Striving for Relationship-Centered Schools

Insights From a Community-Based Transformation Campaign

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Executive Summary

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding that consistent developmental relationships support student learning and well-being. Research shows that youth who have positive connections with adults at their schools demonstrate higher levels of motivation, self-esteem, and prosocial behavior than their peers in less relationship-centered contexts. Relationship-centered schools also enable a range of positive student academic outcomes, including increased attendance, graduation rates, achievement on English language arts and math assessments, and college-going rates.

Relationship-centered schools challenge ingrained structures that have come to characterize U.S. secondary schools and often inhibit their growth and sustainability through institutional, normative, and policy barriers. While research indicates that relationship-centered environments positively support student learning and success, it has been difficult to build and sustain schools with relationships at their foundation, particularly at the secondary level.

This report focuses on one relationship-centered high school transformation effort—the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign, a youth-led effort supported by the community-based organization Californians for Justice (CFJ). Through interviews with CFJ organizers, district and school leaders, practitioners, and current and former youth organizers, this report highlights examples of uptake in two settings—the Long Beach Unified School District and Fresno's McLane High School. The cases demonstrate how local schools and districts have furthered relationship-centered schooling, the conditions and factors that have enabled or hindered RCS work, and the emerging impacts of RCS efforts on practice and policy.

Californians for Justice and the Relationship Centered Schools Campaign

CFJ is a statewide organization with a mission to unlock the power of student voice and agency. It aims to give young people the skills to become community leaders who organize their peers to take action while deepening their understanding on issues of systemic racism, education inequity, and other forms of discrimination.

The RCS campaign, launched in 2015, is one of CFJ's initiatives. The campaign centers three principles to guide action and school improvement: (1) create space for relationship-building, (2) value student voice, and (3) invest in staff. In its approach to change, the RCS campaign embodies the dimensions of the community organizing cycle, which seeks to build collaborative power in relationship-centered and incremental ways and to elevate the voices of often marginalized groups in change efforts.

Long Beach Unified School District

The Long Beach Unified School District (Long Beach Unified) serves more than 67,500 students across its 85 schools, a greater proportion of whom are students of color and students from low-income backgrounds than the California state average. While Long Beach Unified has long been recognized for achievement gains among its diverse student population, district and school leaders saw opportunities for continuous improvement.

The district's longtime engagement with CFJ has supported district and school leaders as they work to meet their strategic priorities. Through the RCS campaign, Long Beach Unified focused on three core areas of practice to cultivate stronger relationships and to better understand and foreground youth experiences:

1. **Adopting empathy-building practices.** These practices include empathy interviews (conversations that help participants develop empathy through open-ended questions and active listening) and shadowing (when a district leader follows a student for a school day to get a better sense of their experiences).

2. **Creating learning opportunities that convene adults and youth.** Long Beach Unified developed and implemented learning opportunities such as student-led, equity-oriented Learning Days; implicit bias training; and an Equity Institute that comprised 5 days of professional learning for staff.

3. **Increasing student voice in decision-making and strategic-planning forums.** Design teams (groups of staff, family members, and students who identify equity challenges and potential solutions) and student advisory committees (students from various pathways who advise their principal on school climate topics) enabled a wide range of students to share their perspectives and take an active role in school improvements.

Fresno's McLane High School

McLane High School (McLane), which serves more than 2,000 students, is one of Fresno Unified School District's 106 schools. Almost 74% of McLane's students are Latinx, just under a quarter are English learners, and about 96% are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged. McLane had a preexisting commitment to relationship-centered schooling through its schoolwide use of restorative practices, which paved the way for its work with the RCS campaign. In collaboration with RCS, McLane embarked on the following three transformation efforts:

1. **Transforming homerooms into relationship-centered forums.** Biweekly homeroom periods aimed to form small communities for McLane's large student population and enable consistent, multiyear connections. Through its RCS partnership, McLane fine-tuned its homeroom practices by training select students to lead homeroom community-building efforts and providing related professional development to educators.

2. **Putting student voice at the center.** This effort elevated student voice in professional learning spaces and cultivated more diverse student representation in decision-making forums—for example, by asking a variety of school clubs to recommend students to serve on the Principal Advisory Council.

3. **Embedding relationship-centered changes in school culture.** Through their work with RCS, McLane educators became well versed in relying on relationships as the initial and primary pathways for identifying and addressing emerging challenges. Staff learned to apply relationship-centered principles to their interactions with fellow educators as well as with students.

Findings

The examples of Long Beach Unified and McLane High School offer insights into key activities, processes, and structures that support relationship-centered schooling in their settings:

- **Establish structures for relationship-building.** Structures for relationship-building among youth and school adults created consistent opportunities for students to be known, seen, and connected to a caring adult. In Long Beach Unified, these structures included the creation of shared learning opportunities and attention to empathy-building practices, while efforts to improve the relationship-centered character of the school's homeroom structure and increased opportunities for student voice characterized RCS work at McLane.
- **Build trusting relationships among those driving change.** RCS implementation was built and sustained through opportunities for consistent engagement and partnership among the youth, educators, district and school leaders, and CFJ organizers who were leading RCS efforts. Interviewees describe how these opportunities cultivated meaningful dialogue, shared investment, and a deeper understanding of the work.
- **Create opportunities for professional development.** Shared learning experiences (e.g., Learning Days, dedicated professional learning communities, student participation in professional development sessions) allowed leaders, educators, and youth to learn with and from each other and to build common knowledge about relationship-centered change. As such, they were identified as important in furthering relationship-centered schooling.
- **Foster empathy-building and deep listening practices.** By developing their capacity to engage in activities that develop empathy, including empathy interviews and other opportunities that surface insights into students' schooling experiences, youth and adults built connections that spanned age, identity, and traditional lines of authority—which served as an important foundation into the equity-oriented work of transforming schools to be relationship-centered.
- **Elevate and value youth voice.** Youth shared their experiences and lent their insights and perspectives to change efforts through RCS structures and forums instituted at McLane and in Long Beach Unified, including those that enabled increased and diverse youth representation in decision-making forums and professional learning settings. Their perspectives helped to surface ongoing challenges and, at times, to identify potential remedies that could support equitable, relationship-centered practices.
- **Find coherence between relationship-centered schooling and preexisting priorities and initiatives.** When RCS work aligned with or reinforced efforts already underway, like initiatives promoting the use of restorative practices, it was more readily embraced because it was more easily understood as enhancing other initiatives. Moreover, congruence between RCS and other initiatives allowed practitioners and youth leaders to leverage emerging structures, routines, and commitments to grow RCS practice among site and district actors.

- **Cultivate the support of administrator and educator champions.** In its early phases, the RCS campaign often engaged a subset of educators and administrators who helped RCS gain visibility and traction. Stability among leaders and educators was reported to help deepen and sustain the work, as stability provided continuity to change efforts and helped to onboard educators and administrators when there was turnover.
- **Allocate fiscal resources to support relationship-centered approaches.** Investments related to relationship-building structures and capacity-building (e.g., stipends for participation or leadership in professional development opportunities related to RCS) allowed youth and practitioners to collectively learn about supporting student learning and well-being, communicated the district's commitment to the transformation effort, and acknowledged the time that practitioners and youth leaders expended in this critical work.

Introduction

> If our young people experience all this violence outside of school and then adults are reaffirming it in the system, they're going to go through life believing that they're not meant to go to college or to be who they want to be or to fulfill their potential. I think that's why relationship-centered schools are so critical. They can interrupt that internalization and help with the healing that's necessary for a lot of young people of color.
>
> — Geordee Mae Corpuz, Californians for Justice

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus acknowledging the power and importance of relationships in supporting student learning and well-being. Communities and organizers—many of whom have long advocated to systematically transform schools into inclusive and empowering settings[1]—remain central in driving the calls for relationship-centered change. They are joined by a growing number of practitioners and educational decision-makers who seek to cultivate whole child–aligned schools, or those that enable learning and development by cultivating relationships, a positive school climate, and additional approaches that attend to students' social, emotional, and academic needs and assets.[2] The turbulence and traumas induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing instances of racial and identity-based violence have only fueled the sense of urgency for relationship-centered schools that work to ensure youth are supported, nurtured, and validated in all aspects of their identities and ways of being.

A growing research base bolsters and corroborates the increasing calls for relationship-centered schools. Studies show that having supportive relationships can enable learning and development in important ways. For instance, youth who have positive connections with educators, mentors, and/or other adults at school demonstrate higher levels of motivation and productive skills and dispositions (e.g., self-esteem, prosocial behavior) than their peers in less relationship-centered contexts.[3] Additionally, capacities around decision-making and critical thinking develop more fully when youth feel emotionally and physically safe and are connected and supported in learning.[4]

With their role in enhancing engagement and cognitive, social, and emotional development, relationships and supportive school contexts have been shown to foster a range of positive outcomes, including increased attendance, graduation rates, achievement on standardized assessments of English language arts and math, and college-going rates.[5] Adding to this body of evidence, a recent longitudinal study by researchers at the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research found that supportive and relationship-centered environments have a positive impact on adolescent youth in the short term (through their freshman year) and the long term (11th grade through college). This includes higher test scores, observed prosocial behaviors, and self-reports of social and emotional development among 9th-graders in supportive learning settings. Increased graduation rates and postsecondary matriculation and attendance were also observed in students' longer-term trajectories.[6]

While research indicates that relationship-centered learning settings positively support student learning and success, it has been difficult to build and sustain schools with relationships at their foundation, particularly at the secondary level. Relationship-centered schools challenge ingrained structures and approaches that have come to characterize U.S. schools, which often result in their growth and sustainability being compromised or inhibited by institutional, normative, and policy barriers.[7] This

research report shares findings from a case study of those engaged in efforts to advance relationship-centered schooling in select California high schools, surfacing lessons for those seeking to enhance the quality and equitable character of secondary schools by growing positive connections among youth and adults.

Why Relationships Matter for Learning and Well-Being

The positive impacts of relationships on youth are explored through the science of learning and development (SoLD)—a growing body of literature that draws together knowledge from developmental and learning sciences, psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, among other fields, to suggest how positive bonds and connections catalyze learning, motivation, and engagement among children and adolescents. Three foundational research syntheses articulate understandings garnered about learning and development across disciplinary fields.[8] Key findings on the role of relationships articulated in these articles are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Positive relationships can catalyze healthy development and serve as primary conduits for learning. Research suggests that positive relationships can shape the architecture of the young brain in powerful ways.[9] That is, positive interactions between students, their peers, and adults support the integration of social, affective, and cognitive circuits and processes in the brain and establish neural pathways for lifelong learning and adaptation. While positive relationships are particularly powerful during the early years of development, their positive impact continues to be important and deeply felt in adolescence and beyond.

Positive relationships can enhance students' motivation, sense of self-efficacy, and higher-order thinking skills.[10] Positive bonds with adults and peers nurture positive emotions, which can, in turn, enhance engagement and help youth feel more comfortable taking risks when they are learning something new. The converse has also been documented—that negative or lacking interactions, which can spur emotions like anxiety and self-doubt, reduce a person's ability to engage and cognitively process.[11]

Maintaining positive relationships can have a protective effect for students. A substantial body of research demonstrates that consistent and warm connections between adults and youth can enable adults to more accurately perceive and respond to a young person's needs.[12] In addition, positive relationships can support a physiological process that mitigates the harmful effects of excessive stress and adversity (e.g., increased heart rate; disruptions in memory, attention, and cognition; depression/anxiety), which can significantly affect learning and development. Specifically, research indicates that positive relationships can enable the body to release oxytocin, a hormone that helps it cope with stress, thus supporting student resilience and enhancing cognition and social and emotional wellness.

Positive relationships are particularly impactful for students who may experience high levels of stress. While stress and adversity happen in all communities, systemic inequity makes chronic stress more likely among young people affected by poverty and discrimination. Thus, positive relationships play a critical role in enhancing educational equity, as they can mitigate some of the negative impacts of chronic stress on students' readiness to learn.

Culturally responsive relationships, which invite students' multifaceted backgrounds into interactions and reinforce students' sense of worth, dignity, and potential, are particularly impactful in counteracting the negative effects of stress and discrimination.[13] For example, building culturally responsive and affirming relationships with youth from marginalized groups, such as students of color, youth from low-income backgrounds, English learners, LBGTQ+ youth, and others, can mitigate the effects of stereotype threat, which can cause those who receive negative messages about their abilities and worth to translate those sentiments into negative self-perceptions and disengagement that undermines achievement.[14]

The research on relationships clearly demonstrates that positive relationships can be a powerful force in youth learning and development. It also identifies qualities that make relationships impactful in young people's lives. Specifically, findings from SoLD research indicate that positive relationships are not just those in which adults are nice to students; rather, positive relationships are developmental, whereby they help students develop a positive self-concept and foster student agency and capacity for self-direction.[15] Relationships that are trustful, caring, and culturally responsive also optimize student learning, well-being, and agency.

The research on relationships clearly demonstrates that positive relationships can be a powerful force in youth learning and development. It also identifies qualities that make relationships impactful in young people's lives.

Moreover, researchers suggest that the impact relationships have may not solely be felt on an individual basis, but rather influence the broader school environment, with implications for student success, engagement, and a sense of safety.[16] When relationships are combative, not culturally responsive, or strained in schools, students may hold more negative assessments of the school climate and disengage from learning. Conversely, when positive relationships are normative and characteristic in a school, they can contribute to the development of a positive school climate, which has been shown to support behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes.[17]

The State of Relationship-Building in Schools

Given the role of positive relationships in supporting youth, many educational decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers have sought to identify approaches that build strong connections among and between students and adults in school communities. These approaches include enacting school structures that create the conditions for young people to be known by and connected to a caring adult and establishing day-to-day practices that convey and embody cultural responsiveness, care, empathy, and affirmation in daily interactions and classroom processes. The SoLD research synthesis, "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," presents a comprehensive synopsis of approaches that promote "strong attachment and relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, and relational trust."[18]

The authors indicate that personalizing structures, such as small class sizes, advisory systems, looping, and block scheduling, can create consistent opportunities for interaction, thus helping youth and their families form closer long-term relationships and healthy attachments with practitioners.[19] They also

demonstrate how practices that cultivate a sense of community, inclusion, and psychological safety are effective relationship-centered approaches. These include consistently holding community meetings; co-creating norms for interaction and engagement; and adopting restorative approaches to repair harm, promote opportunities for connection, and help youth develop prosocial orientation and competencies.[20] Finally, the research synthesis suggests that structures and practices that promote positive relationships between schools and families—including opportunities for collaboration, meaningful engagement, and decision-making—can cultivate relational trust and support that enable student learning and growth.[21]

Despite the benefits of positive relationships and the structures and practices that enable them, many secondary students in the U.S. attend schools that provide few opportunities to develop positive connections.[22] The "factory model" of schooling is a key culprit in maintaining these impersonal environments, particularly at the secondary level.[23] Designed over a century ago, the factory model created public school systems that emphasized efficiency and batch processing of students as schools sought to address population growth and the influx of immigrants into urban areas.[24] To do this, schools instituted structures that assumed student learning could be fostered through the standardized transmission of information at different grade and age levels.[25] This included marshalling young people on academic paths (i.e., tracks) that were informed by flawed and discriminatory assumptions of ability, and potentially advanced by eugenicists, and subsequently divided students into distinctive curricula by race and class.[26]

While many public and private institutions do not adhere to the factory model, its remnants persist in many traditional public high schools, especially those that serve a large number of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Linda Darling-Hammond and Channa Cook-Harvey described several of these persistent features in their 2018 report *Educating the Whole Child*, noting how the model in U.S. schools:

> Typically moves students to another teacher each year and to as many as seven or eight teachers daily in secondary schools. Secondary teachers may see 150 to 200 students per day in short 45-minute blocks, and, despite their best efforts, are unable to know all of their students or their families well. This reduces the extent to which teachers can build on personal knowledge in meeting students' needs.[27]

These entrenched structures that privilege standardization and depersonalization, according to Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, can be at odds with the needs of adolescents, who are developmentally prone to seek strong senses of connection, belonging, and personal identity. Moreover, the authors note that these structural impediments to positive relationship-building in schools can stifle or harm student learning and development, particularly among youth experiencing the effects of poverty, trauma, racism, and other forms of discrimination.[28]

The harms caused by depersonalized structures are exacerbated by other common approaches and policies that affect the relationship-centered character of a school. For instance, the increased presence of campus security officers and exclusionary, harsh discipline practices are damaging to relationships and the support they lend to youth learning and development.[29] The impact of these approaches, which disproportionately lead to exclusionary practices (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) against marginalized groups like Black, Indigenous, and Latinx youth and students with disabilities,[30] can extend beyond the

individual harm they inflict to negatively affect the broader school climate and even student achievement among peers of suspended students.[31] In addition, infrequent or minimal use of identity-safe approaches, like culturally responsive pedagogy or the promotion of student voice and agency, also may impede the development of positive, trustful relationships in schools.[32]

With the current structures and practice that are common in secondary settings, relationship-centered school transformation requires reimagining and restructuring approaches inherited from an educational system put into place more than 100 years ago. Some researchers have demonstrated how some stand-alone schools and school networks have secured and/or leveraged site-based autonomies to design schools that systematically seek to cultivate positive relationships to support deep learning and holistic well-being at the secondary level.[33] Yet, the manner in which the process of relationship-centered transformation transpires through sustained effort—particularly in traditional public high school settings where obstacles to change have been acute and inhibitive—remains less understood.

About the Study

This research report focuses on one such transformation effort and investigates how youth, leaders, educators, and community members pursue relationship-centered school transformation within comprehensive high school settings. It answers the following research questions:

- How does the process of transforming schools to be relationship-centered schools transpire in local settings?
- What emerging changes, if any, have been generated for students, practitioners, and the broader schooling environment as a result of these efforts?
- What conditions have supported or hindered school transformation work?
- What lessons can be garnered from this transformation work? How can we apply these lessons to future efforts?

The research study investigates these questions through an examination of the processes and dynamics surrounding the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign, a youth-led effort—supported by the community-based organization Californians for Justice (CFJ) and conducted in collaboration with practitioners and district leaders—toward transformative and equity-oriented change in high schools in some of California's most disenfranchised communities.

Through interviews with CFJ organizers, district and school leaders, practitioners, and current and former youth organizers, this study investigates how local actors made strides in growing or improving the use of structures and practices that can enable positive connections among students and adults. (See Appendix A for a complete description of the study's methodology.) It investigates the process of making change, noting the campaign's substantive emergence and uptake in two settings—the Long Beach Unified School District and Fresno's McLane High School. The study draws on 2018–19 outcomes data to reflect the period during which efforts related to the RCS campaign were initiated and gaining traction. These pre-pandemic efforts and their surrounding dynamics were the primary focus of this investigation.

The case study demonstrates how local schools and districts have engaged in efforts to further relationship-centered schooling; the conditions and factors that have enabled or hindered RCS work in each region; and the emerging impacts of RCS efforts on practice and policy. Through its findings, the report provides insights into how a transformation effort can ensue as well as the factors that can make a difference in advancing relationship-centered change. In the case of the RCS campaign, enabling factors included:

- establishing structures for relationship-building among and between youth and school adults;
- building trusting relationships among those driving change efforts;
- creating opportunities for professional development to bring youth, educators, and leaders together to build shared knowledge and purpose;
- fostering empathy-building and deep listening practices;
- elevating and valuing youth and their perspectives in change efforts;
- finding coherence between relationship-centered schooling and preexisting priorities and initiatives;
- cultivating the support of administrator and educator champions—particularly those who maintain a stable presence in the school or district—to support the continuity of change efforts and ongoing capacity-building; and
- allocating fiscal resources to support uptake and implementation.

The report begins with a description of the origins, aims, and design of CFJ's Relationship Centered Schools campaign before providing depictions of transformation efforts in Long Beach Unified School District and Fresno's McLane High School. After these regional spotlights, the report concludes with a discussion of takeaways and lessons for those pursuing relationship-centered school change.

The Relationship Centered Schools Campaign

Californians for Justice (CFJ) is a statewide organization "fighting to improve the lives of communities of color, immigrant, low-income, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized communities."[34] Over the past 20 years, CFJ has sought to unlock the power of student voice and agency so that young people become community leaders who organize their peers to take action and deepen their understanding on issues of systemic racism, education inequity, and other forms of discrimination. Each year, CFJ works with youth of color to address issues such as the use of harsh discipline practices or the significant presence of police in schools, and to lead campaigns for social and policy change. In this work, youth leaders share their stories to change hearts and minds and forge alliances with teachers, administrators, and policy leaders to advance "a youth-centered vision for just, healthy, and vibrant schools."[35]

The Relationship Centered Schools campaign is one effort undertaken by CFJ. This initiative launched in 2015 after 10 months of youth-led action research that included a survey of 2,000 students and interviews with 65 education leaders. This research sought to investigate a troubling pattern surfaced in the results from the 2013–15 administration of the California Healthy Kids Survey—that more than 40% of surveyed 9th-graders and 11th-graders indicated that it was "not at all true" or was "a little true" that there was a teacher or other adult who really cared about them.

Through their action research, youth from CFJ surveyed 2,000 of their peers and provided a nuanced assessment of the state of relationships in California high schools, particularly as they were perceived and experienced by students of color. For instance, their research showed that only half of surveyed students reported feeling that adults cared about every student, with Black and Pacific Islander students providing lower assessments (42% and 43%, respectively). In addition, 25% of surveyed students reported that adults at their school do not make them feel like they matter; Black and Native American students expressed this sentiment at higher rates (~34%).[36]

With these findings, CFJ and youth leaders initiated the RCS campaign under the following vision:

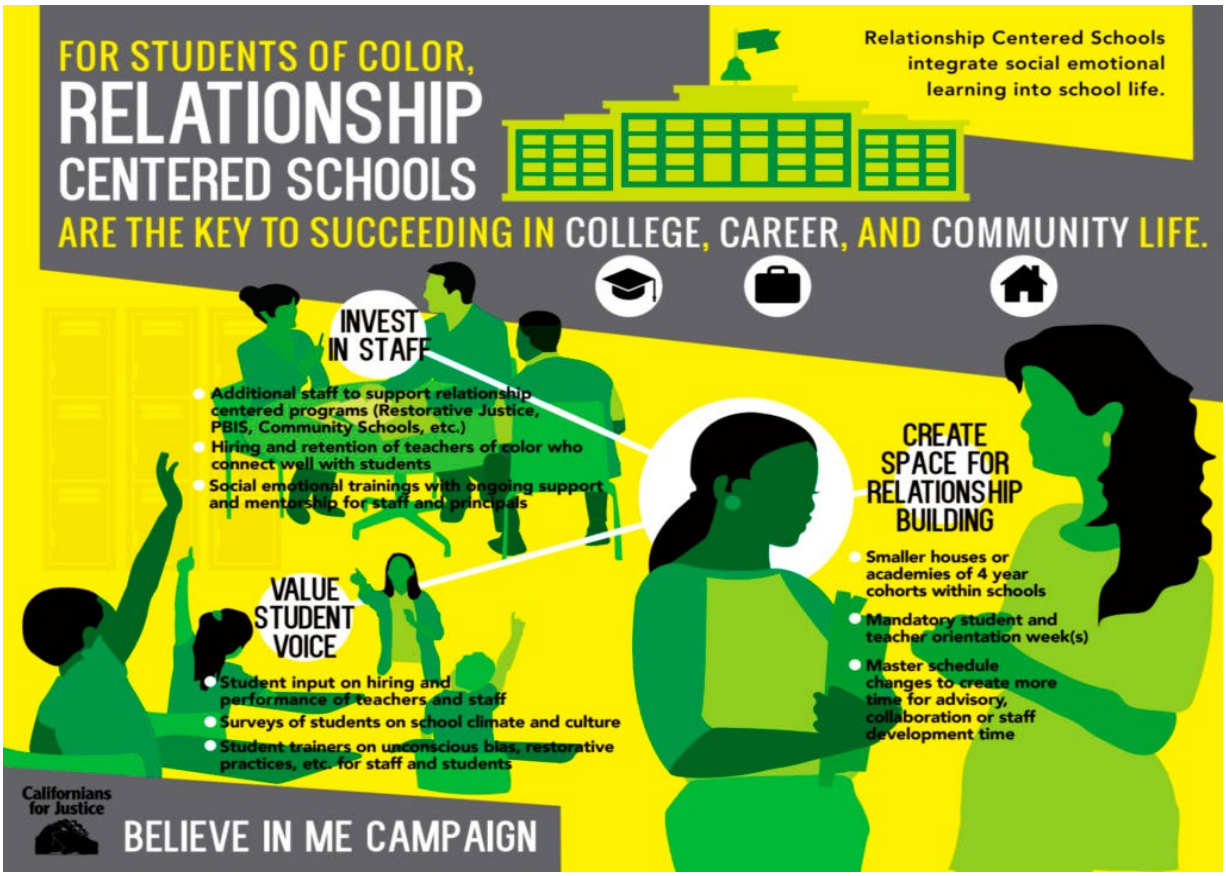
> Relationship Centered Schools break down walls and brings people together so that every student can reach their full potential regardless of race or zip code. When we prioritize relationships, students of color want to come to class, are ready to learn, and are prepared to succeed in college, career, and life.[37]

The campaign maintains a focus on racial equity, as it aims to combat the unequal expectations of students based on race or other identity markers[38] by "confronting bias and trauma, uniting social and emotional learning with academics, and uniting people to lead together towards a shared vision for our schools."[39]

To advance these changes, CFJ and youth organizers have advocated for state policies that can create the conditions for relationship-centered schools. Such policies include equitable school funding; the recruitment and retention of a diverse educator workforce; and increased professional development opportunities that build educator awareness and skills around relationship- and community-building and social and emotional development. In addition, the campaign has sought to support local change efforts, which are the focus of this study.

Since 2016, CFJ youth organizers have collaborated with district officials, school leaders, and educators in four regions—Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, and San José—to advance relationship-centered approaches at the school and district levels. These efforts center the improvement of relationship-centered practice and policy in alignment with three principles: (1) create space for relationship-building; (2) value student voice; and (3) invest in staff. (See Figure 1.) To date, the RCS campaign has sought to spur transformation in 11 comprehensive high schools across the four regions.

Figure 1: Three Principles of CFJ's Relationship Centered Schools Campaign



Source: Californians for Justice. Relationship Centered Schools.

In its approach to change, the RCS campaign embodies the dimensions of the community organizing cycle, which seeks to build collaborative power in relationship-centered and incremental ways and to elevate the voices of often marginalized groups in change efforts. Scholars suggest that key dimensions of the community organizing cycle are a focus on relationship-building as well as deliberate efforts to ensure that diverse actors have the opportunity to share their experiences and concerns to identify actionable issues.[40] They also demonstrate that the community organizing cycle includes attention to leadership development, whereby those driving change engage in educational campaigns and training sessions to expand their reach and build alliances, with the aim of spurring action and growing a network of actors that can support equity-driven continuous improvement.

In practice, the RCS campaign's approach to change at the local level has primarily begun at schools with CFJ chapters (i.e., clubs) or after-school programming facilitated by CFJ organizers, where youth and CFJ organizers have ongoing engagement. Chapter or after-school meetings serve as a forum for leadership development for youth, as they often engage students in discussions of critical issues facing their local contexts and provide opportunities for students to hone their interpersonal and leadership competencies, including deep listening and effective communication skills.

As they help develop youth leaders at school sites, CFJ organizers build their own relationships with school administrators, educators, and district officials and facilitate ongoing conversations among school and district staff and youth to increase their knowledge of and investment in relationship-centered and antiracist approaches. Through these ongoing discussions, students and CFJ organizers seek to build connections and allyship with educators and leaders, surface common concerns that can ground their collective vision for change, and ultimately inform co-determined action steps to improve the quality and tenor of school relationships. Through these actions, a core subset of youth, practitioners, and district and/or school leaders collaborate to create change that can permeate their settings and reach a broad number of students and educators. To date, efforts to reach youth, leaders, and educators beyond the core set of involved actors has most often included the implementation of youth-led professional development opportunities that have been typically open to interested leaders and school staff members. (See "A Deeper Look Into Youth-Led Professional Development Opportunities" for a more detailed description of their scope and structure.)

Because the RCS campaign's approach to change is modeled after the community organizing cycle, relationship-centered transformation manifests differently in local settings. In Long Beach, the campaign has primarily transpired at the district level, allowing for participating youth, educators, and school leaders from different high schools to develop their capacity to enact or engage in relationship-centered approaches. In Fresno, the campaign has maintained a school-level focus, particularly in supporting relationship-centered changes at McLane High School.

A Deeper Look Into Youth-Led Professional Development Opportunities

When asked to describe how the Relationship Centered Schools campaign had taken hold at the local level, interviewees from all four regions—Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, and San José—mentioned the growing presence of youth-led trainings, which were learning opportunities that gathered practitioners and students together to learn how to better advance racial justice at school sites. These trainings were typically available to interested educators and school leaders across the district and were structured by topic, including trainings on implicit bias and relationship-centered practices.

The first biannual Racial Justice, Equity, and Healing Summit, held in the Oakland Unified School District in January 2020, provides a window into these opportunities. This youth-facilitated session allowed attendees to engage in learning within one of the following 2-hour workshops:

- An Introduction to Racial Justice, Equity, and Healing: How White Supremacy Shows Up in Our Schools
- We All Have Bias: The Brain, How We See Our Students & Impacts in the Classroom

- How To Be an Antiracist Educator in Oakland: Tools, Practices & Structures
- How Racism in Schools Traumatizes Our Students: Building Relationship-Centered Schools

Each of these workshops provided an opportunity for attendees to understand how racism can manifest in school structures and practices and elevated approaches that can interrupt racist practices within their spheres of influence. In addition, they engaged participants in reflective exercises about their positionalities and practices and included opportunities for youth and educators to share their experiences to ground collective learning. Workshops were buttressed with relationship-building opportunities that encouraged community-building, deep listening, and candor among those in attendance.

While professional development opportunities in Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, and San José varied based on local needs and interests, they followed a similar structure and organization, as they featured youth leadership, a consistent focus on racial justice, and discussions of approaches that could support culturally responsive and antiracist approaches and relationship-building.

Source: Oakland Unified School District. (2020). Racial Justice, Equity & Healing Summit.

RCS in Action: Centering Relationships in Long Beach Unified

The Long Beach Unified School District (Long Beach Unified) sits near the southwestern edge of Los Angeles County and serves more than 67,500 students across its 85 schools. The district, which spans the municipalities of Avalon on Catalina Island, Lakewood, Long Beach, and Signal Hill, serves a diverse student body. More than 58% of its students identify as Latinx, while Black students (12.6%), White students (12.5%), and Asian and Pacific Islander students (11.8%) comprise nearly equal proportions of the remaining student population. Approximately 14% of its students are classified as English learners, and 63% are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Long Beach Unified School District (2020–21)

Demographic	Long Beach Unified	California Schools
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	63.3%	58.9%
English learners	14.1%	17.7%
Students with disabilities	13.7%	13.3%
Asian, Filipino, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	11.8%	12.1%
Black or African American	12.6%	5.2%
Hispanic or Latinx	58.2%	55.9%
White	12.5%	21.1%
Other/Not reported	5%	5.8%

Source: Ed-Data. Long Beach Unified, 2020–21.

Long Beach Unified serves a greater proportion of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds than the state average and has been recognized for its achievement gains among its diverse student population for more than 2 decades. Researchers and prominent organizations have lauded the district's commitment to continuous improvement, support for teaching and learning, workforce preparation, and data-driven decision-making, all of which have been shown to contribute to the achievement of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.[41] The district has also been recognized for the academic outcomes it has supported among its students. For example, one study identified Long Beach Unified as a "positive outlier" California district that excelled at supporting learning among students of color and those from low-income families.[42] Specifically, it indicated that Black, White,

and Latinx students in Long Beach Unified achieved at higher levels than similar students across the state on math and English language arts assessments, controlling for their demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status.

At the time the RCS work was gaining traction, district outcomes demonstrated some continued areas of strength. For instance, in 2018–19, Long Beach Unified's graduation rate (87.1%) exceeded the state average, as did the percentage of students who graduated meeting A-G requirements (58.5%)—an indicator that captures the number of students who pass select courses with a grade C or better to be eligible for admission to California's public university system. In addition, students in Long Beach Unified high schools demonstrated greater than the state average growth in English language arts (ELA), as assessed by the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).

Yet the district continued to strive for higher outcomes. While Long Beach Unified students outperformed peers of similar racial and economic backgrounds across the state in math and ELA, the aggregated performance level among high-school aged youth was lower than those of all high school students in California, who represent proportionately fewer socioeconomically disadvantaged households. The district's rate of chronic absenteeism among high schoolers was also higher than the state average. In addition, 71% of Long Beach Unified high school students in 2018–19 assessed their school's climate and culture favorably, indicating that almost one third of respondents did not agree or strongly agree that their school maintained a climate that supported their learning, their sense of safety and belonging, and/or clear and fair rules and disciplinary processes.[43] (See Table 2.) These two latter outcomes may suggest that Long Beach Unified high schools maintained room for growth in cultivating healthy school-based attachments and implementing a range of social and emotional supports.

With its promising yet varied outcomes, Long Beach Unified remains committed to continuous improvement and seeks opportunities to help leaders and educators improve student experiences in its schools.[44] The district's longtime engagement with CFJ and its collaborative work to advance relationship-centered schooling represents one such opportunity. The following sections illustrate how Long Beach Unified engaged with CFJ and its RCS campaign shortly after the initiative launched in California regions in 2016 to spur the increased use and quality of relationship-centered schooling approaches that support student learning and development.

This profile begins by describing the relationship-centered structures that district high schools typically had in place prior to the RCS campaign. Then, it details how Long Beach Unified sought to improve the quality of relationship-building within those structures as well as their efforts to create new opportunities for positive and responsive connections to emerge. Specifically, the sections highlight how the district sought to grow stronger connection and empathy between youth and adults by creating structures that enabled shared learning and the meaningful elevation of student voice. After describing these structures alongside evidence of their emerging impact on practice, structure, and/or policy, the profile concludes with a description of the conditions and factors that district officials, practitioners, and CFJ organizers identified as central to enabling local investment and emerging change.

Table 2: Outcome Data for Long Beach Unified School District (2018–19)

Outcome	Long Beach Unified High Schools	California High Schools
11th-grade CAASPP English language arts (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	52.6%	57.3%
Percentage change in students meeting grade-level standards on CAASPP English language arts assessment (2016–17 to 2018–19)	+3.9%	+1.3%
11th-grade CAASPP math (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	27.3%	32.2%
Percentage change in students meeting grade-level standards on CAASPP math assessment (2016–17 to 2018–19)	+0.5%	+0.8%
Graduation rate	87.1%	84.5%
Graduates meeting A-G requirements	58.5%	50.5%
Chronic absenteeism	20.7%	16.4%
K–12 suspension rate	3.6%	3.5%
School climate and culture (% students who favorably assess their schools)	71%	N/A

Notes: The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) is administered annually to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11. The Long Beach Unified and California suspension rates reflect the number of students suspended across K–12, as no disaggregation by grade level is publicly available. The aggregated indicator of school climate and culture is based on the district's administration of the CORE student survey, which is used by the eight California districts in the CORE network.

Sources: Ed-Data. Long Beach Unified, 2018–19; Ed-Data. California Public Schools, 2018–19.

Long-Standing Relationship-Centered Structures in Long Beach Unified High Schools

Long Beach Unified has committed to engaging students in whole child learning[45] and, with this commitment, has incorporated school structures that enable the sorts of connections and relationships that have been shown to support rich learning experiences.[46] For example, high schools in Long Beach Unified have been structured around **linked learning pathways**—smaller learning communities in which a cohort of students takes classes with a common set of teachers for much or all of their coursework. These pathways, which are organized around a career-related or topical focus, help teachers know a subset of

students over extended periods of time and create opportunities for sustained relationships. Long Beach Unified high schools create opportunities for cross-pathway interactions that enable students to take core classes with students in other pathways.

Linked learning pathways also intend to promote staff collaboration, which can enable practitioners to share knowledge and build continuity in supporting students and implementing impactful relationship-centered approaches.[47] Deputy Superintendent Tiffany Brown explained:

> A lot of teacher collaboration and engagement among one another comes through department areas, which exist around core areas like history, math, and science. However, the infusion of pathways does create relationships among different teachers who teach different disciplines and who focus on specific pathway areas.

In addition to departmental and pathway-related collaboration structures, **forums that center teacher voice and expertise** were identified as important approaches that the district has institutionalized to support rich learning and relationship-building. Specifically, interviewees cited structures like Instructional Leadership Teams and School Site Councils, which are features of all Long Beach Unified schools, as forums that allow educators to express their insights to inform pedagogical and relationship-centered improvements. According to Long Beach Unified leaders, staff collaboration structures like these have been a key aspect of creating a culture that values relationship-building, as they provide staff with the opportunity to collectively discuss and design learning experiences that develop positive relationships.

Another structure at Long Beach Unified high schools that created the conditions for extended relationship-building was **block scheduling**. With a block schedule, students typically attend fewer classes each day for longer periods of time (~85–120 minutes, depending on the site). Educators, school leaders, and district officials acknowledged that having longer periods of time together afforded more time for relationship-building among educators and students. In this regard, block scheduling provided opportunities to facilitate deeper and more personalized relationships in Long Beach Unified schools.

Interviewees also noted that high schools across the district had a growing set of **social and emotional supports** for students that centered on building consistent and personalized connections. For example, district officials pointed to Long Beach Unified's Student Success Initiative as a growing program to support students' social and emotional wellness. This program connected triads of students who showed signs that they needed extra support with a teacher, coach, and/or counselor to provide a social safety net to increase students' sense of belonging and healthy attachment.

A Growing Collaboration to Improve Youth–Practitioner Relationships

Long Beach Unified's longer-established relationship-building structures indicate that the district has worked to redesign key elements of its schools to provide more consistent opportunities for students to be known and supported by staff. At the same time, several interviewees noted that these more personalized relationship-building structures alone were insufficient in helping students feel known, valued, and included in school settings. As Deputy Superintendent Brown put it, "I don't think the structure of the

schedule or others [other structures] prompt relationship-building, but teachers who form relationships well with students really capitalize on having more time. …Collaboration looks as collaborative as the person will allow it to be."

With this assessment, leaders and practitioners at Long Beach Unified acknowledged that more work needed to be done, particularly work that focused on advancing relationships and establishing culturally responsive practices throughout the district's high schools. The realization spurred a more formal collaboration between the district and CFJ to improve the relationship-centered and equitable character of its schools.

CFJ has had an almost 2-decades-long presence in the district, maintaining chapters in several high schools and one middle school for several years. Over this time, CFJ has focused on developing youth leaders by providing them with development opportunities and supporting their learning around social justice issues pertinent to their communities and identities. Under the RCS campaign, CFJ expanded the scope of its work to ensure that its organizers and youth have consistent and meaningful opportunities to connect with school and district leaders in Long Beach Unified. These conversations served multiple purposes. They helped with relationship-building and served as opportunities to introduce leaders to the RCS campaign. They also enabled leaders, youth, and CFJ organizers to find common ground and purpose. Superintendent Jill Baker described these early interactions:

> I started with CFJ, literally sitting around and just sharing. Some meetings were pure relationship-building, sharing my work and them sharing their work. We quickly started to look for intersections and to co-create ideas that then led into a couple of years of work.

As meetings were held about relationship-centered schooling at the district level, work also began at three Long Beach Unified high schools—Cabrillo, Lakewood, and Long Beach Polytechnic—which were schools with CFJ chapters and historic culture-climate issues on campus, according to several interviewees. This school-level engagement focused on building relationships and creating forums for dialogue and connection. Shawn Abbate, the former Principal of Lakewood High School, recalled her early interactions with youth leaders and CFJ organizers as they discussed RCS:

> When they started telling me about the work—especially the part about what they were doing to train students to use their voices and to help them become leaders in their community and to change their schools and their environments—I thought, "Oh, I want to be involved."

Overall, conversations and relationship-building among district and school leaders, CFJ organizers, and youth leaders characterized early RCS efforts in Long Beach Unified, sparking interest and a budding collaboration among local actors to improve relationships and equity in schools. As these partnerships solidified, particular RCS structures and practices—aligned with CFJ's three RCS principles—began to emerge.

Emerging Relationship-Centered Practices and Structures in Long Beach Unified

As a result of their engagement with the RCS campaign, Long Beach Unified educators and leaders described emerging practices and structures to cultivate stronger relationships and to understand and amplify youth experiences. These included empathy-building practices, new learning opportunities that convened adults and youth, and increased student voice in decision-making and strategic-planning forums.

Improving empathetic practice

When discussing the emerging approaches that emphasized relationship-building, each Long Beach educator and leader pointed to increasing attention to empathy-building across the district. A practice they each mentioned was the use of **empathy interviews**, a deep listening approach that seeks to cultivate care, interest, and a sense of shared humanity between those engaged in the conversation.

By definition, empathy interviews are "one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged need."[48] The interviews are guided by a set of four to eight open-ended questions that are tailored to the purpose of the interaction and can range from surfacing challenges in schools and classrooms to surfacing change ideas. These questions are accompanied by probes like "Tell me more" or "Why?" to ensure that the experiences and points of view of those participating in the interview are well articulated. Each person engaged in the empathy interview is both an interviewee and an interviewer, allowing for each individual to share their perspective and to understand the point of view of the other.

While seemingly straightforward, empathy interviews often require norms, technical skills, and specific mindsets that should be understood and developed among all participants. These include allotting ample time for each person to share their thoughts without interruption or response, actively listening, and remaining aware of one's biases, including those related to power dynamics among school actors.

Long Beach Unified has incorporated empathy interviews into its efforts to become a "relationship-centered district."[49] Specifically, empathy interviews have often been a central practice in newly instituted Learning Days, which provide opportunities for educators, leaders, and high school students to learn alongside one another and to discuss equity-focused topics. In this forum, attendees are introduced to the norms and practices of empathy interviews and subsequently provided an opportunity to observe them in action and to reflect on the process and its impact. (See "Learning to Engage in Empathy Interviews" for more on the form and scope of one of these shared learning opportunities.) Former Lakewood Principal Abbate participated in empathy interviews during a Learning Day and later engaged educators and staff at her school in this activity during on-site professional development. In observing this practice at Lakewood, she noted the power of the interviews in changing perspectives:

> There was a level of respect that [students and teachers] had for one another when they got in the room and started grappling with what would work and what wouldn't work at our school. Everybody came away and said, "I have a different respect for our students' perspective," or "I have a different respect for teachers."

According to Abbate, these empathetic exchanges spurred a growing appetite among participating teachers at her site to create more consistent opportunities for building relationships and for involving more students in decision-making.

Learning to Engage in Empathy Interviews

In February 2020, a group of more than 75 individuals gathered at Long Beach Unified's Lakewood High School to participate in one of the district's Learning Days. This youth-led professional development opportunity centered on the theme "Shift Power to Students" and was designed by youth facilitators—in partnership with Californians for Justice organizers, local educators, and district leaders—to engage attendees in learning about the importance and impact of building shared power and meaningful relationships with young people to support learning, well-being, and student success.

The daylong forum engaged participants, including Long Beach Unified students, practitioners, and district leaders as well as invited attendees from across the country (e.g., community organizers, policymakers, researchers, parent activists), in collective discussions of essential questions such as "What does genuine co–decision-making with students look like?" and "What does it mean to share power with young people?" In addition, it featured a dedicated 75-minute block of time to introduce participants to the practice of empathy interviews, in the hopes of demonstrating the utility and potential impact of this approach in furthering the aims of relationship-building and cultivating shared power.

Youth facilitators began the discussion of empathy interviews by describing their goals and the following norms to support their effective implementation:

- Be curious and take a learning stance.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Be fully present, without distractions.
- Do not challenge, correct, or interrupt.
- Express gratitude.

After this introduction, Learning Day attendees engaged in a fishbowl activity to witness the practice in action. They broke into small groups of 10–12 individuals and observed one Lakewood High School educator and one student engage in an empathy interview grounded in one or more of the following questions:

- Talk to us about your experience at Lakewood. What is your vision for student success at the school? What makes it difficult for you to step into your role?
- What do you think it is going to take to transform Lakewood into a relationship-centered school?
- How do you feel about leading this work with students?
- What do you wish you knew more about, had more training on, or had more resources for in order to collaborate with students?
- What is your biggest hope for collaboration between staff and students at Lakewood (especially for racial equity)?

After a 10-minute exchange between the educator and student, observers were invited to pose questions about the empathy interview process—to inquire about the interview that just transpired as well as the processes that enable these conversations to be integrated into ongoing practice. The question-and-answer period was followed by a reflective discussion in small groups, during which participants shared their reactions to the approach (e.g., "What was exciting? What made you nervous? What was relevant in your context?") and the challenges and opportunities they may encounter in bringing it into their settings.

Other Long Beach Unified practitioners expressed that empathy interviews helped them develop deeper understandings of the issues that students faced and the ways those challenges could constrain positive relationships between students and teachers. For example, some interviewees noted that students' descriptions of unjust disciplinary practices that targeted students of color, as well as a lack of diverse representation in curriculum and public-facing school media, demonstrated how implicit bias could shape their experiences and sense of belonging in schools. Superintendent Baker described how the incidents raised in empathy interviews surprised some teachers: "There was a moment where a group of teachers were listening to this incident that a student had, and their heads exploded. They were like, 'This happens right now? Today?' That really drives the conversation."

Overall, the use of empathy interviews in professional development provided opportunities for teachers and school staff to see how certain forms of harm were being inflicted on students and opened the door for strategizing and collaborating on how to alleviate inequitable structures, practices, and mindsets. Moreover, empathy interviews gave students an opportunity to identify and articulate problems that created inequities in their schools, thus helping participating individuals to become more knowledgeable and attuned to challenges and opportunities.

While it was less frequently cited, interviewees also pointed to the growing practice of **shadowing students** as an empathy-building exercise that helped school and district administrators connect with and understand students. Specifically, administrators—especially district leaders—shadowed a select number of students throughout the school day with the aim of garnering a better sense of their experiences. Administrators then wrote reflection letters about their observations and the challenges and opportunities students faced throughout the day. A district official described how Superintendent Baker engaged in this process:

> A few years ago, many Long Beach Unified students were struggling in math, so Dr. Baker sought to understand the experience of students with varying levels of math success by shadowing them. She subsequently captured her reflections in a memo shared to administrators, who increasingly began to adopt the practice.

As more and more school administrators followed suit in shadowing students, some district leaders—many of whom supported school leader professional development efforts—noted an evolution in how principals conducted and reflected on their observations. They noted that principals increasingly began to focus their observations on how students were experiencing learning rather than focusing more exclusively on a teacher's pedagogy. With this turn, principals also more frequently included reflections on how educators immersed students in learning and the ways that the school was attending to youth well-being.

From the insights gained in shadowing students as well as those garnered through empathy interviews, district leaders noted that school administrators were increasingly considering how they could center the student perspective to support instruction and a positive climate at their schools. This included opportunities that brought students into school-based professional development—a growing RCS approach in Long Beach Unified as a result of their work in the campaign, which is detailed in the next section.

School administrators were increasingly considering how they could center the student perspective to support instruction and a positive climate at their schools.

Creating shared learning opportunities

Long Beach Unified's efforts to improve relationships in its high schools also informed the range and scope of the professional learning opportunities it offered. The aforementioned **Learning Days** are one prominent example. Learning Days, which typically occur outside of school hours and are attended on a volunteer basis, hold space for youth, educators, and/or school and district leaders to build relationships and collaboratively learn about a range of equity-oriented topics that could inform and improve practice. Topics have included those centered on deep listening practice as well as those pertaining to the Continuum of Student Involvement—an adapted framework introduced by CFJ youth leaders and organizers to help leaders and practitioners assess how deeply and authentically they engage students at their schools. (See Figure 2.) In structure, Learning Days are student-led and include direct learning on the focal topic as well as icebreakers and community-building activities that allow for youth and practitioners in attendance to deepen their familiarity and connection with one another.

Figure 2: Continuum of Student Involvement

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Lead Together
Youth engagement goal	Provide youth with relevant information.	Gather input from youth.	Ensure youth needs and priorities are part of the process & solution.	Ensure youth capacity to play a leadership role in design and implementation of decisions.	Democratic participation and equity through shared leadership, & decision-making.
Message to community	"We will keep you informed."	"We care what you think."	"You are making us think (and therefore act) differently about the issue."	"Your leadership and expertise are critical to how we address the issue."	"We cannot unlock transformative solutions without you."
Activities	Fact sheets Open houses Presentations	Public comment Focus groups/survey Community forums	Student LCAP committee Students on hiring committees	Students on staff leadership committees (Climate and Culture, Equity, Instructional Leadership)	Student & staff leadership committees Participatory budgeting

Note: The Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a 3-year plan that districts develop in collaboration with their constituents. The LCAP describes district goals, priorities, and expenditures and articulates how they work to support student success.

Source: Adapted from González, R. (2019). *The spectrum of community engagement to ownership*. Movement Strategy Center.

Long Beach Unified has also implemented **implicit bias trainings** facilitated by students and open to educators districtwide. Before the trainings, attendees are often asked to read short articles around implicit bias and reflect on how implicit bias may be present at their school. At these trainings, students then lead practitioners in discussions about how implicit bias can influence student experiences and attitudes, and adults reflect on their own developmental needs and growth areas related to bias and equity-oriented practice and mindsets. By collaborating in discussions on how to address implicit bias at their schools, students and practitioners develop plans for how they could collectively work toward creating culturally responsive and equitable structures and practices that support the learning and development of all students, particularly students of color and those from other marginalized groups.

With the inclusion of youth as facilitators and participants in Learning Days and implicit bias trainings, many educators who attended these professional development workshops expressed a deep and often new appreciation for youth expertise. To illustrate, a CFJ youth facilitator summarized some of the assessments they garnered from practitioner participants:

> A lot of teachers say, "This is the first time that I am really working with students and really listening to them." It turns on this light bulb, where now, all of a sudden, they are like, "We need more students. We need more students. We need to listen to them, and we need to bring them into these spaces."

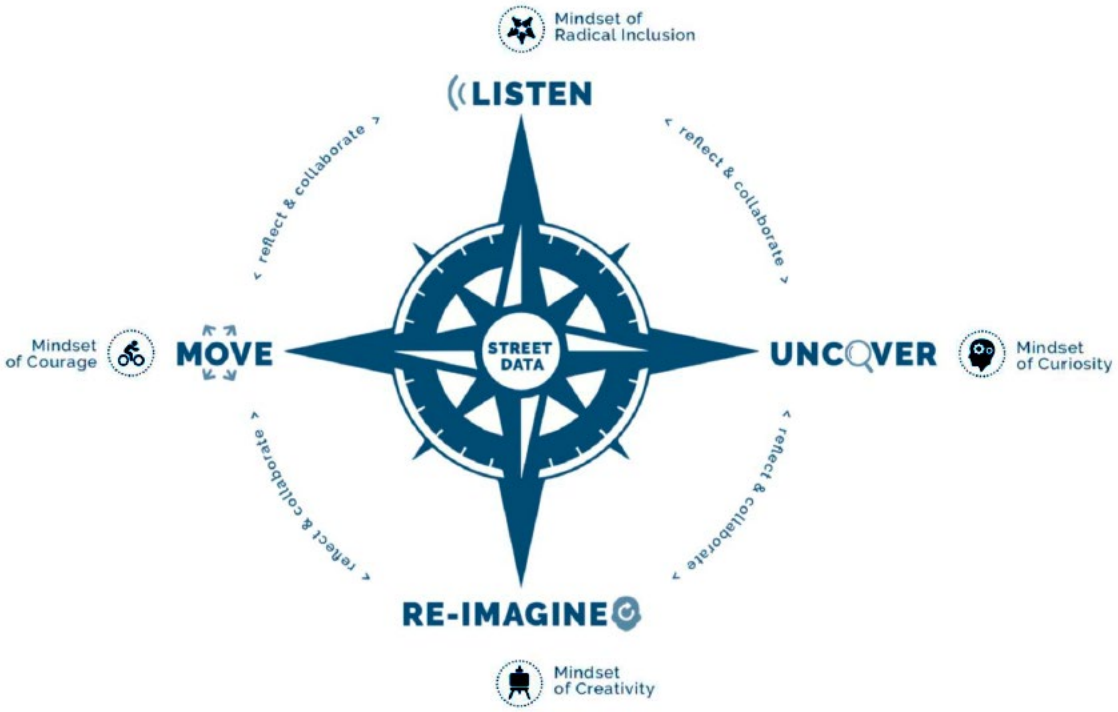
Learning Days and implicit bias trainings represent newly created shared learning opportunities that have been made available to Long Beach Unified practitioners who are interested in improving their knowledge and capacity to implement relationship-centered and equitable approaches. Yet, with the voluntary nature of Learning Days, district officials also sought ways to integrate a focus on equity, structural racism and bias, and the importance of relationships and other whole child practices more systematically in their professional development programming to reach more practitioners.

This intention led Long Beach Unified to launch its first **Equity Institute** in summer 2021, which required all staff to attend 5 days of professional learning.[50] Day 1 of the Equity Institute focused on defining and understanding the competencies associated with transformative social and emotional learning and elevating the role of trusting and collaborative relationships as part of that instructional vision. The following days addressed topics such as the elements of culturally competent classrooms, asset-based pedagogies and their application to social and emotional learning approaches, and issues of identity and oppression in schools. The goal of the Equity Institute was to further build Long Beach Unified educators' understanding of equity and its enabling practices and structures that could be better fostered at each school.

The aim to systematically immerse more practitioners in learning about equity-oriented and relationship-centered practice also spurred the growth of the district's **Equity and Inclusion Relationship Centered Schools Professional Learning Network** (PLN), which most substantively took form during the pandemic. The PLN consists of six schools in the district—five comprehensive high schools and one middle school. The PLN is attended by members of each school's equity design team and convenes twice annually as a whole group. (See more school equity design teams in the section "Elevating Student Voice in Decision-Making and Strategic Planning.")

As a collective, the PLN seeks to improve the equitable and relationship-centered character of participating schools by collecting and analyzing "street data."[51] Street data are those that draw on and elicit the knowledge, testimonies, and experiences of students and families as critical sources for designing and implementing school practices and policies that support equity and student learning and development. Between full PLN gatherings, school equity teams meet to discuss the equity challenges surfaced from street data at their schools, which become the focus of their development and planning. With these data in hand, PLN school teams collectively and individually engage in an improvement process grounded in the elements of the equity transformation cycle to inform data-driven action. (See Figure 3.) Importantly, they do so in a way that centers student voice and racial equity in content, focus, and process.

Figure 3: Equity Transformation Cycle



Source: Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin.

Interviewees who participated in the PLN acknowledged that these collaborative learning opportunities reveal how deficit-laden mindsets and biases show up in schools in ways that inhibit relationships, learning, and engagement. At the same time, they expressed optimism and positivity about the collaborative design team structure and the opportunities it affords, noting how it helps to identify and address equity concerns in ways that challenge traditional hierarchies of authority and expertise in schools while building positive relationships. A participating PLN member and school administrator described this sentiment in reflecting on the PLN's impact on her and the school's design team: "It's about learning to value student voice and how much they could change you and what you do. I really think there's an old culture, an authoritarian culture in education. It's a wall that we have to break down."

In addition to the positive assessments PLN participants shared in reflecting on their learning experiences, they described how engaging in the equity transformation cycle as part of the PLN sparked some tangible changes in school policy and practice. For instance, in identifying equity challenges through street data, PLN participants scrutinized and altered uniform policies to be less discriminatory. This included lifting limitations on wearing head wraps in schools, as this policy can be insensitive and discriminatory to some individuals and their hair care needs.

Examining equity challenges also spurred changes to some physical school environments to ensure that school imagery and prominently displayed artifacts reflect student diversity. To illustrate, through its equity design team discussions, one high school identified that its highly visible trophy case primarily

featured photographs and accomplishments of White alumni from decades ago. This representation stood in contrast to the current student demographic, which was primarily students of color, and caused many students and families of color to see this school as an unwelcoming environment.[52] To remedy the culturally unresponsive messages this conveyed, the high school updated murals and pictures to capture the fuller cultural spectrum represented in the school and local community.

Elevating student voice in decision-making and strategic planning

As forums for relationship-building and shared learning have increased in Long Beach Unified, district and school leaders have sought systematic ways to include students as authentic and meaningful partners in decision-making and strategic planning as part of their RCS efforts.

The development of school and district-level **design teams** was one way this took form. The equity design teams described as part of the Equity and Inclusion Relationship Centered Schools PLN serve as an example. The equity design teams at PLN schools gathered select administrators, parents, educators, and five to six students to identify equity challenges, gather street data to diagnose the problems, and ultimately propose changes. In seeking youth input and representation, equity design teams were deliberate in trying to recruit student leaders who represented varied racial and ethnic backgrounds and levels of academic performance. They did this to enable better representation of Long Beach Unified's diverse student body in school decision-making structures.

In addition to design teams, interviewees mentioned the growing presence of **student advisory committees** across the district. At the site level, every Long Beach Unified principal established these committees—with representatives from various pathways, not just traditional school leadership structures like student government—to support principals in thinking about school climate and community-building. At the district level, the superintendent similarly created a student advisory board to advise on key issues that affected student experience.[53] Superintendent Baker described how these collaborative spaces compelled administrators to think about school challenges differently. She explained:

> Equity work shifts power dynamics because you have the superintendent and the principals of schools in these spaces with kids, and we hear what they say. We're compelled to action differently than if I were just sitting in my house thinking of ideas on my own. Student experience leads us.

Some interviewees acknowledged how school and district administrators increasingly turned to the Continuum of Student Involvement to assess and improve how they integrated student voice into their daily work and decision-making. (See Figure 2.) As a tool, the Continuum helps leaders understand how they can engage youth in disempowering or empowering ways. In turn, it provides guidance as to how leaders can shift from more top-down approaches to those that engage students as actors with valuable and necessary expertise. In addition, the Continuum holds a specific focus on the democratic participation of Black and Indigenous students and other youth of color, helping administrators maintain equity and systemic injustices at the fore of their thinking.

Deputy Superintendent Brown described the district's progress in elevating student voice via these forums:

> We've tried to capture and really push the momentum on involving students in decisions at the earliest point—at the idea and conception stage, not once a plan's been created and saying, "What do you think about this?" So, we are really building them in at the foundation.

According to other Long Beach Unified officials, student participation in these forums has influenced how administrators approach their work and afforded them the opportunity to learn from students and their experiences. Superintendent Baker articulated the impact that this relationship- and student-centered approach had across the district:

> We've seen much more attention to having students at the table and incorporating student voice. … It's an outgrowth of the philosophy of RCS, but also really operationalizing some of the strategies and some of the moves that we think are important to making our schools more equitable learning environments and better places for all students.

Interviewees also indicated that youth participation in decision-making and strategic planning materialized into some school and districtwide policies. For example, district officials and school leaders noted that youth representation informed decisions to create gender-neutral restrooms and locker rooms in sports and school facilities. Superintendent Baker also described the range of investments and policies that youth on her advisory board directly informed. She noted how youth input informed the district's proposed allocations for mental health supports and high school wellness centers as well as the institution of an asynchronous learning day as a part of the Long Beach Unified Learning Acceleration and Support Plan to address pandemic-induced challenges. Growing attention to relationship-building and student voice also spurred curriculum equity audits to assess the cultural relevance of learning materials as well as reconsiderations of principal evaluation criteria so that they surfaced how relationships and student perspectives were being fostered in schools.

District leaders also pointed to the adoption of the 2021 Excellence and Equity Board Policy as a policy that was deeply informed by their commitment to growing relationship-centered schooling and its equity aims. This policy established an equity- and relationship-centered vision that:

> Creates a path forward through informed professional development and a focus on dismantling internal practices that are racist, oppressive, and exclusive for specific individuals or groups of students. While this policy reflects our district values, it is designed with the recognition that our work around equity will be guided by the data that we gain through continued engagement with students and families.[54]

To achieve its aims, the policy codified that the district and its schools will implement equity-oriented practices and processes, including efforts to foster culturally responsive teaching and learning, to integrate student voice in school and districtwide decision-making bodies, and to implement restorative practices that encourage relationships and humanistic approaches to conflict resolution. District leaders indicated that these codified commitments set precedent for future leaders and educators to sustain districtwide practices and structures that promote student voice, equity, and relationship-building at each Long Beach Unified school. Moreover, they noted that the policy established a system of accountability and signaled to students and families that relationships, diversity, and equity are core dimensions and commitments of the district's approach to schooling.

Relationship-Centered Schooling at Lakewood High School

As districtwide work on the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign ensued in Long Beach Unified, some local high schools engaged in their own simultaneous efforts to support their schools in becoming more relationship centered. Lakewood High School (Lakewood), a comprehensive secondary school serving more than 3,000 students in grades 9 through 12, was one such site. Its student body is diverse (52.6% Hispanic or Latinx, 18.8% Black, 11.5% White, 8.1% Asian, 5.9% Filipino or Pacific Islander), and almost 60% of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Lakewood is one of three high schools in Long Beach Unified that has maintained a Californians for Justice (CFJ) chapter and has had an active subset of youth, educators, and administrators engaged in advancing relationship-centered practices and structures on their campus.

As a result of its engagement in the RCS campaign, Lakewood established the following schoolwide goal related to relationship-centered schooling as part of its accreditation process:

> Lakewood will establish a relationship-centered school culture to address the social and emotional needs of all students and close the achievement gap by creating a supportive, safe, and caring climate to increase the student CORE survey results 5% in the areas of sense of belonging, a climate of academic support, and self-efficacy.

To make strides toward this goal enshrined in the school's accreditation and accountability process, administrators at Lakewood established several structures and practices.

These structures and practices included bringing students into the decision-making realm so they could have a more equal voice on campus and establishing a student advisory committee to inform administrator decision-making, like those already in place in other Long Beach Unified schools. Yet they also extended to include student representation on the school's Instructional Leadership Team, which previously consisted of lead teachers from each pathway and representatives from each department. The aim was to enable students to provide more systematic input on decisions related to teaching and learning and to express how they feel about the campus climate. In the process, this included bringing students incrementally into this decision-making forum that had been previously adult dominated. Former Principal Shawn Abbate noted that the incremental approach "help[ed] to get teachers comfortable with having students in the room."

School administrators also sought to enhance educator capacity in incorporating intentional relationship-building into their teaching. School officials pointed to their collaboration with CFJ as one partnership that helped them in this work. For instance, through these collaborations, Lakewood began using what Abbate called "quick start lessons" for content teachers, which were brief activities that educators could use at the beginning of their class periods to develop students' sense of belonging and facilitate community-building. In addition, Lakewood was a host site for several Learning Days, which gathered select staff and youth leaders on their campus to understand how to better incorporate substantive relationship-building and deep listening approaches into their practice and curricula.

The school complemented these efforts with other approaches that aimed to make its goal of becoming relationship centered more concrete and systematic. For example, Abbate noted that Lakewood had taken early actions to advance restorative justice approaches to conflict resolution

to help shift disciplinary action to be better rooted in relationship-building and maintaining positive school climates. Preliminary steps had included tapping select staff to engage in focused professional development and then model restorative approaches for other adults on the campus. The school also considered systems and processes that could enable the use of restorative justice schoolwide.

In addition, Lakewood sought to increase family outreach as a way to enable relationship-centered schooling that could support academic, social, and emotional student development. Specifically, it began to systematically leverage Zoom meetings, particularly during pandemic-induced school closures, to increase inclusive parent engagement—providing more families with flexible opportunities to learn about their child's school and what they could do to support their learning and well-being. According to various school administrators, this approach to family engagement allowed for a broader web of supports to be brought into the fold to help students feel more connected and engaged in learning.

Note: Long Beach Unified is one of California's eight CORE districts—districts that work in a networked fashion to support data-driven continuous improvement and collaborative capacity-building to enhance student outcomes and well-being. As a CORE district, Long Beach Unified administers CORE surveys, which capture how students in grades 5 through 12, school staff, and families perceive school culture and climate.

Sources: Ed-Data. Lakewood High, 2020–21; interview with Shawn Abbate.

Factors Enabling Relationship-Centered Changes in Long Beach Unified

In Long Beach Unified, engagement in the RCS campaign spurred district officials, school administrators, educators, CFJ organizers, and youth to support the growth of practices and structures that sought to create substantive and egalitarian relationships and to allow each and every student to feel a stronger sense of belonging at their school. When reflecting on how they enabled relationship-centered changes in the district, interviewees pointed to a few factors.

Each district official, practitioner, and CFJ organizer interviewed in this study mentioned the importance of having **administrator and educator champions** as a key factor that enabled relationship-centered schooling to gain traction. CFJ organizer Norma Rodriguez expressed this sentiment as she described the role that supportive administrators played in furthering relationship-centered change at Lakewood and in other parts of the region:

> One of the main things we've noticed is that key administrators that have decision-making power have to be on board. Where we have the most work and we've advanced … is because the principal, the vice principals, and other key administrators firmly believe that social-emotional learning, school climate, and student voice are critical to start changing what their data looks like.

CFJ organizers and practitioners also described the important role that educator allies played in advancing RCS work, noting that educators often helped build knowledge, momentum, and investment in RCS at their schools. For instance, at Lakewood, former Principal Abbate pointed to an invested subset of teachers who demonstrated receptiveness and strong motivation to engage in relationship-centered

change as key partners in moving the work forward at the comprehensive high school. (See "Relationship-Centered Schooling at Lakewood High School" for more about Lakewood's efforts.) CFJ organizer Omar Cardenas shared this sentiment, noting how important it was to have educators "willing to step up to the plate and say, 'This work is important. We need to address this and be willing to confront or willing to admit where there might be some gaps in skill set or understanding.'"

Most interviewees also expressed that maintaining **stable support and investment** from administrators and educators was particularly impactful. Organizers and practitioners often discussed Long Beach Unified's stable district leadership to illustrate this point, noting the longtime engagement among CFJ youth, organizers, and Superintendent Baker that spanned multiple years and preceded her time as superintendent. Interviewees suggested that the extended collaboration helped solidify relationship-centered commitments in the district and supported a coherent and thoughtful implementation of associated structures and practices. Just as stability was viewed as an enabling factor in advancing RCS, school staff and CFJ organizers noted that turnover was an impediment to growing and sustaining relationship-centered approaches. Interviewees typically recalled examples of administrative and teacher turnover that stalled school-based efforts and required renewed attention to building relationships and knowledge with new leaders and educators.

Extended collaboration helped solidify relationship-centered commitments in the district and supported a coherent and thoughtful implementation of associated structures and practices.

Most district leaders and CFJ organizers also described **funding** as an enabling factor for RCS-related efforts. These interviewees noted that Long Beach Unified had been intentional about allocating funds for those engaged in RCS shared learning opportunities, which often occurred during out-of-school hours and required active planning and facilitation. Specifically, district leaders indicated that educators who opted to participate in these learning opportunities were offered a stipend for their time, as were the youth facilitators who planned Learning Days and other voluntary development sessions.

Those engaged in the RCS campaign also discussed the role and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their efforts. Each interviewee described how the pandemic had stifled RCS efforts, noting that it had forced cancellations of planned professional development opportunities associated with the campaign and stymied regular convenings of student advisory committees as administrators, educators, and youth dealt with pandemic-induced challenges. At the same time, they noted that the pandemic **increased attention to the importance of relationships** among school actors. Former Lakewood Principal Abbate described how the pandemic heightened this sentiment among administrators and teachers at her school:

> We were trying desperately to build relationships through computer monitors, and people started to realize how really important it was to have relationships with students. … I think COVID has just put it at the forefront. People are realizing we can't neglect this anymore. We have to slow down and build the relationships that we need with our students and make them feel like valued individuals in our classrooms.

Deputy Superintendent Brown shared a similar reflection on how pandemic-related challenges underscored the importance of building positive connections with young people to support learning and well-being. She stated:

> COVID removed all the ways that we keep our arms around youth—how we monitor how they're doing by [noting] if they come to school, when they don't come, who they come with, how they look when they arrive, what they say, and how they interact. All of those observations and connections that schools really rely on in terms of assessing student well-being were not there.

Brown elaborated on this assessment by expressing that these pandemic-induced challenges and realizations taught the important lesson that the work of a school has to happen "on the back of a relationship, a sense of connectedness, and a sense of belonging."

Overall, interviewees suggested that these factors individually and collectively coalesced to enhance local uptake and sustained investment in advancing relationship-centered change in Long Beach Unified. Thus, these conditions and factors better enabled district and school officials to support the growth of emerging relationship-centered structures and practices that could improve the inclusive, equitable, and supportive quality of school environments and ultimately propel youth success and well-being.

RCS in Action: Elevating Relationships and Student Voice at Fresno's McLane High School

Situated in the heart of California's Central Valley—the state's most productive agricultural region—the Fresno Unified School District serves more than 70,000 students in its system of 106 schools. Among its secondary schools is McLane High School (McLane), a school that serves a distinct student population as compared to the average composition of its surrounding district and California at large. Of its more than 2,000 students, almost 74% are Latinx—a disproportionately higher rate than the district and state—with Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students comprising the second-largest student subgroup (17.6%). Nearly a quarter of McLane's student body are English learners, more than 95% are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and about 15% of its population is students with disabilities—statistics that again reflect a higher proportion of these demographic subgroups when compared to the district and California average. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Demographic Profile of McLane High School and Fresno Unified (2020–21)

Demographic	McLane High School	Fresno Unified School District	California Schools
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	95.7%	87.9%	58.9%
English learners	23.9%	18.5%	17.7%
Students with disabilities	15.5%	12%	13.3%
Asian, Filipino, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	17.6%	11.5%	12.1%
Black or African American	4.1%	8%	5.2%
Hispanic or Latinx	73.6%	69.1%	55.9%
White	3.2%	8.3%	21.1%
Other/Not reported	1.5%	3.1%	5.8%

Sources: Ed-Data. McLane High, 2020–21; Ed-Data. Fresno Unified, 2020–21; Ed-Data. California Public Schools, 2020–21.

As the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign work was taking hold at McLane, the school demonstrated areas of strength as well as areas for improvement in its efforts to support its student population. To illustrate, in 2018–19, McLane students scored lower than their more socioeconomically advantaged Fresno Unified counterparts in math and English language arts on the CAASPP, and the school had slightly higher rates of chronic absenteeism when compared to the district average. Moreover, only 63% of McLane students agreed or strongly agreed that their school cultivated a culture and climate that supported their learning and a sense of safety and inclusion, which was slightly lower than the

district average. These metrics signaled that efforts to improve the quality of relationships and other systems of support were likely needed to grow students' sense of belonging and connectedness to the school environment.

At the same time, McLane students graduate at higher rates and complete the series of college preparatory courses (i.e., A-G course requirements) at greater rates than the district average. Moreover, McLane students have shown larger improvements in their CAASPP scores in English language arts and math than the district average, suggesting that progress is being made among its student population. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Outcome Data for McLane High School and Fresno Unified High Schools (2018–19)

Outcomes	McLane High School	Fresno Unified School District High Schools
11th-grade CAASPP English language arts (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	35.8%	44.9%
Percentage change in meeting grade-level standards on CAASPP English language arts assessment (2016–17 to 2018–19)	+6.2%	+3.0%
11th-grade CAASPP math (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	9.7%	15.5%
Percentage change in students meeting grade-level standards on CAASPP math assessment (2016–17 to 2018–19)	+4.3%	+0.6%
Graduation rate	87.8%	84.2%
Graduates meeting A-G requirements	57.4%	50.3%
Chronic absenteeism	23.1%	21.1%
Suspension rate	8.6%	N/A
School climate and culture (% students who favorably assess their schools)	63%	65%

Notes: Fresno Unified California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results include charter and non-charter schools. Publicly available data on Fresno Unified suspension rates cannot be disaggregated by grade level, and thus are not presented in the table. The indicator of school climate and culture is based on the district's administration of the CORE student survey, which is used by the eight California districts in the CORE network.

Sources: Ed-Data. McLane High, 2020–21; Ed-Data. Fresno Unified, 2020–21; CORE Districts. Core Index, 2018–2019.

McLane school administrators and educators have remained engaged in school improvement efforts, particularly those aiming to cultivate a positive school climate in which students have healthy school attachments that propel learning, engagement, and academic persistence. The following sections describe those efforts.

They begin with a description of the structures and approaches McLane had in place to support relationship-building prior to the RCS campaign and how the school's promotion of restorative practices provided a springboard to grow attention for other dimensions of relationship-centered schooling. The sections then detail McLane's attention, beginning in 2018, to advancing the aims of the RCS campaign, which spurred efforts to improve relationship-building within some of its established school structures and to create new and more substantive avenues for elevating student voice and perspectives. Finally, this school profile concludes with a discussion of identified changes in school culture and practice that have emerged as a result of McLane's RCS efforts as well as a description of the enabling factors that help foster the school's sustained commitment to and engagement in relationship-centered school transformation work.

Relationship-Centered Approaches at McLane Prior to the Campaign

Historically, McLane has instituted many relationship- and community-building structures to foster positive school attachments and help students feel known in its large school environment. These have included common practices that are often staples in high schools. For example, to build community across the campus, the school has traditionally held a steady stream of events and activities, such as assemblies, rallies, and school dances, which create opportunities for students across grade levels to come together. McLane has also held periodic events, such as picnics on the campus's expansive quad, that allow educators and staff to connect and has encouraged McLane staff to use informal practices to engage with students on a personal level. With the school's class schedule of six 60-minute periods a day, informal moments for personal connection include educators greeting students at the classroom doors and performing everyday check-ins.

In recent years, the school also created homeroom periods through a redesign of McLane's master schedule, which held 22 minutes on the schedule every other week for a small group of students and a teacher to "connect outside of the classroom in a non-contingent way to build relationships."[55] McLane staff and administrators explained that the intention was for homerooms to loop, with students remaining with the same cohort from their freshman year to senior year. In codifying this forum, educators at McLane have been encouraged to build relationships in homerooms and their teaching periods, though school leaders note that the connections and relationships built in these periods varied in quality and tenor.

Relationship- and community-building at McLane has also traditionally extended to families and included approaches commonly used in secondary settings. For instance, administrators described a range of activities and events, such as back-to-school nights, open houses, award celebrations, and elective fairs, as opportunities to welcome families onto campus in asset-driven ways. In addition, as part of McLane's family engagement approach, the school held periodic coffee hours, supported learning opportunities through its parent university, and maintained a family coordinator who connected families with opportunities and resources.

Administrators also described the ways the school sought to build connections among McLane staff. These approaches, which aimed to cultivate a collegial work environment as well as support educators in implementing effective and responsive pedagogical approaches, included community-building activities like friendly staff competitions (e.g., rock-paper-scissors championships), staff celebrations, and coordinated fun activities (e.g., bowling days) that convened both certified and classified staff. They also included formal collaboration structures, such as regularly held time for professional learning communities (PLCs) that convened teachers in the same grade level and department (e.g., all 9th-grade English teachers) for 1 hour per week.[56] Administrators pointed to the importance of this structure, explaining that it allowed practitioners to come together to plan, review student artifacts, and discuss problems of practice. Principal Brian Wulf expressed that PLCs "ensure that they [educators] are in the same direction when they teach and that they are working toward the same outcome and goal." Administrators also noted that PLCs had the added benefit of providing school leaders and instructional coaches with a consistent time to meet with educators to support their professional development.

Growing engagement around restorative practices and relationships

Another notable relationship-centered approach at McLane has been its commitment to the use of restorative practices. By definition, restorative approaches build and repair relationships while supporting reflection, communication, and problem-solving among practitioners and students, particularly in the face of emerging issues.[57] They can be important relationship-building approaches as well as equitable and educative alternatives to harsh and exclusionary disciplinary practices that emphasize punishment and compliance, which have been shown to heighten student anxiety,[58] increase disengagement and detachment from school,[59] and aggravate the disproportionate disciplining of students of color and other marginalized groups.[60]

The seeds for McLane's commitment to relationship-centered schooling were sown with its schoolwide engagement with restorative approaches as part of the district's Restorative Practices Pilot. In 2013–14, Fresno Unified identified McLane as one of the first six early adopter sites of restorative practices as a strategy for improving school climate and community,[61] and allocated key resources and personnel to McLane to support the implementation of authentic and impactful restorative practices.

Notable among these were restorative practice school counselors—district employees associated with Fresno Unified's Department of Prevention and Intervention—who were embedded in pilot sites for multiple years to build practitioner capacity and the school's restorative policies and practices. Specifically, restorative practice school counselors were charged with onboarding staff to the initiative and leveraging site-based professional development forums and a school's culture and climate team—a structure found at each school in Fresno Unified—to provide educators with ongoing support. This support typically included helping practitioners build stronger relationships with their students and teaching them how to respond to minor challenges in their classrooms in restorative ways. Counselors were also designated facilitators of restorative conversations and processes that served as preventive or intervening measures to address harm or significant issues.

Rebecca Alemán was one of these restorative specialists and has served as McLane's Restorative Practice School Counselor since 2014. Alemán described the Restorative Practices Pilot rollout at McLane, noting how she and members of the culture and climate team began by conducting one-to-one interviews with every McLane teacher to surface challenges and needs. According to Alemán, these

conversations raised important concerns about what some described as the siloed nature of teaching at McLane and its potential impact on community- and relationship-building. In addition, the conversations identified the importance of building productive educator mindsets, particularly as the adoption of restorative practices sought to interrupt behaviors that furthered punitive discipline and traditional notions of authority and to encourage more relational and restorative structures and practices in their stead.

Insights gained through these introductory interviews were then shared with staff, and soon after were supplemented with circle conversations—facilitated by Alemán—that enabled staff to talk about school values, the current state of relationships and school discipline, and what the school might do next to continue its improvement journey. Moreover, these circle discussions served as a way of involving school staff in listening and sharing practices that they, in turn, could use when engaging students in restorative approaches.

After these discussions and onboarding activities, McLane continued its site-based professional development on restorative practices, typically facilitated by Alemán. School leaders at McLane explained that the ultimate goal of implementing restorative practices at the comprehensive high school was "to create a schoolwide campus culture where everything that we do focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships and a culture of care, concern, growth, and learning."[62] To this end, the school hoped to support staff in integrating relationship-centered practices into everyday practice to support learning so that, Alemán continued, "When a harm or hurt occurs, we have relationships that are worth restoring and repairing."[63] In addition, the school aimed to institute restorative approaches to conflict resolution that address interpersonal challenges in humanistic ways.

Alemán described the nature and scope of capacity-building opportunities to advance these aims:

> We teach our teachers how to respond to students in the moment for low-level incidents that can be resolved by taking into account students' needs. We also teach them to utilize a structured restorative chat model when needed to support a healthy and proactive solution-oriented conversation that preserves the relationship between both adult and student.

In addition to ongoing professional development, McLane instituted a Restorative Justice class for students (primarily seniors) to build their skills to lead hallmark restorative practices,[64] such as peer mediation and circles.

Efforts to transform McLane through restorative practices consistently included attention to relationships.

As indicated, efforts to transform McLane through restorative practices consistently included attention to relationships. Yet the school engaged in additional efforts when McLane was identified as a site for Fresno Unified's Student Voice/ Relationship Centered Schools Campaign—an initiative that first appeared in its 2017–18 Local Control Accountability Plan to support the district's restorative practice investments and its continued efforts to improve student engagement, attendance, and achievement. As part of the initiative, the district codified the priorities of elevating student voice, providing training to students and staff, and partnering with community-based organizations to promote relationship-centered schools. (See "The Relationship Centered Schools Campaign and Its Influence in Fresno Unified" for more details on campaign efforts and implementation at the district level.)

The Relationship Centered Schools Campaign and Its Influence in Fresno Unified

While the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign took its most robust form at the McLane school site, youth leaders and Californians for Justice (CFJ) organizers also worked within Fresno Unified School District to support the growth of relationship-centered practices across the district. Much of this work has sought to support and inform the development of Fresno Unified's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and its attention to and investment in relationship-centered approaches. In practice, this has meant creating opportunities for meaningful engagement for youth and communities in the district's LCAP process, which ultimately informed the district's decision to codify frameworks and allocate resources to restorative justice and RCS.

In addition to LCAP-related efforts, those engaged in the RCS campaign have supported districtwide professional development. Specifically, youth leaders, in partnership with CFJ, held facilitated learning sessions on topics such as implicit bias that were open to practitioners across the district and attended on a volunteer basis. Furthermore, RCS efforts have spurred the district to consider modifications to its school climate survey—a survey implemented as part of Fresno Unified's work with the CORE districts—so that it includes more substantive attention to relationships and student voice.

Source: Californians for Justice. Fresno.

With this initiative underway, McLane officially embarked on its work with the RCS campaign in 2018 and fostered a collaborative partnership with CFJ organizers, who increasingly engaged with practitioners and youth on the campus to grow relationships and knowledge of RCS and racial equity work. While the school did not have a formal CFJ chapter (i.e., club), CFJ organizers cultivated relationships with site leaders through frequent meetings and conversations to help them understand the initiative and its potential impact so that they, in partnership with McLane students, could carry the work forward. This is particularly true for Alemán, who has served as a liaison between CFJ and McLane administrators and practitioners since the onset of the campaign.

Through their partnership, Alemán has supported leaders and staff to understand the purposes and aims of the RCS campaign and its synergy with restorative practices. For instance, Principal Wulf described how Alemán had been instrumental in growing his knowledge of the campaign and its connection to restorative practices, particularly as he assumed the leadership helm after the initiatives had already begun. In addition, Alemán opened lines of communication between school staff and CFJ organizers, inviting CFJ organizers to site meetings, including gatherings of the school's climate and culture team. Interviewees noted that these opportunities allowed organizers to see the work of the school while prompting staff to draw connections between RCS and restorative practices.

On the heels of these introductory efforts, McLane leaders introduced the broader staff to the initiative, using listening circles during a staff meeting in which students spoke about their schooling experiences as staff listened. Wulf described what this opportunity signified:

> It was the first time the staff really had to put themselves in a vulnerable state with the students and just be listeners and then had to evaluate what they were being told. … It dropped the titles. It dropped everyone's role. Everyone became on equal footing.

With these initial efforts completed, McLane staff then began the important yet challenging work of building a more relationship-centered school—one that could enhance the restorative practices that it had been working to implement for years. To do this, they would pay particular attention to improving the quality of relationship-building within school structures as well as establish opportunities to more systematically solicit and elevate student voice.

Homerooms as a Forum for Relationship-Centered Improvement

Creating a relationship-centered environment in which each and every student is seen, known, and connected with a caring adult is a challenging task in comprehensive high schools, given their sheer size and typical organization. Yet research suggests that creating smaller communities within these settings—particularly those that create a family unit or home base for a group of students with a staff member—can support the development of consistent and positive connections among students and adults that propel learning and well-being.[65] This research demonstrates that this is particularly true when these home bases are consistent for 2 to 4 years to allow relationships and shared knowledge among a small group of students and a staff member to develop over time. Research also suggests that meeting regularly (i.e., 3–5 days a week), usually for a full class period, supports academic progress, social and emotional development, and attention to emerging challenges.

Before embarking on RCS work, homerooms at McLane sought to form small communities or home bases for the school's large student population, as these biweekly meeting periods were seen as forums that could enable more consistent, multiyear connections between and among students and a caring adult. To this end, educators were provided guidance on how to further the aims of relationship- and community-building during homeroom. These included receiving direct training on the approaches described in the resource *Classroom Meetings That Matter*[66] as well as a related scope and sequence of homeroom lessons and recommended activities curated by a group of high school teachers. McLane staff were also provided resources, such as "do's and don'ts" of community-building structures and ready-made lessons with accompanying PowerPoint slides they could use to engage students in relationship-building and social and emotional learning. McLane administrators also noted that staff could use some of their professional learning time to observe others implementing homeroom lessons.

In practice, the early iterations of homerooms did allow a small group of students to connect with the same teacher from their freshman year to senior year—albeit for a relatively short amount of time every 2 weeks. At the same time, administrators and teachers at McLane noted that the homeroom experience had been highly variable even after providing staff with time and resources to cultivate a relationship-centered homeroom period. Thus, McLane leaders identified homeroom as an established structure that was ripe for improvement and relationship-centered transformation.

Interviewees offered several reasons for homeroom-related challenges. One of them related to the mix of students assigned to homerooms and the general grade-level assignments of teachers, which did not always overlap. Alemán described some teachers as wondering, "'What are we supposed to do with 22 minutes with students that I might not necessarily see otherwise?' Or, 'I usually teach juniors, and I have a bunch of freshmen. What am I supposed to do?'" Jane Koshiba, a physics teacher who also taught the school's Restorative Justice class, shared a similar assessment. She explained, "Some homerooms really clicked and others not so much. … The teachers felt like, 'I'm out of my wheelhouse with this because these are kids I don't even know.'"

In addition to the wariness that emerged from grade-level mismatches in homeroom and the short time span for their biweekly engagement, others described how the staff orientations and teaching styles made the relationship-centered character of these periods differ across the school. Principal Wulf explained, "It'll always be somewhat of a challenge because you're working with a hundred different unique adults and … they're just so different. It's hard to have a cookie-cutter format."

To support staff who were struggling to build community in homeroom, the school sought a new solution as part of their RCS work—to develop and empower students to lead homeroom community-building efforts. Interviewees noted that this approach could help alleviate the anxieties or burdens some teachers felt about the class period. Lucila Ortíz, a CFJ organizer at McLane, expressed this sentiment, noting that having students play a significant role in homeroom relationship-building would make it "so that not everything lands on the teachers themselves and that they feel supported by the students in this process."

Other school leaders and practitioners also pointed to the shift's potential in enhancing relationships among and between students and educators, as it allowed both teachers and students to be more active participants in community-building. Wulf noted that student-led homerooms could yield greater openness and candor by inherently shifting power dynamics. He explained that student-led community-building can ease teacher tendencies to feel the need to "present to students" or to "become conservative or concerned about going deeper with certain topics." He also expressed that it potentially allowed students to be more open, as some students may have been more cautious about sharing if the teacher, who held a position of power and authority, were leading activities.

While many at McLane acknowledged that student-led advisories held great potential, they realized that for them to be impactful, student facilitators would need to have explicit opportunities to develop skills and competencies to facilitate relationship-building. To this end, school leaders looked to McLane's Restorative Justice class as a natural place to identify and support youth leaders who were already learning about the elements of restorative approaches.

Both Alemán and Koshiba explained how students in the Restorative Justice course were supported in building their facilitation skills. They noted how they, in collaboration with CFJ organizers who often attended the class, guided student learning over the course of a semester. This learning included direct instruction on the ranging purposes and structures of restorative circles and discussions and practice opportunities related to building communication skills, self- and social awareness, and relationship management. Youth also explicitly learned the motions of doing a community-building

circle, including setting up the space, and practiced facilitating them with the group to receive feedback and hone their abilities. Wulf explained the importance of this scaffolded and incremental approach to youth development:

> It took quite a while because you have to build students' capacity. … You have to have them model it, and we have to have them go through different focus groups where they do it and get feedback. … They did it in a safe, controlled group, and then they finally got to go out and do it in classrooms.

After engaging in these learning opportunities, youth leaders, with the support of Alemán and Koshiba, led schoolwide professional development sessions that guided teachers in understanding and facilitating community-building circles. In addition, in the early months of 2020, youth facilitators began leading circles in select McLane homerooms in which teachers volunteered for additional support.[67]

Pairs of youth facilitators were dispatched to six homerooms prior to the pandemic-induced school closures in March 2020. According to McLane staff, there were clear areas for improvement and youth development that surfaced from this first round of student-facilitated homeroom. For instance, some suggested that youth facilitation of homeroom could be improved by providing youth with additional opportunities to conduct circles to grow their confidence and capacity. In addition, better preparing teachers to co-facilitate homerooms with youth could also improve this approach so that it did not appear as if youth facilitators were "guest teachers" and educators were only participants.[68] Yet there was room for optimism given other feedback shared by participating homeroom teachers. Koshiba described a sentiment shared by a McLane English teacher who stated, "I just loved it, and I want to do this all the time. The students are all doing great work."

While momentum and feasibility around homeroom transformation was stifled by the onset of the pandemic, administrators and practitioners at McLane were optimistic about the precedent it set for their school culture. Alemán explained:

> I do feel like [the pandemic] has really taken us back to people going back to their silos. … However, we still have staff and students that are chomping at the bit just to talk about getting back into homeroom, having those connections, and being in a space with each other.

She further described why spaces for connection were particularly important in light of the disconnection she observed at McLane as the school reopened: "This is not apathy that we're seeing. … It's atrophy. It's a social atrophy, and we have to actually get back into the habit of rebuilding that muscle of what it takes to reestablish relationships." Administrators noted that homeroom and community-building practices would continue to be an important part of rebuilding relationships as well as social and emotional skills, as they enabled productive and empathetic interpersonal connection and communication.

Student Voice at the Center of Change Efforts

In addition to their efforts to support relationship-building in homerooms, leaders and staff at McLane sought to elevate student voice as part of their relationship-focused improvement work. Much of this work entailed bringing more diverse student representation into decision-making and professional learning spaces, which interviewees noted had not been systematically done at the school in years prior.

Like other California secondary schools, McLane had some structures in place to facilitate collaborative decision-making that included the perspectives of varied constituents, and one of these forums—the Principal's Advisory Council—became the focus of McLane's change efforts. Traditionally, the council had been composed of administrators and elected department chairs who reviewed every policy that had an impact on teachers. Yet internal discussions among administrators and council members revealed a growing interest in expanding representation to include students who could lend important insights into pedagogical practice and school climate.

To grow the council, school leaders intentionally recruited students from a broad cross-section of the campus. Wulf explained that they wanted to ensure that the most vocal or visible student leaders on campus were not the primary or only voices on the Principal Advisory Council. With this intention, he and other council members implemented a broad-based recruitment process:

> At a high school, it's pretty common to have a variety of different clubs and organizations. … We have a BSU [Black Student Union]. We have a GSA [Gender & Sexuality Alliance] and other different focus areas and groups. … We have these organizations on campus make their own recommendations for the students who will then represent them on the council.

Wulf explained that this recruitment approach allowed school leaders to learn from students who may have otherwise been less heard. He explained, "Through this process we learned that we had a lot of students that may be overlooked because they aren't big personalities … but it doesn't mean they have any less of an impactful voice."

With more diverse student representation, the Principal's Advisory Council became a forum to learn how students were experiencing school—what Wulf described as similar to a focus group in which practitioners listened to students about what was happening in classrooms and the broader school environment. At the same time, interviewees noted that the council sought student insights on specific topics and areas for improvement, including cultural responsiveness at McLane. In Fresno Unified, practitioners across the district engaged in cultural proficiency professional development modules that were intended to help them understand the varied and often nuanced ways that racism and cultural bias can manifest in schools. Targeted discussions on cultural responsiveness during council meetings were intended to continue this learning and elicited student perspectives on if or how their cultures and backgrounds were reflected or validated in classrooms and the school at large.

Through their presence in and contributions to advisory council discussions, student representatives lent their insights to identifying areas of strength and struggle at McLane—insights that led to some school policy changes and considerations, according to school leaders. For example, Wulf shared that the insights students provided in committee spaces informed McLane's decision to alter their schedule to begin later in the day—a decision made before the 2019 California law that mandates that high schools begin no earlier than 8:30 a.m.—to accommodate home life responsibilities that many students faced (e.g., sibling drop-off, caretaking), which were causing difficulties in attendance.

With the insights garnered from students in decision-making spaces, practitioners and leaders at McLane also noted that student voice was a growing feature of the school's professional development opportunities. For example, students were invited to attend select full-staff meetings or convenings of

McLane's Culture and Climate team to inform and support staff reflection and improvement processes, and as noted previously, even co-led learning sessions on community-building and circle implementation for McLane staff.

Like the process of improving homerooms, efforts to elevate student voice and leadership at McLane were significantly stifled by the pandemic. Interviewees noted that it became increasingly difficult to have students participate in virtual committee meetings or to lend their insights at professional development sessions due to their increased responsibilities (e.g., sibling or elder care, employment). At the same time, leaders and educators at McLane remained hopeful that there would be continued support for understanding and elevating student perspectives given the shared experiences and challenges that living through the pandemic surfaced. Wulf explained:

> [COVID has] blurred the lines between adults and students. I think it's actually had a positive impact on relationships. … You are actually—perhaps for the first time—in this together. You all have the same struggles. You have the same frustrations right now. You have the same challenges.

With the potential empathy born of shared experience, interviewees expressed optimism that McLane practitioners would understand the importance of relationships and student voice and would be eager to continue this work.

Relationship-Centered Changes in School Culture

Findings show that leaders and educators at McLane have not only articulated a commitment to becoming a restorative and relationship-centered school, but have also taken concrete steps to modify or create structures and practices that enable them to meet these aims. While these efforts remain ongoing and incremental, interviewees noted that engaging in this long-term, equity-oriented work has begun to spur change.

Leaders and educators at McLane have not only articulated a commitment to becoming a restorative and relationship-centered school, but have also taken concrete steps to modify or create structures and practices.

Some of these changes related to how teachers and staff understood and implemented the school's tiered systems of support. According to school administrators, teachers became more comfortable with relying on relationships as initial and primary ways to identify and address emerging challenges. Wulf explained:

> We have a tiered response plan with these [relationships and restorative practices] as prerequisites. These are how we deal with situations. … And we see patterns. When a team meets to review what's happening, they consider why we are having an uptick in things at this level. What's transpiring? Is it the relationship between adults and students?

Staff shared corroborating comments, noting how engaging in relationship-centered school transformation had altered how they approached challenges. Koshiba, the school's Restorative Justice course instructor, described how building connections with students had become "tied to almost everything" at McLane. She explained, "Even our discipline procedures require us to examine what we're doing before you have to take the student outside to talk to them or call their parents. What kind of relationship did you build first?" An instructional leader who often works with new teachers at McLane offered similar thoughts, adding that the school's relationship-centered approach had even enhanced how she supported educators:

> It has helped me see our kids differently and to advocate for them differently. I've become better educated about their circumstances and their family lives … and I think it has helped me be able to support them better. But also, on the same plane, I think about the teachers the same way: What has the teacher been through? What is the teacher's background? What might cause them to approach a kid differently than maybe what we would prefer?

With these changes, some interviewees expressed that the emphasis on relationships at McLane had also resulted in changes in school culture, making it so relational and restorative approaches were a "part of the fabric of McLane."[69] Alemán's reflection on her tenure at McLane provides insights into these cultural shifts. She noted a tangible difference in the faculty's orientation to building relationships with students and engaging student voice:

> To think about that first mindset stepping onto this campus and hearing, "If we listen to kids, they're going to run the show. There's going to be chaos. Who's going to have the authority here?"… To now, with the pendulum swinging and to come far enough to where that's not the first thought. … This is a culture where we listen to students first—where we get to know them. To be able to witness that transformation is incredible to me.

Some students also described positive changes in their schooling experiences amid these relationship-centered transformation efforts. Specifically, they noted a greater willingness on the part of teachers to inquire about their well-being, particularly when issues emerged. One student stated, "One of my teachers actually hit me up asking why I didn't finish a test, and I opened up. It meant a lot because he actually cared." Another recalled a series of interactions between them and their math teacher, stating, "My math teacher reached out to me and asked if everything was all right. … He knew something was going on at home or with me. He did help. He made things more engaging and tutored me and helped me pass." In both instances, educators connected with students to understand the root causes behind school challenges and relied on relationships to build a bridge that could support student well-being and academic progress.

Factors Enabling Relationship-Centered Change at McLane

Emerging changes at McLane have been spurred by the school's ongoing commitment to relationship-centered schooling approaches and deliberate efforts to continuously improve their practice. When asked how the school sustains these commitments and focus, school staff and administrators acknowledged some enabling conditions and factors that have supported the school in its change efforts.

Among these were **staff and administrator champions**, who enabled relationship-centered improvement efforts to remain a priority. Maria Ortega, a CFJ organizer who supported RCS efforts across Fresno Unified and local secondary schools, shared this assessment:

> At McLane, we had the buy-in of our champion [Alemán]. She brought on staff and high-level administrators like the principal. We were able to make changes much faster and implement them a lot faster than our other sites.

As interviewees noted the important role that practitioner champions played in enabling McLane's prolonged commitment to relationship-centered practices, they also pointed to the **coherence between RCS and existing priorities and initiatives** as a key reason for why the RCS campaign had gained traction. Specifically, at McLane and in Fresno Unified, relationship-centered school transformation reinforced and enhanced the attention given and investments made to the implementation of restorative practices. In reflecting on the progress of RCS work at McLane, Fresno Unified Superintendent Bob Nelson explained how the Restorative Practices Pilot and the RCS campaign were both "humanizing" educational approaches:

> [Cultivating] relationship-centered schools is saying, "I'm a human in this space. You're one in yours. We're going to find areas around which we can connect. And if we disagree, we'll find a way to do that in a way that preserves the humanity of one another. … Restorative [practices] requires the same sensibility.

With the similar sensibilities they require, restorative and relationship-centered practices could be seen as complementary rather than competing, potentially helping practitioners to embrace the two initiatives with more ease and understanding.

Interviewees at McLane also mentioned the synergy between RCS and restorative practices as an enabling factor, noting how the school's years as a district-designated Restorative Practices Pilot site created the conditions for the RCS campaign to take hold. Lucila Ortíz, a CFJ organizer at McLane, explained how the school's work on restorative practices had helped to shift mentalities on traditional discipline practices, and thus helped McLane move more readily into the next phase of its relationship-centered school improvement. She described this in the following way: "Now that you [McLane staff] are able to see students as human and their mistakes as separate from who they are as a person, let's create an institutional space for relationships with the students and the adults." Overall, administrators and school leaders described the congruence between restorative practices and relationship-centered schooling as a key enabling factor that helped RCS take root and grow.

Finally, many interviewees pointed to McLane's **collaborative and relationship-centered approach to change** as an enabling factor. As part of the RCS change process, McLane staff, administrators, CFJ organizers, and youth consistently engaged in candid and bidirectional communication about the challenges and opportunities of relationship-building at the high school to ground and drive reform, which helped school actors feel integral and connected to transformation work. In recalling the numerous listening circles, interviews, and full-staff reflections that were facilitated as part of the RCS campaign at McLane, Alemán reflected on how they set the foundation for why RCS was readily embraced:

> That process of holding a circle, holding a space, having that conversation about repairing relationships. … They [students] didn't get punished for saying or speaking [their] truth. They were validated, and then they felt empowered. It was like, "No, *you* are the ones that get to do the work and own it and be proud of it. It's not me. I just helped to facilitate this with you. You guys have been the ones all along." I would say that they were able to embrace that.

The positive impact of a collaborative and relationship-centered process also extended to the partnership with CFJ and their youth leaders, which interviewees noted provided important thought partnership that pushed school leaders and practitioners to think outside the box[70] and to imagine what was possible in cultivating relationships and elevating student voice.

Overall, leaders and practitioners at McLane described how these various factors came together to support McLane in its ongoing work to be a relationship-centered and restorative school environment. With these enabling conditions in place, the school has found concrete ways to elevate student voice and to attend to relationship-building practices within its school structures. Interviewees noted that the school's culture and students' schooling experiences are positively changing as a result.

Findings and Takeaways From Long Beach Unified and McLane High School

Relationship-centered schools, which support holistic well-being and propel learning, are increasingly advocated for in community, policy, and practitioner circles. This report provides insights into how practitioners and leaders—in partnership with youth and community members—may engage in the critical work of advancing the relationship-centered school transformation that has long been needed to advance equity and opportunity for students, particularly those from marginalized communities.

Findings from this report highlight the processes and dynamics surrounding the Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign, a California initiative that sought to spur locally driven, relationship-centered transformation in secondary schools through its distinct community organizing approach to change. In doing so, this case study demonstrates how efforts can unfold at the district and school levels and what approaches can make a difference in advancing change. While the campaign represents one of likely many efforts to advance equitable and relationship-centered change in secondary schools, it offers findings and insights into key activities, processes, and structures that may initiate and realize relationship-centered schools in other settings.

Establishing structures for relationship-building was one of the key factors that supported growing attention to improving connections between youth and adults in schools through the RCS campaign. Actors in both Long Beach Unified and McLane High School established new forums and practices and, at times, sought to improve long-standing structures to create increased opportunities to develop and deepen relationships between educators, administrators, and youth. In Long Beach Unified, these included the creation of shared learning opportunities and attention to empathy-building practices, while efforts to improve the relationship-centered character of the school's homeroom structure and increased opportunities for student voice characterized RCS work at McLane. While additional structures are needed to ensure that these relationship-centered forums are high-quality, widespread, and consistently held, these incremental activities represent important steps in creating more consistent opportunities to ensure all students are known, seen, and connected to a caring adult.

The importance of creating forums and opportunities for relationship-building also extended to the students, educators, leaders, and Californians for Justice (CFJ) organizers leading RCS efforts. In both Long Beach Unified and McLane, **building trusting relationships among those driving change** made a difference, as it cultivated meaningful dialogue, shared investment, and a deeper understanding of the work and the importance of partnership. Interviewees described how opportunities for consistent engagement and partnership among youth, leaders, educators, and/or CFJ organizers were central features of local efforts. Some interviewees elaborated on this dimension of the change process, noting how and why these connections were important. The comments expressed by Maria Ortega, a CFJ organizer in Fresno Unified, represent a poignant reflection on the role of relationships in change work. She explained:

> We're working for transformation, but in that process, it's been great to see the humanity of people: "You're not just a principal. You're also a person. Let's have this conversation. Let's spend some time getting to know one another." I think that's really been key in allowing the work to be as deep, as strong, and to carry out over months or years and not be a kind of a transactional relationship.

Overall, interviewees suggested that RCS implementation was built and sustained through intentional relationship-building and ongoing opportunities for meaningful dialogue and exchange. This reveals an almost commonsense lesson: Efforts to improve the quality and character of relationships between young people and practitioners in schools are enhanced when the change efforts themselves are characterized by relationship-building and care.

Creating opportunities for professional development, particularly through the creation of learning experiences at the district or site level that allowed leaders, educators, and youth to learn with and from each other, was also important in furthering relationship-centered schooling. The shared learning that occurred in forums like Learning Days, dedicated professional learning communities, and the inclusion of youth in professional development sessions supported collaboration and created opportunities for connections to develop at the district or site level. In addition, they built common knowledge among participants that deepened understandings of the importance of and need for making relationship-centered change.

Shared learning opportunities also **fostered empathy-building and deep listening practices** as a powerful strategy for enhancing the quality of relationships and adult–youth interactions. In Long Beach Unified, youth and adults developed their empathetic capacities by learning about and engaging in activities such as empathy interviews and shadowing students, which helped build bridges and connections that spanned age, identity, and traditional lines of authority. At McLane in Fresno, youth and practitioners increasingly engaged in dialogue in committee and professional development forums, which often centered students' experiences at the high school and thus drew attention to areas of growth and opportunity to advance relationship-centered changes. Collectively, these efforts created opportunities for connection and empathy-building among youth and adults, which served as an important foundation for the equity-oriented work of transforming schools to be relationship-centered.

Empathy-building approaches also demonstrated how **elevating and valuing youth voice**—a central principle of the RCS campaign—could enhance and support relationship-centered change. In the structures and forums instituted at McLane and in Long Beach Unified—particularly those that enabled increased and diverse youth representation in decision-making forums and professional learning settings—youth shared their experiences and lent their insights and perspectives to change efforts. Their perspectives helped to surface ongoing challenges and, at times, to identify potential remedies that could support equitable and relationship-centered practices and structures. Many educators, administrators, and CFJ organizers described a deep appreciation for youth voice and perspectives, noting the creativity, richness, and relevance of student insights in diagnosing equity challenges and identifying possible solutions. CFJ organizer Omar Cardenas's comments capture commonly expressed sentiments:

> This work has confirmed that young people have just as much insight, wisdom, skill sets, potential, expertise … to sit at the table, to be decision-makers, and to inform and guide the process and success of any district or any school system.

In shedding light on the role that youth voice played in local relationship-centered change efforts, this study's findings build upon the growing body of research that demonstrates how engaging youth as deep collaborators and co-leaders can advance substantive and equitable reform[71]—an approach that has also been shown to support postsecondary achievement and civic engagement among youth engaged in change efforts.[72]

Lessons ascertained from the RCS campaign also suggest that **finding coherence between relationship-centered schooling and preexisting priorities and initiatives** can influence local engagement and investment in relationship-centered change. This was particularly demonstrated at McLane, where improving the quality and tenor of youth–adult relationships was seen as instrumental to the school's ongoing implementation of restorative practices, which aim to cultivate meaningful connections, equity-oriented mindsets, and healthy school attachments. When RCS was understood as aligned with or reinforcing of efforts underway, RCS was more readily embraced, as it was more easily understood as enhancing other initiatives. Moreover, congruence between RCS and other initiatives allowed practitioners and youth leaders to leverage emerging structures, routines, and commitments to grow RCS practice among site and district actors.

Cultivating the support of administrator and educator champions was also identified as an enabling factor that made a difference across the regions. Educators and school and/or district administrators who worked alongside youth in their RCS campaigns played an important role in supporting the process of transformation. Their efforts often created opportunities to support relationship-centered school changes, and their perspectives enriched professional development sessions as they shared insights about RCS practice and its impact. Overall, while local implementation of the RCS campaign often engaged a subset of educators and administrators in its early phases, these practitioners played an important role in helping RCS gain visibility and traction. Their impact was particularly felt under **stable leadership**, as this provided continuity to change efforts and helped to onboard educators and administrators when there was turnover.

Finally, **allocating fiscal resources to support relationship-centered approaches** was also seen as supportive of uptake and implementation. Investments included those related to relationship-building structures and capacity-building (e.g., stipends for participation or leadership in professional development opportunities related to RCS), which allowed youth and practitioners to collectively learn about the potential impact of relationships in supporting student learning and well-being. In addition, funding allocations were discussed as important resources that communicated the district's commitment to the transformation effort while acknowledging the time, energy, and labor that practitioners and youth leaders expended in this critical work.

The RCS campaign represents one collaborative effort to support the redesign of comprehensive secondary schools to be settings in which youth, particularly youth of color and youth from low-income backgrounds, maintain positive connections that can spur academic success and holistic well-being. While the campaign is ongoing and bounded in its reach and scope, evidence garnered from the campaign provides important insights into the structures and processes that can bolster change, which can in turn inform others seeking to advance relationship-centered change in their schools and districts.

Appendix A: Methodology

This study investigated how local actors worked to transform comprehensive secondary schools to be more relationship-centered in practice and structure. It considered how local leaders, practitioners, community organizers, and youth collaborated to spur changes in the school environment and what factors supported or inhibited their efforts. With these aims, the investigation answered the following research questions:

- How does the process of transforming schools to be relationship-centered schools transpire in local settings?
- What emerging changes, if any, have been generated for students, practitioners, and the broader schooling environment as a result of these efforts?
- What conditions have supported or hindered school transformation work?
- What lessons can be garnered from this transformation work? How can we apply these lessons to future efforts?

The youth-led Relationship Centered Schools (RCS) campaign—conducted in partnership with local actors, including Californians for Justice (CFJ), district and school administrators, and educators—was purposively identified as an "information-rich case"[73] that could generate insights into these research questions. First, the campaign represents a current effort, allowing researchers to capture the change process as it unfolds. Investigating efforts while they are underway enables more accurate assessments of the dynamics at play and buffers the potential impact of relying on retrospective data, which can affect data availability and interpretations of those engaged in transformation activities. In addition, the RCS campaign seeks to advance change in multiple California regions, allowing researchers to examine how efforts transpire in contexts with distinct political, social, and educational dynamics. This variation is important, as it allows for a more systematic comparison of change processes and the factors that propel and hinder them, which can generate stronger conclusions.

The demographic composition of the campaign's regions—Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, and San José—also makes a case study of relationship-centered transformation in these settings relevant and valuable for the field. Many students and families in these California regions are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have likely experienced discrimination and challenges due to their racial, economic, and/or linguistic identity markers. As research shows, youth with these demographic characteristics often attend schools that are overcrowded, under-resourced, and ineffectively structured to support the learning, relationship-building, and healthy development of all students.[74] Examining how relationship-centered improvements can take hold in schools supporting marginalized groups can advance understandings into the processes that can enable equity and opportunity that are long overdue in these communities.

Research Design

To answer the study's questions, the research team used a nested case study research design. Case studies enable researchers to examine a phenomenon in context, allowing them to investigate the varied processes and dynamics that surround the phenomenon as they unfold in real-world settings over which researchers have little to no control.[75] Researchers conducting case studies often draw upon multiple data sources that allow them to more comprehensively understand the phenomenon under consideration.

Given its attention to contextual factors and varied processes, a case study approach is an appropriate research design to surface the complex ways that relationship-centered transformation efforts transpire in local settings.

This study's research design also supports holistic and nested case analyses, which can surface insights about the phenomenon in question and its distinct manifestations in varied contexts. Nested case analyses enable researchers to examine a broader phenomenon and its embedded subunits, which supports systematic comparisons of patterns within and across the study's sample to corroborate evidence and illuminate embedded case dynamics.[76] In this study, researchers consider the RCS campaign the overarching case of a transformation effort, while its regional uptakes can be understood as its nested subunits.

With this design, this report illustrates how relationship-centered transformation has uniquely unfolded in local settings and draws its conclusions from the commonalities that emerged across the nested cases to identify lessons and takeaways for researchers, practitioners, and educational decision-makers. Given that the RCS campaign is a locally driven and relatively recent effort, schools and regions were at differing stages of their change journeys, with some displaying more engagement and uptake with RCS than others. Therefore, the level of data garnered about the four regions varied, and researchers opted to focus their data collection on school sites and/or regions with more robust investment in and implementation of relationship-centered change efforts.

Data Collection

Researchers collected data for this study from May 2020 through October 2022. Primary data sources for this study included interviews, documents, and observations.

Interviews

The research team conducted a total of 28 interviews with 25 individuals, including school and district administrators, educators, CFJ organizers and staff, and CFJ youth leaders (see Table A1). The interviews were conducted in multiple phases.

The first wave of interviews focused on understanding the origins and goals of the RCS campaign and general impressions of its site-level implementation across the state. With this aim, researchers used purposive sampling to identify CFJ staff (e.g., lead organizers, organizing directors, strategy directors) who actively supported the campaign at the organizational and regional levels. Through these initial interviews (n=10), researchers also learned of regions and school sites with more robust uptake of RCS, which could provide rich data on the multiple dynamics surrounding the relationship-centered change process. Specifically, initial interviews suggested that two regions—Fresno and Long Beach—had more prolonged and substantive engagement in RCS efforts at the district and/or school levels and could thus surface a range of insights into change processes and their varied character. With this, researchers prioritized data collection and interview efforts in these two regions during the study's second phase.

To understand the RCS campaigns in Fresno and Long Beach, researchers used snowball sampling[77] to identify district officials, school leaders, educators, and/or alumni who served as CFJ youth organizers[78] who could provide in-depth knowledge of change processes in their respective regions. This sampling

approach used the knowledge and experience of CFJ staff to identify respondents who could effectively speak to local RCS efforts and their impact and implementation. These interviews sought to understand the process by which local actors were introduced to RCS and how the initiative had proceeded in the district and/or participating schools. Researchers also asked interviewees to speak to the factors that supported or hindered their efforts; emerging changes in practice or structure resulting from the campaign; and lessons learned that could inform how others might productively engage in relationship-centered change.

Table A1: Study Interviewees

Role	Number of interviewees
District leaders	3 (1 = Fresno; 2 = Long Beach)
School administrators	6 (2 = Fresno; 3 = Long Beach; 1 = Oakland)
Teachers and teacher leaders	4 (3 = Fresno; 1 = Long Beach)
Former CFJ youth leaders	2 (2 = Long Beach)
CFJ staff and organizers	10
Total	25

Note: While there were 25 individuals interviewed in this study, researchers conducted a total of 28 interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 45 to 75 minutes. In most instances, study participants were interviewed once, but three individuals were interviewed multiple times to solicit additional information given their school or district-level leadership in local RCS efforts. In addition, two study participants were interviewed at the same time, per a request for convenience. All interviews were conducted virtually to conform with physical distancing protocols necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and were audio-recorded and later transcribed to support data analysis with permission from participants.

Documents

Documents comprised the second primary data source. Researchers collected and reviewed 28 documents, including:

- CFJ organizational documents, such as those that described the RCS campaign, its pillars and intended outcomes, and related research and policy briefs;
- district and school documents, such as school board policies, programming or school descriptions, descriptive demographic data, and professional development agendas and supplemental materials;
- press and research reports that described RCS efforts; and
- formative data procured from practitioners and students participating in RCS efforts and activities (e.g., responses to reflection prompts, feedback survey results after an RCS-related professional development sessions).

Researchers reviewed these documents to gain a more holistic understanding of the RCS campaign and its localized uptake, implementation, and emerging impact. Documents also helped to corroborate information provided in interviews, particularly regarding the focus and structure of shared learning opportunities that had been instituted as a result of RCS efforts and local policies that had been crafted in light of RCS commitments.

Observations

Researchers conducted a limited number of observations of RCS-related activities, as observations were inhibited by the onset of COVID-19 and its related physical distancing requirements as well as the significant demands it placed on schools and practitioners. Due to these limitations, researchers only observed two RCS-related shared learning opportunities, which were both facilitated in Long Beach.

The first was an all-day, youth-led Learning Day in February 2020, which brought together approximately 50 youth leaders, local practitioners, and individuals from across the state and country to learn about RCS, its implementation in Long Beach, and some of its hallmark practices (e.g., deep listening, empathy interviews). The second was a virtually facilitated convening of Long Beach's Equity and Inclusion Relationship Centered Professional Learning Network in October 2021, which convened approximately 30 youth leaders, school administrators, educators, and families from five comprehensive high schools to discuss site-based equity challenges and how to address them.

These observations in Long Beach allowed researchers to gain insight into the scope, content, and collaborative character of shared learning opportunities—an emerging practice spurred by the RCS campaign in many CFJ regions. It also helped researchers triangulate and enrich data retrieved from interviews and documents, which often conveyed details about shared learning opportunities in more summative and overarching ways. At the same time, researchers acknowledge that observations were limited in number, thus inhibiting an in-depth depiction of the day-to-day processes to advance relationship-centered change.

Analysis

To analyze data sources, researchers used a multistep process. First, they created a code list based on the ideas present in the semi-structured interview protocol. They then refined the code list after a preliminary review of interview transcripts to include themes, structures, and practices reflected in the data. In this process, researchers added and deleted codes from the original list and clarified code definitions to minimize redundancy and to better capture RCS implementation and its surrounding dynamics.

Once the codebook was revised, researchers applied the codes to interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. To support interrater reliability, researchers met periodically to discuss code applications to ensure the consistency of their interpretations. Once qualitative coding was completed with the use of Dedoose Qualitative Analysis Software, researchers analyzed code or pattern frequency within and across the case and its embedded units. Researchers identified something as a finding if the conclusion was triangulated and convergent. At the same time, researchers took time to examine divergent findings to understand the complexity and nuances of RCS dynamics where relevant.

About the Authors

Laura E. Hernández is a Senior Researcher at the Learning Policy Institute and co-leads the Whole Child Education team. She specializes in designing and conducting qualitative research on whole child approaches and the systems and structures that enable them. Her work is informed by her 9 years of classroom teaching as well as her interdisciplinary research training focused on education policies and the factors that affect their equitable and democratic implementation. To date, her work has examined the systems, factors, and processes surrounding a range of reforms, including community schools, deeper learning school design, and relationship-centered schooling initiatives. Hernández holds a PhD in Education Policy from the University of California, Berkeley; an MST from Pace University in New York City; and a BA in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Eddie Rivero is a visiting professor at Columbia Teachers College in Bilingual/Bicultural Education. As a critical learning scientist, he employs cultural historical approaches in the design of learning ecologies that examine the power dynamics that shape young people's literacy development. He also focuses on designing equitable, technology-supported learning environments in collaboration with youth from nondominant communities and how teachers can leverage the everyday media practices of youth to develop culturally sustaining pedagogies. His policy work underscores the significance of social and emotional learning and relationship-building for youth from nondominant communities. In his publications, Rivero has examined learning ecologies organized around youth play, underscoring the significance of supporting their collective agency and the pivotal role of relationship-building in their educational and developmental trajectories. Rivero holds a PhD in Education from the University of California, Berkeley.

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68. Written communication with Rebecca Alemán, Restorative Practice School Counselor at McLane High School (2023, April 12).

69. Interview with Jane Koshiba, Physics and Restorative Justice Teacher (2021, May 26).

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