to consistent standards for staffing, climate and performance, and ensure all students are taught in environments free from discrimination in adherence with federal and state civil rights laws, with particular focus on communities that are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities and those whose native language is not English. Districts and communities should be the primary decision makers in opening or closing public schools.

3. ACCESS

Public schools should provide equal access to a quality education for children that is safe, offers challenging academics, and provides supportive measures for the mental and physical wellness of all students and staff. Access to education requires attention to the civil and educational rights of everyone in the school community, avoiding marginalization based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, income levels, immigration status, multilingual learner status, religious beliefs, national ancestry, caste, and geography.

4. FUNDING

Public schools should be equitably and adequately funded to support the student populations they serve. Funding should be transparent and predictable, aligned with student needs, and ameliorate gaps and disparities among schools. This requires addressing the longstanding pain point of competition over funding between charters and typical public schools and finding additional resources rather than forcing schools to compete over scarce, limited funds.

5. STAFF CALIBER

Public schools should pursue cultural, racial, economic, LGBTQ+ and gender diversity in their faculty, staff and leadership, and have the resources to recruit, prepare, and support talented staff regardless of geographic location. Faculty, staff and leadership should be professionally-prepared, supported, respected and respectful, and representative of the communities they serve.

6. FLEXIBILITY

Public schools should be able and willing to adapt and adjust to meet the needs of their community. Incentives for flexibility, agility, and innovation should support meeting the needs of all students, the surrounding community, and the broader system in which schools are situated.

7. QUALITY

Public schools should provide rigorous, academically enriching, racially just and culturally responsive, safe and restorative learning environments for all students. The learning experience should instill in students a lifelong love of learning and prepare them for the wide range of opportunities open to them throughout their adult life.

A Framework for Strengthening Public Education

8. CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Public schools should incorporate the knowledge, relationships, and histories of every community into the learning environment for students. They should establish mechanisms for seeking out and learning about their surrounding communities and the families and students served so that they are proactive in meeting evolving needs over time.

9. SCHOOL CLIMATE

Public schools should pursue cultural, racial, economic, LGBTQ+ and gender diversity in their student bodies and actively cultivate a sense of connection and belonging that draws students into the school community, honoring diverse learning needs and styles. Policies and practices should celebrate diversity as a strength, build understanding and shared experience within the school community, and avoid within-school stratification between groups.

10. STUDENT/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Public schools should provide opportunities for students and families to inform and collaborate on educational priorities and practice, and proactively address the barriers to participation for different families. Learning environments should center student voices and support students in building positive relationships with educators to meet their academic and socioemotional needs. Caregivers should be invited and supported to build trust and open communication with faculty, staff, and leadership in pursuit of student learning and success.

11. COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Public schools should strengthen the communities in which they exist, serving as consistent, trusted places where relationships are built and maintained over time, and work to reduce school closures, community polarization, erosion of public trust, job loss and other negative impacts on local communities.

12. SYSTEMS EFFECTIVENESS

Public schools should strengthen the local, state and tribal education systems in which they exist by operating in cooperation, not in competition, with other schools. Capacity-building processes and norms should be in place to support schools to share ideas, policies, and practices and strengthen school quality, including among schools that provide learning environments customized for particular student interests or needs (e.g., on STEM or supporting students with disabilities). All financial transactions and contracts should be transparent to the public. Laws governing the bidding process should be consistent across school systems within states.

Applications

Applications are offered as examples of the values in practice, recognizing there will be variation in what it looks like to operationalize these values in different contexts.

GOVERNANCE

1. Democratic Accountability

Values	Public schools and the entities that govern them should be inclusive of and transparent, responsive and ultimately answerable to the communities they serve.
Applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All public schools (including charter schools) are subject to the same mechanisms of local oversight (e.g., locally elected school boards), public reporting and FOIA/open records requirements. • Communities, especially those that are often disenfranchised, have a voice in how many schools are in their communities and if new schools are opened in their communities.

2. Systemic Oversight

Values	Public schools should be held to consistent standards for staffing, climate and performance, and ensure all students are taught in environments free from discrimination in adherence with federal and state civil rights laws, with particular focus on communities that are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities and those whose native language is not English. Districts and communities should be the primary decision makers in opening or closing public schools.
Applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All schools are held to consistent expectations for performance, determined with community input, and are resourced and supported to meet these expectations. • The authorization process for charter schools is transparent (e.g., spending, data, curriculum, governance, etc.), democratically informed by local communities (e.g., via meaningful public hearings and comprehensive impact assessments), and independent (i.e., there is no kick-back funding to the authorizing entity).

3. Access

Values	Public schools should provide equal access to a quality education for children that is safe, offers challenging academics, and provides supportive measures for the mental and physical wellness of all students and staff. Access to education requires attention to the civil and educational rights of everyone in the school community, avoiding marginalization based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, income levels, immigration status, multilingual learner status, religious beliefs, national ancestry, caste, and geography.
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A Framework for Strengthening Public Education

Applications

- Civil rights laws and open access to all schools are actively and consistently enforced.
- Admission procedures and enrollment should reflect the community served.
- Every seat should be filled before any student is turned away, regardless of when the vacancy occurs during the school year.
- Schools and districts actively work to solve transportation issues that serve as barriers for students and families and promote efficiencies that enable school districts to better serve student needs.
- Loopholes that enable schools to avoid serving all children are identified, closed, and monitored to prevent exclusion.

SYSTEM INPUTS

1. Funding

Values

Public schools should be equitably and adequately funded to support the student populations they serve. Funding should be transparent and predictable, aligned with student needs, and ameliorate gaps and disparities among schools. This requires addressing the longstanding pain point of competition over funding between charters and typical public schools and finding additional resources rather than forcing schools to compete over scarce, limited funds.

Applications

- Available K-12 education funding in a state and local context is calculated and determined for all public schools to fund appropriate operations (e.g., on the diverse needs of the student body).
- Funding prioritizes maintaining schools based on community needs rather than solely on per pupil allotments that can lead to competition for resources.
- Funding allocations are adjusted to address differential school access to publicly funded grants with the goal of serving all students well.
- No public school should be wholly or substantially operated by a for-profit.

2. Staff Caliber

Values

Public schools should pursue cultural, racial, economic, LGBTQ+ and gender diversity in their faculty, staff and leadership, and have the resources to recruit, prepare, and support talented staff regardless of geographic location. Faculty, staff and leadership should be professionally-prepared, supported, respected and respectful, and representative of the communities they serve.

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Applications

- Staff are certified, prepared and able to meet the needs of students; they are recruited from the community in a way that truly represents the community and culture; and they regularly invite input and feedback from family and community members to inform their work.
- Staff are paid appropriately (prevailing wage, living wage).
- Staff in charter schools are allowed to unionize as employees of institutions that receive tax-payer dollars.

3. Flexibility

Values

Public schools should be able and willing to adapt and adjust to meet the needs of their community. Incentives for flexibility, agility, and innovation should support meeting the needs of all students, the surrounding community, and the broader system in which schools are situated.

Applications

- Support and guardrails are in place that give schools the flexibility to meet the needs of individual students.
- Innovation and best practices consistently and easily flow among and between charter and typical public schools.

SCHOOL-LEVEL PRACTICE

1. Quality

Values

Public schools should provide rigorous, academically enriching, racially just and culturally responsive, safe and restorative learning environments for all students. The learning experience should instill in students a lifelong love of learning and prepare them for the wide range of opportunities open to them throughout their adult life.

Applications

- Schools embrace a 'whole child' approach as they support students' educational experiences; social, emotional, and mental health supports are integrated into teaching and learning practices.
- Schools create conditions for student-focused meaningful, culturally relevant learning, fostering higher order critical thinking and problem-solving skills, a love of learning, academic competence, and overall readiness for adulthood.
- Schools collaborate with community partners to provide enrichment, mentoring and tutoring, supplemental academic instruction, and projects that further foster a love of learning and a sense of belonging in and outside of school.

2. Cultural Responsiveness

Values

Public schools should incorporate the knowledge, relationships, and histories of every community into the learning environment for students. They should establish mechanisms for seeking out and learning about their surrounding communities and the families and students served so that they are proactive in meeting evolving needs over time.

Applications

- Community engagement is authentic and intentional, and norms and practices are in place that help schools to be aware of and responsive to the needs of the community.
- The culture of students and families are centered in the curriculum, and schools are resourced and supported to do this (e.g., celebrating Blackness and having Black teachers).

3. School Climate

Values

Public schools should pursue cultural, racial, economic, LGBTQ+ and gender diversity in their student bodies and actively cultivate a sense of connection and belonging that draws students into the school community, honoring diverse learning needs and styles. Policies and practices should celebrate diversity as a strength, build understanding and shared experience within the school community, and avoid within-school stratification between groups.

Applications

- Schools reflect the larger community and develop cultures of shared ownership and belonging.
- Structural incentives are in place that encourage all schools to serve all students, and prevent and protect against discriminatory school disciplinary practices and pushout, and the use of high stakes testing in gap-widening ways.
- Civil rights laws are universally and vigorously enforced.
- There are robust special education services in all public schools.
- Restorative practices, culturally responsive counselors and trauma-informed mental health supports are widely implemented.

4. Student/Family Engagement

Values

Public schools should provide opportunities for students and families to inform and collaborate on educational priorities and practice, and proactively address the barriers to participation for different families. Learning environments should center student voices and support students in building positive relationships with educators to meet their academic and socioemotional needs. Caregivers should be invited and supported to build trust and open communication with faculty, staff, and leadership in pursuit of student learning and success.

A Framework for Strengthening Public Education

Application

- Youth voice, climate, parent and caregiver surveys are used regularly to inform planning and improvement.
- Parents and caregivers are engaged as active and critical partners in advancing student success.

IMPACT

1. Community Wellbeing

Values

Public schools should strengthen the communities in which they exist, serving as consistent, trusted places where relationships are built and maintained over time and work to reduce school closures, community polarization, erosion of public trust, job loss and other negative impacts on local communities.

Application

- Schools and districts have robust community engagement plans that go beyond meetings and center racial equity and diversity in their efforts to provide inclusive, welcoming environments that invite and support the full range of families in their community.
- There is a deep and shared sense of ownership of schools among young people, parents and caregivers, community members and teachers, especially among those without historical power or a seat at the table.

2. Systems Effectiveness

Values

Public schools should strengthen the local, state and tribal education systems in which they exist by operating in cooperation, not in competition, with other schools. Capacity-building processes and norms should be in place to support schools to share ideas, policies, and practices and strengthen school quality, including among schools that provide learning environments customized for particular student interests or needs (e.g., on STEM or supporting students with disabilities). All financial transactions and contracts should be transparent to the public. Laws governing the bidding process should be consistent across school systems within states.

Application

- There is an investment in solutions and school improvement within the public education system, rather than on creating escape hatch/other systems of education for children.
- Straightforward processes are in place to share strategies and practice among charter and district schools to encourage adoption and maintenance where appropriate. There is a consistent flow of best practices among and between charter and typical public schools.
- Incentives that promote competition for funds, accolades, and rankings are eliminated.

Questions and Tensions for Discussion

1. What are the minimum standards that schools must meet to be called public (e.g., virtual charters) across states?
2. How do we ensure that each school is democratically accountable to the students, families and communities they serve?
3. What are the best practices for charter authorization?
4. How can we promote equitable engagement across members of the school community, including of Black and Brown students and families who have been historically disenfranchised from democratic processes, rather than recreating patterns of unequal access?
5. How do we respond to democratic action that impinges on the rights and opportunities of others (e.g., imposing religious education in schools)?
6. How do we help people who want to teach or become an administrator to overcome the barriers to entry into the profession and still be rigorously prepared and able to support the students they serve?
7. In monocultural/ethnic communities, is there a tension between reflecting the larger community and prioritizing diversity and racial equity?
8. Is competition for funding inevitable in a public school system that offers choices in educational learning environments (e.g., Gifted-and-Talented programs and programs supporting students with disabilities, in addition to charter and magnet schools)? What incentives encourage cooperation instead of competition among schools?
9. How do we balance the differing needs of communities to keep or close schools in the face of declining enrollment and public education resources?