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# Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development

A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success

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This paper draws from and elaborates upon the 2019 white paper, “The Intersection Between Human Learning and Thriving and Equity,” prepared by David Osher and Michelle Boyd for the Spencer Foundation.

## About the Readiness Projects

With an unwavering focus on youth potential, the Readiness Projects advance work informed by science and grounded in practice, supporting adults in all settings and systems across the diverse youth fields.

The Forum for Youth Investment, the National Urban League, and the American Institutes for Research have united to devote our time, resources, and perspectives to stimulate equity-driven solutions and policies.

With partners, we will accelerate work that demands equitable learning and development opportunities and builds on the strengths of people working at all levels to help children, youth, and young adults thrive.



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# Introduction

The potential for thriving is universal, but so to is the existence of adversity. Young people can overcome adversities, but the ease of doing so is not equally shared. Opportunity structures – in schools, communities, and society – make it easier for some youth to avoid or buffer the impacts of adversity than others. Our paper speaks to the needs of all youth, as every youth can benefit from robust approaches to thriving, equity, and learning. The cumulative impacts of inequity and trauma, however, propel us to particularly call out the need to improve opportunity structures to address and eliminate the disadvantages created by current systems and practices. We also call out the need to eliminate the root causes of structural inequality in opportunities for youth to thrive across all domains.

Developing more powerful conceptualizations of thriving, equity, and learning and development, and considering them together, enriches our understanding of each. In doing so we can leverage recent syntheses of the science of adolescence, the science of learning and development, and the impacts of institutionalized inequities to emphasize the fact that children and adolescents can realize their potential and thrive. Young people can thrive even in the face of current and past adversities if they have steady exposure to contexts and relationships that are designed to provide safety, support, and challenge. The convergent science findings on developmental potential and on how, when, where, and with whom learning and development happen challenge traditional thinking in the education field about thriving, equity, and learning.<sup>1</sup>

The terms “thriving,” “equity,” and “learning and development” (linked together) are frequently found in the same sentence, especially when the topic is education. The relationship between the terms, however, is not always clear. Thriving, equity, learning, and development are connected to different goals and, by association, different systems: thriving with health; equity with racial justice and economics; learning with education; and development with developmental science. *More complete, nuanced and scientifically grounded definitions can highlight the dynamic interrelationships among thriving, equity, and learning and development in ways that should inform policies and practices.*

The primary purpose of this paper is to present the research base to support this concept. In the sections that follow, we:

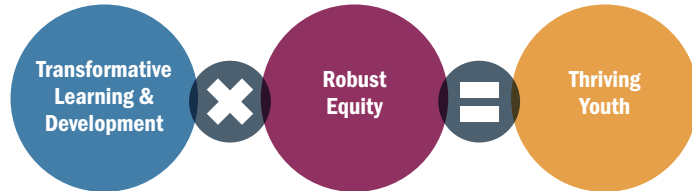
- ▶ **Introduce a formula and a rationale for addressing thriving, equity, and learning and development together that helps us better focus on actionable social factors;**
- ▶ **Summarize prevailing definitions of thriving, equity, and learning and development (and related terms);**
- ▶ **Take a deeper dive into the dimensions that contribute to individual and collective thriving;**
- ▶ **Offer powerful and aligned conceptualizations of thriving, equity, and learning and development;**
- ▶ **Describe the opportunities and conditions required to ensure that efforts to create “equitable educational outcomes” or “equitable learning and development opportunities” are as powerful and inclusive as possible.**

The science of learning and development presents many powerful lessons that can transform education systems, advance equity, and can help every young person thrive.

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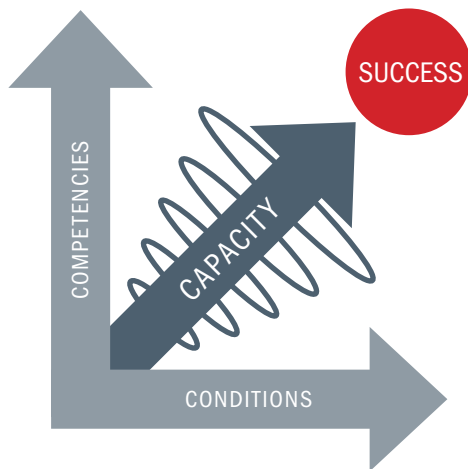
## A Timely Formula for Linking the Concepts

Thriving, equity, and learning and development should be linked in our thinking and practice. Although they are often treated separately, they are dynamically related in practice and in outcomes. Addressing them together enriches our understanding of each and helps us address the social factors that support or constrain thriving. Thriving, equity, and learning and development can be examined and addressed at an individual, collective (or group), community, and system level. More complete and nuanced explorations of each concept validate these connections. When fully defined, each concept stretches the others and reinforces the fact that an integrated approach is significantly more powerful than the sum of the parts.



One way to grasp the connections is to consider how the interplay between individual *competencies* and supportive *conditions* affect young people's behaviors and, equally important, our predictions of their *capacity* to thrive. Capacity is more than a skill or competence. It is produced by the combination of (1) technical and social and emotional competence and (2) supportive proximate and societal conditions.

A young person's success is linked to their capacity to thrive – to feel, be, and be seen as competent in multiple life domains – and is a product of their opportunities to develop individual competencies and experience supportive conditions. Adults can support young people to succeed and thrive through life by helping them develop their individual competencies, and also by providing supportive conditions while also working with them and their families to address historical and institutional barriers.



The relationship between competencies, conditions, and capacity, however, is not a simple additive one. It is dynamically interactive. A young person's willingness to demonstrate a competency, for example, is dependent upon their assessment of the environment. That assessment, however, can be influenced by immediate or recurring past experiences. At the same time, a young person who successfully navigates a hostile environment or adverse experience is likely to feel better equipped to navigate future experiences.

In part, it is the recognition of the powerful and dynamic interplay that these factors have on youth success that is driving research, practice, and policy changes focused on creating equitable learning environments. This press for change is squarely focused on schools since state and local education districts have formal accountability for academic learning. The opportunity to create equitable learning environments, however, extends well beyond schools and includes an array of public (e.g., libraries, museums), non-profit, faith based, and civic organizations that support young people's learning and development.

COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd and many others have thrust the country into long-overdue debates about how (not whether) to dismantle systemic and institutional inequities that are literally taking the lives of Black Americans and other people of color. Systemic changes are needed in every system – not just law enforcement and education. Fundamental changes in beliefs and mindsets are needed in every adult – not just police officers and teachers. Educational equity, however, cannot be achieved without a focus on racial equity.

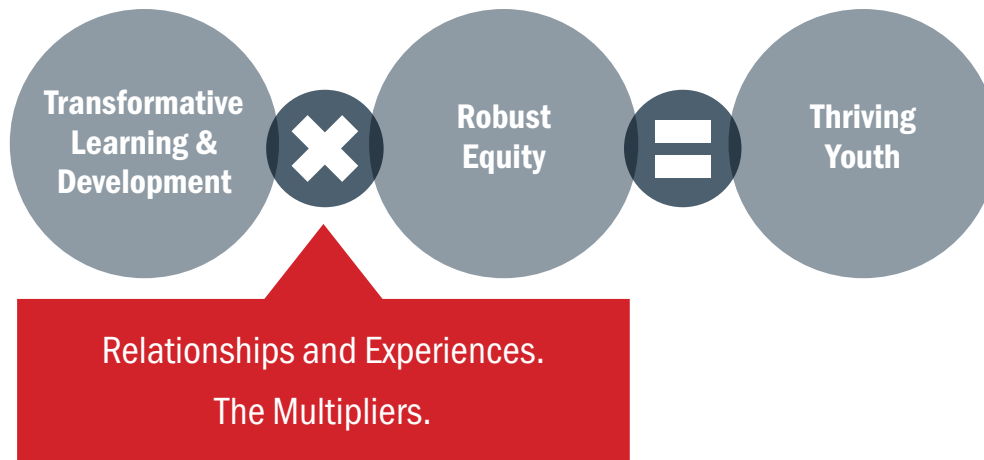
A commitment to aggressively expand access to equitable learning environments is a targeted and effective way to accelerate individual and collective thriving of all young people by focusing explicitly on creating opportunities and conditions that support the learning and development of our most marginalized young people. In both school and community settings, this commitment must focus on thriving, optimize transformative learning, enhance development, and address multiple determinant of inequity.

The first step towards activating this commitment is agreement on definitions of thriving, equity, and learning and development that are clear and actionable, research-based, and change-focused. In the sections that follow, we make the case for the adoption of definitions that:

Push Beyond...	Towards...
<p><b>Well-being</b> as a set of goals and social indicators that span multiple domains including physical, economic, emotional, and social well-being.</p>	<p><b>Thriving</b> as a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency.</p>
<p><b>Equity</b> as the condition of fair and just opportunities for all people to succeed regardless of individual or group identity or differences.</p>	<p><b>Robust Equity</b> as the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.</p>
<p><b>Learning and Development</b> as the processing of experiences and information that leads to the acquisition of particular skills, knowledge, and competencies, including academic, social, emotional, and cognitive ones.</p>	<p><b>Transformative Learning &amp; Development</b> as the optimization of a learner’s ability to translate specific experiences and content into generalizable knowledge, competencies, and perspectives.</p>

The second step is agreement on a simple visual that depicts how these change-oriented factors combine. Formulas describe the relationships between independent and dependent variables. A good formula is a concise way to declare a goal and propose a strategy for achieving it. We suggest a simple multiplication statement: Transformative Learning & Development X Robust Equity = Thriving Youth. (Note: For Transformative Learning & Development we use an ampersand to emphasize the interconnection between learning and development).

The multiplier insert included with this formula emphasizes the fact that schools supplemented by a host of other organizations – including libraries, museums, employment training programs, community, faith and civic organizations – have been charged with or have taken on responsibility for creating structured experiences that support learning and development in different contexts with different content.



A concerted effort to not only increase the quality and quantity of intentional relationships and experiences created by adults in these organizations is critically needed but not sufficient. There is ample evidence that efforts within systems will be more successful if system leaders and staff are guided to recognize the fact that they and the young people they engage with are a part of a dynamic learning and development ecosystem.

The term ecosystem is frequently used to acknowledge the range of **settings where children, youth, and families live, learn, work, play, and make meaning**. Ecosystem researchers,<sup>2</sup> however, suggest the need for a more robust definition:

**“Using ecological thinking changes the way we see the ecosystem itself: it is no longer a collection of participants and learning places with separate essences that need to be connected for individual children.... Instead, the learning ecosystem emerges as a constellation of inter-twined and entangled elements, where learning happens through dynamic relational processes among the people, places, and stuff we find across / within / between school and out-of-school places.”<sup>3</sup>**

This ecological approach to thinking about the learning ecosystem moves away from an emphasis on individual learning outcomes as evidence of ecosystem health towards a focus on assessment of relational processes that exist between ecosystem actors. Assessing the health of relational processes versus the progress of the individual learner enables new ways of thinking about ecosystem design and management. This approach a) relies on a shared understanding of the conditions for optimal learning experiences that can be used across systems and settings, b) assumes that these conditions will be expressed differently based on the opportunities presented and the assets and perspectives brought into the experience by youth and adults, and c) establishes diversity (think about biodiversity) and communication (think about the importance of communication nodes in dynamic systems) as essential to ecosystem health.

# What We Know About Thriving, Equity, and Learning and Development

The terms thriving, equity, and learning and development are often narrowly defined or limited to specific domains. This section reviews definitions of the concepts of thriving, equity, and learning and development that are grounded in research and policy.

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## Thriving

We can best understand thriving if we include two other terms that relate to thriving: well-being and flourishing. Well-being, flourishing, and thriving are distinct terms that have roots in different disciplines. But when aligned, these terms enable us to develop a more complete, equitable, and actionable definition of thriving.

**Well-being.** Well-being is a term employed in health, public health, psychology, and economics (particularly welfare economics) as a goal<sup>4</sup> and as a social indicator. Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct that blends quality of life, subjective well-being, health, objective data, and other dimensions into a holistic perspective that includes social contexts, satisfaction, expectations, socioeconomic conditions, culture, societal values,<sup>5</sup> identity development and safety.<sup>6</sup> The domains of well-being include physical, economic, emotional, psychological, cognitive, and social well-being and they cover all social fields.<sup>7</sup> Like thriving and flourishing, well-being research attends to the social contexts (including all places where youth learn and develop) that support well-being.<sup>8</sup> Unlike thriving, studies of well-being include negative indicators (e.g., ill-being<sup>9</sup>) and indicators of being developmentally on track (e.g., the abilities to acquire appropriate capacities to prepare for adulthood and to engage the world in developmentally appropriate ways).<sup>10</sup>

**Flourishing.** Flourishing has roots in positive psychology. Flourishing provides an alternative to deficit-oriented theories on mental health.<sup>11</sup> It can be defined as “a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially.”<sup>12</sup> Flourishing includes psychological well-being (e.g., highly or mostly satisfied with life domains); social well-being (e.g., positive relations with others and the experience of autonomy), and emotional well-being (e.g., a sense of belonging and social support).<sup>13</sup> Just as thriving is more than the absence of problems or the development of basic competencies, flourishing is more than the absence of negative indicators.<sup>14</sup>

**Thriving.** Thriving is a term employed in youth development, developmental science, and health. Thriving is more than the absence of problems or the development of basic competencies; it is a dynamic and holistic process that involves children, youth, and adults influencing each other both in every moment as well as over time.<sup>15</sup> Because children, youth, and adults are whole beings, thriving should be addressed across the many interconnected dimensions of well-being: physical, economic, emotional, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual/aesthetic.<sup>16</sup> Because people affect each other and are in turn affected by each other in all dimensions, it is important to define thriving in collective as well as individual terms. And because individuals are influenced by and influence dynamic socio-cultural systems, it is important to address how thriving emerges in dynamic formal institutions (e.g., schools and youth centers) and informal spaces.<sup>17</sup>

**Aligning Thriving, Flourishing, and Well-being.** Children and youth develop as whole people in relationship to families and a broader social and cultural world that provides resources and opportunities and presents challenges. Well-being provides a base for individual thriving and flourishing — it can contribute to the ability to flourish or prosper.

At the individual level, well-being provides a foundation for thriving and ill-being limits possibilities. For example, although some stress and adversity may contribute to the optimization of some individuals, too much of a bad thing does not help, and in fact, through stress, will be harmful, and even resilience can have costs.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it is easier to flourish and thrive when you have sufficient nutrition, safety, housing, and wellness and are free from the stresses of racism. Conversely, it is harder to thrive when you lack such well-being.<sup>19</sup>



We have opted to use the term thriving in our work because, unlike flourishing, the concept of thriving is not just individual. We must address thriving at a group, societal, and (ideally) at a global level, where preventive interventions and policies eliminate or buffer risks, and where appropriate services that are consumer-driven, culturally competent, strengths-based and trauma sensitive can support the well-being of the whole person.<sup>20</sup> For example, appropriate strengths-based services and trauma sensitive approaches that focus on healing and engagement contribute both to a youth's ability to flourish and thrive (e.g., experiencing hope, happiness, imagination, aspirations, and trust) as well as support the ability of that youth to support the thriving others (e.g., their peers).<sup>21</sup>

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## Equity

Equity is an important but contested term in our nation where we continue to confront contradictory values and segregated experiences with inequality, inequity, and privilege.<sup>22</sup> The term “equity” is frequently used as a label, goal, or decision-making lens, sometimes without definition or operationalization. Equity has been viewed in conflicting ways. On the one hand, “equity” is defined as minimizing inequity as opposed to “mechanistic approaches to equality”<sup>23</sup> that ignore the implications of people's starting points and assets. On the other hand, equity is viewed as “fair play.”<sup>24</sup>

Unlike well-being, equity is almost always applied to a particular domain (e.g., education) or subdomains (e.g., access to gifted and talented classes) or population (e.g., African Americans). This is also the case on related research on inequities and disparities. We will focus on two terms which often intersect: educational equity and racial equity, knowing that there are relevant conceptualizations in other intersecting domains (e.g., health equity and economic equity).

**Educational Equity.** We provide two relevant definitions that are somewhat expansive. They come from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the international organization of countries that are most similar to the U.S., and the U.S. Equity and Excellence Commission.

OECD conceptualizes educational equity as involving two dimensions: inclusion and fairness.<sup>25</sup> OECD operationalized inclusion as ensuring that all students reach at least a basic minimum level of skills and fairness as ensuring that personal or socio-economic circumstances (e.g., gender, ethnicity, family background, migrant background, special needs) are not obstacles to educational success.<sup>26</sup> “Equitable education systems are fair and inclusive and support their students to reach their learning potential without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations.”<sup>27</sup> Equity does not mean that everyone gets the same materials or realizes the same results, but that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their potential.<sup>28</sup>

The Equity and Excellence Commission was charged with providing advice “on the disparities in meaningful educational opportunities that give rise to the achievement gap, with a focus on systems of finance, and to recommend ways in which federal policies could address such disparities.”<sup>29</sup> The Commission called for mitigating poverty's effects by providing “broad access not only to early childhood education, but also to a range of support services necessary to promote student success and family engagement in school; effective measures to improve outcomes for student groups especially likely to be left behind—including English-language learners, children in Indian country or isolated rural areas, children with special education needs, and those involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems”.<sup>30</sup> The Commission's approach to equity was further operationalized by the Consensus Report on Indicators of Educational Equity, which spoke of the “distribution of certain goods and services is purposefully unequal so that the neediest of students may receive more of certain resources, often to compensate or make up for their different starting points.”<sup>31</sup>



**Racial Equity.** Racial equity has been defined and operationalized as equalizing the odds in a manner that addresses thriving.<sup>32</sup> Equalizing the odds means creating conditions “that would be achieved if one’s racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares.”<sup>33</sup> Doing so involves creating the conditions where “people are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives.”<sup>34</sup> Racial equity involves addressing “systemic racism to become a community in which all residents can thrive.”<sup>35</sup> The OECD and Equity and Excellence Commission definitions come together in the statement of The National Public Education Support Fund, which operationalized racial equity as:

- ▶ **The distribution of resources and opportunities is neither determined nor predicted by race, racial bias or racial ideology.**
- ▶ **The structures, systems, practices and cultural narratives in society provide true situational fairness and equal opportunity.**
- ▶ **There is a democratic commitment to dismantle the false narrative of white supremacy and address the legal, political, social, cultural and historical contributors to inequity.**
- ▶ **Families and individuals are able to thrive and flourish in the intersections of all aspects of their identity, including race, religion, gender, orientation, ability, and socioeconomic background.**
- ▶ **The most vulnerable communities in society have access to mechanisms to achieve social mobility and voice in naming their reality, describing how these systems of oppression play out, and developing solutions that draw upon their assets.**
- ▶ **All people, cultures and identities are equally valued and recognized under the belief that strength comes through the diversity and expression of our shared humanity.**<sup>36</sup>

**Aligning Educational and Racial Equity.** Definitions of educational equity often focus on ensuring students from multiple, specified groups (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners, low income students) realize a narrow set of outputs and outcomes (e.g., academic resources, attainment). Definitions of racial equity focus on the broader societal and institutional structures, practices and narratives that systematically result in disparities across domains. The conceptualizations of educational and racial equity presented both speak to fairness, realizing potential, and removing barriers to success while raising the bar for success. When we combine the inclusive definitions of educational equity with the already more expansive and systemically focused conceptualization of racial equity, we can develop a more robust conceptualization of equity that incorporates thriving and addresses human learning and development across all life spaces and over the life course.

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## Learning and Development

Learning occurs 24/7 over the entire life course, and in diverse range of settings, not just in schools. Learning and development dynamically interact in an integrated manner. Learning – the act of making meaning out of experiences – contributes to the development of skills and competencies.<sup>37</sup> As we explore the interrelatedness of these concepts, we use the term “learning and development” to capture this wholeness.

Every experience creates the potential for learning and development, both positive and negative, as the brain and mind process new information.<sup>38</sup> Learning and development includes changes at the neurobiological level, as our brain responds, changes in meaning making, and behavioral changes. There are dynamically interactive relations between a youth and their contexts that affect learning. Individual factors that play a key role include prior knowledge and beliefs; cognitive load and the boundaries of working memory; metacognitive skills; social and emotional competencies and dispositions; and motivations. Context is also crucial for learning. For example, youth learn better in environments that demonstrate and emphasize safety, inclusiveness, equity, support and connectedness,

challenges and engagement, and social and emotional development. Furthermore, culturally responsive and competent environments and educators support student learning, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Learning is not a linear pathway, but skill development is progressive in that the skill growth build upon prerequisite skills.

Learning and development reflect the wholistic coaction of the mind, brain, body, and the individual's relationships to others. For example, social and emotional learning and development processes are inextricably linked neurobiologically and cognitively.<sup>39</sup> Human learning and development, and in particular the development of social, emotional and cognitive competencies, is critical to thriving because it empowers individuals to have agency and enables individuals to work together in support of thriving and equity. Learning and development is both individual and social.<sup>40</sup> While each of us has our learning and development journey, we do so with and in interaction with others and their products, and this includes the narratives that affect us and that we help create. Learning and development are enhanced by relationship-rich contexts. Although we can learn when we are alone, learning is always socially situated, through language, culture, media, the environment that people and policies share, and by socio-economic and geographical factors.

Learning and development is both individual and collective. Learning and development occur and can be understood individually, in two-person and small group settings, in larger settings (e.g., schools), and through larger social networks. Learning and development benefits from individual and collective thriving, including the well-being of all involved in the learning process, for example teachers, youth workers, and peers.<sup>41</sup> Learning and development is both conscious and unconscious and takes place in environments and systems that directly or indirectly afford learning opportunities and constrain learning. Most learning and development involve interactions with others, and the quality of those relationships powerfully affects learning and development.

**Aligning Research-based Definitions of Learning and Development with Common Usage.** Technical definitions of human learning and development, or more specifically about the relationship between learning and development, vary. The more important push for alignment, however, is between the research-based definitions of learning and development and those in popular use. The term learning is sometimes reduced to focus on rote and surface learning and ignore the social, emotional, and experiential factors that contribute to learning. Similarly, the term development is sometimes associated only with natural growth and does not recognize intentional efforts to build competence. Narrow definitions of learning and development do not account for the interaction between the learning and development processes or the enormous variation in the ordering and pacing of skill development. They reinforce perceptions that can narrow our view of learning and limit our understanding of what young people can realize when we provide the right conditions.

Greater use of research-based definitions of learning and development can, at a minimum, help practitioners and decision-makers understand how to reduce the unintended consequences of policies and practices that emphasize instructional hours and factual content mastery because of the need for accountability) and assess progress by using age-based averages as the comparison point.

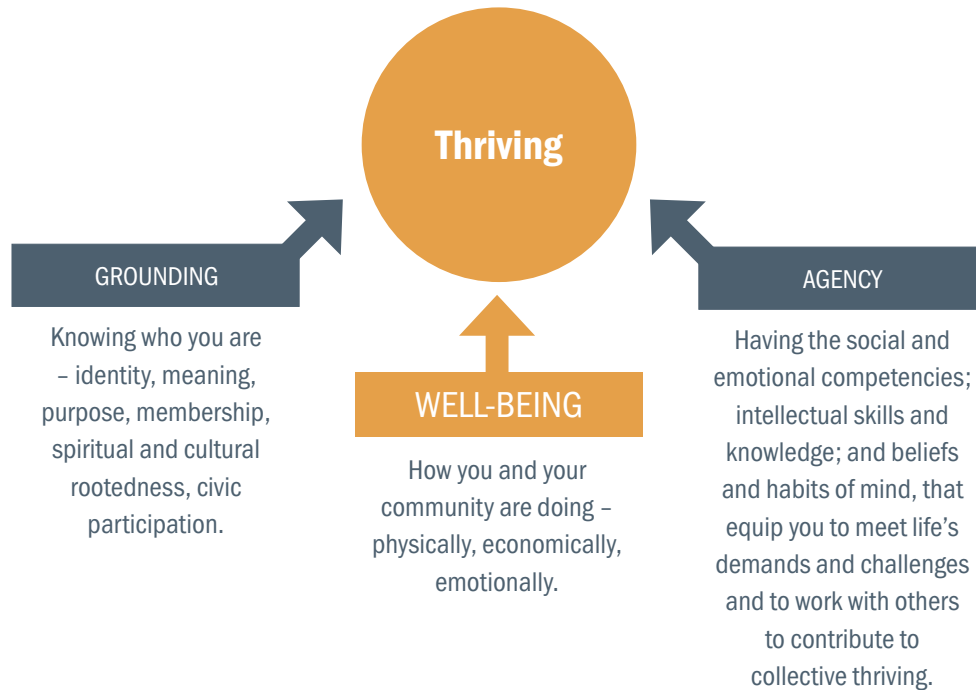
# Key Findings from the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Research Syntheses

- 1. The ongoing, reciprocal relations between individuals' biology, their relationships, and the ecologies and contextual influences in which they are embedded determine the expression of their genetic endowment and ultimately their development as individuals.**
- 2. Genes are chemical “followers”; their expression is determined by contextual influences at the biological level; epigenetic adaptation determines the expression of our genetic makeup and is part of a system of ongoing two-way exchanges between human beings and the physical and social world that create qualitative changes over time.**
- 3. Malleability and neural plasticity are the core principles of human development.**
- 4. Each child's development is nonlinear, has its own unique pacing, and is highly responsive to context.**
- 5. The development of children's skills is progressive and does not occur in isolation; it requires the integration and layering of prerequisite skills.**
- 6. Social, emotional, and cognitive capabilities are fundamentally intertwined; they are interdependent in their development, experience, and use; neural integration and interconnectivity of children's cognitive, social, and emotional development is essential for well-being—both anatomically and functionally.**
- 7. Contextual influences and ecology cannot be ignored.**
- 8. Adversity can affect development, mental and physical health, and learning.**
- 9. Resilience and thriving in the face of adversity are possible and are a product of children's internal assets and supports from individuals within a child's social environment.**
- 10. Adults' buffering of stress plays a central role in healthy child development; therefore, building and supporting adult capacity are critically important tasks. Adults' experience of adversity and stress can affect their ability to provide this support.**
- 11. Schools and other child-serving systems are potentially powerful contexts through which stress can be buffered, neural integration and connectivity supported, and individual development nurtured.**
- 12. Culture, cultural responsiveness, and cultural competence are critical components of context and are profoundly important in shaping the experiences through which children grow.**

Source: Osher, Cantor, Caverly in Osher, Mayer, Jagers, Kendziora, and Wood, 2019

## A Deep Dive into Individual and Collective Thriving

People and their communities develop and thrive in and across many dynamically interactive dimensions, which include aspects of their physical and mental health and economic well-being, their sense of self and of their community, and the social, emotional, and cognitive tools that equip them to address life's changes. Although people may focus on one dimension at a particular time or even one aspect of a particular dimension, and although they are treated and studied independently, these dimensions are interdependent and dynamically interactive. Mental models, therefore, are useful. There are numerous frames in use that cluster the specific aspects of thriving into dimensions.<sup>42</sup> All are useful and share common features. For the purposes of this paper, we have organized our thinking about thriving into three dimensions:



### Well-being

Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct that includes physical, economic, emotional, psychological, cognitive, and social dimensions and includes the quality of life, physical health and wellness, mental health and subjective well-being, and economic security and agency.

**Physical Well-being.** Health and the lack of health affect physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, work performance, parenting, and mortality. Evidence suggests links between various forms of physical activity and emotional, psychological, and cognitive benefits over the life course—for example, increased energetic feelings, improved mental health, and the promotion of brain structure and functions for attention, inhibition, and memory for children and youth.<sup>43</sup> And as the physical and social consequences of global warming and pandemics suggest, our well-being is also tied to the physical well-being of our planet and all living things. Physical well-being is important throughout life, and, as COVID-19 has highlighted.

While access to physically and emotionally safe environments, quality health care, and safe and nurturant recreation opportunities foster physical health, access to these opportunities is not equally available. There are social determinants of health disparities, and these particularly involve economic inequality and racism.<sup>44</sup>

Social determinants of health include the experience of micro and macro aggressions, housing insecurity and homelessness, mass incarceration and the problematic policing of communities, food deserts, and poor transportation. Disparities in health outcomes reflect the built environment (e.g., lead effect and poisoning)<sup>45</sup> and less access to quality care and the related dependence upon constricted, aversive, and culturally inappropriate services. Although the root causes of health disparities are entrenched, it is possible to start to change outcomes while addressing the systemic roots. For example, while urban environments often contribute to psychological distress, randomized experiments involving greening vacant lots in Philadelphia reduced self-reported feelings of depression and worthlessness<sup>46</sup> and reduced shootings.<sup>47</sup>

**Mental and Emotional Well-being.** Mental well-being is more than mental health; however, it builds upon it. Mental health has been conceptualized as the “successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity.”<sup>48</sup> Mental health itself builds upon physical, economic, and emotional well-being,<sup>49</sup> and is undermined by ill-being in any of these domains. Mental wellness is more than the absence of mental health problems and includes both emotional and psychological wellbeing. It is enhanced by the ability to experience the world with gratitude, awe, and joy. Emotional well-being includes life satisfaction and individual and collective sense of hope and optimism. Well-being includes psychological well-being (e.g., highly or mostly satisfied with one’s experiences in life domains); social well-being (e.g., experiencing positive relations with others and autonomy), and emotional well-being (e.g., having a sense of belonging and social support).<sup>50</sup>

Emotional well-being also involves the experience of voice and of one’s ability to act on the world – both individually and collectively.<sup>51</sup> Hope and optimism are key here. Hope has been conceptualized as a “positive motivational state” that is built on the interactions between our sense of successful agency and goal-directed drive and plans or “pathways” for achieving goals.<sup>52</sup> Hope relates to a sense of individual and collective efficacy, which contributes to motivation and persistence. Hope, for example, appears to contribute to first generation students persisting in higher education.<sup>53</sup> Hope is action-oriented; it involves acting on our positive beliefs about or expectations for the future and maintaining the motivation to reach goals, versus just having positive beliefs alone.<sup>54</sup> Individual hope and optimism are positively related to several indicators of youth thriving in school and life, including academic achievement, positive self-perceptions, expectations for the future, goal-directed thinking, sense of purpose, life satisfaction, and physical health and skills.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, hope and high levels of community efficacy are negatively related to depression, and hopelessness predicts some externalizing and risk behaviors.<sup>56</sup>

Access to a full range of interventions to support mental health (promotion, prevention, treatment, and maintenance)<sup>57</sup> is particularly important for youth development. Untreated mental health problems, along with the inability of some schools and out-of-school settings to address the needs of young people with emotional and behavioral problems and disorders contribute to disparities, and race, poverty, and co-occurring disorders amplify this inequity.<sup>58</sup> For example, compared to other students (including other students with disabilities), children and youth identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders are more likely to be placed in restrictive settings, fail classes, have lower GPAs, be grade retained, be suspended from schools or programs, drop out of school and programs, have lower rates of graduation, have more encounters with juvenile and adult corrections, and realize poorer adult outcomes.<sup>59</sup> Children and youth of color have less access to preventive mental health care and effective treatment. When they do receive services, they are more likely to experience restrictive placements, stigmatizing labels, and aversive interventions that focus on behavioral compliance.

Preventing and responding to trauma and its impacts are key as exposure to traumatic events is common for young people.<sup>60</sup> There are disparities here as well: young people of color or who live in poverty, are homeless, LGBTQ, or have essential (e.g. healthcare, transit, child care, retail and delivery, etc.) or high-risk occupations (e.g., iron and steel workers, construction workers, etc.) are more likely to experience adversity (e.g., abuse and neglect, racism and discrimination) and this may be compounded by historical trauma.<sup>61</sup> Most young people will report experiencing at least one traumatic event by the age of 16 (e.g., experiencing or witnessing violent acts; experiencing sexual

abuse; being diagnosed with an illness; being in a serious accident)<sup>62</sup>. Often young people are able, with support, to be resilient,<sup>63</sup> and the assets and protective factors that aid resilience include youth self-regulation and positive self-concept as well as support from adults.<sup>64</sup> Assets such as family attachment; supportive relationships with adults and peers at home, school and community; social supports; prosocial behaviors; social skills and competencies; moral beliefs; religiosity; and positive personal disposition, among others, foster positive mental, emotional, and behavioral development, while protecting against threats to mental health.<sup>65</sup>

A consistent body of practice as well as evaluation data and research suggest that effective mental health should be: (1) culturally competent, responsive, and humble; (2) youth and family-driven; (3) ecological; (4) strengths-based and building; (5) coordinated; (6) provided across the relevant social fields; and (7) use relevant information for progress monitoring and improvement, and (8) build upon a universal foundation that is both promotive and prevention.<sup>66</sup> The best systemic approaches are culturally competent; multi-systemic (e.g., include schools and physical health); coordinated; include promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment; collaboratively involve stakeholders; and employ data for continuous quality improvement, and that these approaches can include and be employed by schools.<sup>67</sup> Systematic approaches to mental health should minimize the use of diagnostic labels, ensure that interventions build social and emotional competence (not just behavioral compliance), employ youth development strategies, support positive identity formation, and foster self and collective efficacy and voice.<sup>68</sup> For example, Howard Stevenson's and Shawn Ginwright's work with their respective colleagues illustrate how critical mindedness, active engagement of social networks, spiritual resources, and cultural resources can be used to buffer the effects of poverty and the often-related impacts of racial inequality in a trauma sensitive manner.<sup>69</sup>

**Economic Well-being.** Economic resources include wealth, income, public social benefits, and social resources. Economic resources and equality contribute to well-being, while poverty and inequality contribute to ill-being.<sup>70</sup> Economic well-being includes the ability to meet basic needs, including those important for engaging in life domains (e.g., resources to go on a field trip), having control over their day-to-day finances, having the ability to make choices about their finances, and feeling financially secure. Economic well-being also includes the ability to absorb financial shocks, meet financial goals, build financial assets, and maintain adequate income throughout the lifespan. While it is realized by individual, families and communities, it is affected both by public policy and systematic factors.<sup>71</sup> Institutionalized racism and privilege connect them in the U.S. when it comes to economic well-being and ill-being.<sup>72</sup>

Poverty increases the risk for health, behavioral and cognitive problems,<sup>73</sup> which can contribute to social, behavioral, and academic challenges over the life course. The pathways and mechanisms for poverty's effects include housing insecurity and its consequences;<sup>74</sup> adult and children's stress responses;<sup>75</sup> the effects of scarcity on decision making,<sup>76</sup> neighborhood effects;<sup>77</sup> and school effects.<sup>78</sup> Although disadvantage and poverty create or exacerbate vulnerability and risk, individuals *and* communities can be resilient.<sup>79</sup> Frequently, responses to poverty and adversity focus on individual versus collective solutions. People use social networks, spiritual resources, and cultural resources to buffer the effects of poverty and the often-related impacts of racial inequality<sup>80</sup> and they can flock together and support collective positive adjustment.<sup>81</sup> Examples of resources include the power of family commitment, youth organizing, and cultural socialization<sup>82</sup> and positive racial and ethnic identity.<sup>83</sup>

There are important relationships between and among economic well-being, equity, thriving, and learning and development, that are both direct and indirect. Economic and social inequality limits thriving and creates disadvantages that limit youth access to skills, opportunities, and credentials that could contribute to access to higher paying and higher status jobs.<sup>84</sup> Middle class resources and wealth create education advantages that play out throughout the life course and provide the opportunities to build internal developmental assets.<sup>85</sup> Education creates assets and risks through opportunities to learn, the lack of which generates student alienation and disengagement.<sup>86</sup> Economic resources and privilege, in no way ensure well-being. Privilege exempts people from encountering some of the challenges that build resilience and creates particular pressures to excel. Population studies indicate that affluent youth to be at higher risk for drug and alcohol use, as well as internalizing and externalizing problems.<sup>87</sup>



## Grounding

Everyone develops a sense of who they are in relationship to the world, and this grounding is particularly important in adolescence. Grounding is feeling anchored by knowing who you are and how you are connected to others. Grounding includes a sense of identity that addresses the multiplicity of roles and statuses one has, along with one's own unique experience in the social and physical world. Becoming grounded involves developing and making sense of one's identity and the roles and purposes that one can play. It also involves understanding and being enriched by cultural and spiritual connections, and it includes the experience of belonging to groups and being able to engage in and help shape the groups.

**Identity.** Identity development happens individually and in groups; the sense we make of these experiences, and how our experiences and sense making are informed by others who matter to us through webs of affiliation and cultural contexts. Identity develops across the lifespan, but adolescence is a key developmental period for identity; it is a time of increasingly goal-oriented learning and development, identity formation, autonomy assertion, and a growing sense of values.<sup>88</sup> Adolescent identity development consolidates attitudes, ideological and cultural beliefs, values, career goals, and life aspirations as adolescents search for meaning in their lives and start to construct a narrative identity.<sup>89</sup>

Identity includes personal or self-identities (how we define and understand ourselves as individuals, including as a member of groups whom we identify with), and social identities (or statuses and roles, both chosen and ascribed) in relation to other people. Identity development is relational in nature; we develop our sense of self in interaction with others. Furthermore, there are multiple and often intersectional elements of identity—including but not limited to gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, cultural, religion, disability—that all have contextual relevance.<sup>90</sup> Identity formation is a socially situated dynamic interpersonal process that is influenced by micro and macro ecological factors.<sup>91</sup> Emotionally- and identity-safe environments support identity development<sup>92</sup> while at the same time contributing to emotional and academic well-being.<sup>93</sup> The interactions of youth and adults in these environments are important. These interactions can provide resources for identity formation, opportunities to test emergent identities, and feedback on those emergent identities.<sup>94</sup>

Healthy identity development is particularly important but also challenging for minoritized and marginalized students who face microaggressions, overt prejudice, and acculturative stress which increases during adolescence.<sup>95</sup> Ethnic and Racial Identity (ERI) involves explorations and commitments<sup>96</sup> and includes feelings, beliefs, and attitudes.<sup>97</sup> A rich and consistent body of research shows the importance of developing a positive sense of racial or ethnic identity, and its increasing salience in middle and late adolescence.<sup>98</sup> Meta-analyses and reviews suggest positive racial identity promotes healthy adjustment among African American, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and American Indian youth.<sup>99</sup>

**Meaning, Religion/Spirituality, and Purpose.** Meaning, religion/spirituality, and purpose affect identity development and well-being. Meaning in life is malleable, self-evaluated, and involves our ability to understand our life circumstances, be aware of our motivations, and feel our life is important.<sup>100</sup> A sense of meaning can support adolescent well-being<sup>101</sup> and serves both promotive and protective purposes.<sup>102</sup> Purpose also interacts with meaning and identity. A sense of purpose can contribute to physical and mental health, reduced risk behaviors, increased prosocial behaviors, goal-directed orientations, hope, positive affect, and happiness, and buffer against adverse circumstances.<sup>103</sup>

Religious identity/participation and spirituality can be sources of self-images, role models, ideals, world views, and meaning that can be supports for youth development and identity development. Spirituality has been conceptualized as “engagement with the sacred” while “believers are united with the sacred and to each other through religiosity.”<sup>104</sup> Religious experience can include beliefs and the associated meaning making processes and connections with our inner selves, others, and/or transcendent experiences.<sup>105</sup> Spirituality involves similar elements including beliefs



and values and connectedness. Religious participation and spirituality during adolescence has generally positive links with emotional and psychological health, educational, and civic outcomes. Like other domains of adaptive development, religious and spiritual growth can be fostered by ecological influences and supports including schools, families, and community settings, among others.<sup>106</sup>

**Civic and Community Engagement.** Civic engagement such as political participation, activism, organizing, and community service supports identity development along with “skills and knowledge, networks and relationships, and feelings of purpose and meaning.”<sup>107</sup> These personal and social assets contribute to success in other domains<sup>108</sup> and are levers for building social capital and social and emotional competencies. There are also positive associations between civic participation and engagement and psychosocial well-being, emotional health, and physical health. Civic engagement includes how young people engage in shaping classrooms, school, organizations and the communities in which they live. Civic engagement includes youth participatory-led and youth-informed research that can start early in adolescence and can be transformational.<sup>109</sup>

Civic engagement can be supported in a manner that is consistent with the characteristics of effective youth development programs: (1) opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of activities; (2) emphasis on the development of life skills; and (3) positive and sustained adult-youth relationships.<sup>110</sup> Civic opportunities and youth-adult partnerships and collaborations in civic endeavors can potentially meet those criteria, especially when youth are genuinely and meaningfully engaged: “Meaningful youth engagement is an inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people’s ideas, perspectives, skills and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries and globally.”<sup>111</sup>

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## Agency

Youth and adults need portable and adaptable social, emotional, and cognitive competencies that support a sense of agency. These transferable competencies enable youth and adults to address life’s continually evolving demands, navigate multiple social contexts, develop individual and collective social capital, and work with other to address the individual and collective problems that their communities and the world face, including the causes and impacts of prejudice, privilege, and inequity.

**Social and Emotional Competencies** include the skills and knowledge that helps individuals understand and manage their emotions and relationships with others, such as family, peers, teachers, and trusted adults. Key skills relate to self-regulation, self-awareness, social awareness, and decision-making skills.<sup>112</sup> There are over 120 frameworks that describe social and emotional competencies, including emotional intelligence, 21st Century Learning, and life skills.<sup>113</sup> Social and emotional competencies contribute to school and work success in adulthood as well as to the avoidance of short- and long-term challenges.<sup>114</sup> Competencies are developmental and malleable, with major windows of opportunity occurring during early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

**Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** is the process by which children and adults acquire and apply core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively.<sup>115</sup> In addition to SEL, there are several approaches geared to promoting competency development, including character education, prosocial education, and positive youth development.<sup>116</sup>

Approaches to SEL have evolved.<sup>117</sup> A decade ago, SEL approaches focused on student-level interventions in schools and manualized programs. Now, SEL focuses on individual development within social contexts, extends to out-of-school time, focuses on adults, and incorporates common ingredients.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, SEL approaches to equity have changed. Until recently, most SEL advocates defined equity as equitable access to SEL programming, and most SEL frameworks did not address privilege, bias, and cultural competency or the disconnect between individualistic

approaches to SEL and collectivist cultural strengths.<sup>119</sup> This is changing. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning presents a case for “transformative SEL,” where youth and adults build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems and outlines approaches and practices relevant for youth and adults.

SEL is inextricably linked to climate and conditions for learning and development.<sup>120</sup> While conditions for learning and development affect all learning and development, they may be particularly salient regarding social and emotional well-being due to the importance of SEL and co-regulation in SEL, as well as the power of peer reinforcement. Adult social and emotional competencies and cultural responsiveness are particularly important here, as the learning and

### Transformative SEL

Transformative SEL explicitly addresses power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination and should help all youth build awareness of privilege and bias, address racism, and develop the ability to navigate diverse settings and expectations in culturally competent ways and work effectively in diverse teams.

While doing so, Transformative SEL addresses acculturative stress, stereotype threat, alienation, institutional mistrust, and disengagement, all of which reproduce or exacerbate education and economic inequities. The conceptualization of Transformative SEL addresses the five key SEL competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making ) with an equity lens and operationalizes identity, agency, belonging, and engagement as “transformative expressions” of the five competencies.

Source: Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams (2019)

development of social and emotional competencies are emotionally and culturally salient. Youth are more able to receive mentorship and utilize feedback and guidance from adults whom they experience as authentic, caring for and respectful for them and their family, and who model social and emotional competence in their own behavior. Trauma sensitive and culturally responsive SEL approaches, when aligned with trauma informed/approaches and treatment, help contribute to restorative approaches to discipline and address the impact of trauma.<sup>121</sup>

**Cognitive and Intellectual Contributors.** A variety of cognitive skills, capacities, and accumulated experiences maximize learning and development-related well-being for children and youth and help equip them for a thriving future and the ability to navigate the instrumental and ethical challenges they will face through life.<sup>122</sup> While

young people need job related skills, technology-related skills, and skills related to supporting academic success, (including the ability to read, write, and express themselves orally), thriving and robust equity require transformative skills and knowledge. Key cognitive and intellectual contributors to well-being include metacognition, deeper learning and development, critical thinking, and creativity. While the development of these skills, capacities, and experiences are important, they are all to infrequently available to, students who face social and economic disadvantage.<sup>123</sup> Although all youth can benefit from a stimulating environments where creativity, critical thinking, originality and expressiveness are valued, where they explore, muse and express their ideas in different ways,<sup>124</sup> these opportunities are unequally unavailable due to resource constraints or deficit-based beliefs.<sup>125</sup>

**Metacognition.** Metacognition is an active process of reflection, sense-making, and self-assessment, that is related to self-awareness.<sup>126</sup> Metacognition facilitates becoming active participants in the learning and development process, supports neural integration, helps individuals prevent some mistakes and learn from others,<sup>127</sup> and supports transferring knowledge to new situations.<sup>128</sup> Strategies that encourage metacognition push learners to reflect on the process of learning and development, including how well they are learning and developing, their affective states, and how new knowledge fits into their existing knowledge.<sup>129</sup> Metacognition can be nurtured at a collective level, where peers can support each other's ability to be metacognitive.<sup>130</sup>

**Deeper Learning.** Deeper learning is the process of active engagement in learning and development that allows young people to continuously explore, critically reflect upon content, and understand and produce complex thought and models.<sup>131</sup> Deeper learning involves higher level and cognitive processing, analytical and critical thinking and the ability to synthesize and interpret diverse information, along with the ability to communicate knowledge learned and apply the skills and knowledge in new circumstances. Deeper learning can be contrasted with surface learning where youth use lower level cognitive functions such as simple memorization or rote learning.<sup>132</sup> For example, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning focuses on character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking – the “6 C’s.”<sup>133</sup> This model moves toward “liberating learning”<sup>134</sup> and can be connected to developing critical consciousness, which has been tied to a developmental systems perspective on youth thriving.<sup>135</sup>

**Creativity.** Creativity is not a trait or an a priori stable property of only special people.<sup>136</sup> Creativity involves complex, multi-faceted and co-influential processes that can be fostered and realized in all life domains and disciplines.<sup>137</sup> Creativity involves social and emotional as well as cognitive factors and has neurobiological underpinnings.<sup>138</sup> Creativity is malleable, learnable, critical to life success, and can be developed in many individuals;<sup>139</sup> and it is strongly influenced by social, relational, and other contextual factors.<sup>140</sup> Creativity involves a combination of cognitive skills, dispositions, social and emotional competencies, and environmental factors.<sup>141</sup> In addition, there are social, emotional, cognitive, and neurobiological conditions for both learning to be creative and for being creative. For example, learning to be creative may involve risk taking and the ability to handle failure, both of which can be affected by individual social-emotional attributes (e.g., self-awareness and self-regulation), appropriate social support, and the conditions for learning and development (e.g., emotional safety). Originality often involves perspective taking and the willingness to pursue ideas that others do not promote and the ability to assess which ideas are worth pursuing. Further, creativity can have collective components and involve the shared creation and discovery where “two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have known on their own.”<sup>142</sup>

# Aligned Conceptualizations: Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development

In the first section of this paper, we introduced a formula and provided brief definitions of thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development.

In this section, we offer the detail behind these conceptualizations and describe the roles that systems, settings, adults, and peers can play in promoting or undermining thriving, equity, and individuals' capacity to realize their fullest potential. By providing not just definitions but guidelines, we invite leaders to engage in discussion about the extent to which their efforts meet these criteria.

Given what we collectively know about each of these concepts, we now offer a more complete and actionable conceptualization of youth success that focuses on definitions of thriving, equity, and learning and development that are strengths-based and are grounded in convergent science findings and practice wisdom regarding how youth thrive. We describe the roles that systems, settings, adults and peers can play in promoting or undermining thriving, equity, and individuals' capacity to realize their fullest potential.

## Thriving

**Thriving** is a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency.

- **Strengths-based – more than well-being and resilience.**
- **Multi-dimensional – reflecting growth or success in any number of domains from physical to economic to spiritual.**
- **Linked to internal characteristics and external conditions that interrelate to enable or thwart progress.**

Thriving is more than being well; it also includes a sense of doing well. Thriving is a strengths-based concept that describes both one's immediate state as well as being on a path towards optimal development. Thriving is more than just being competent, resilient, and without problems. Thriving is multidimensional and exists at subjective, whole body, and sociological levels. Thriving is dynamically linked to key internal characteristics and assets, including social, emotional and cognitive competencies, skills, and dispositions. Thriving is also related to the social and physical environment: there is a dynamic relationship between and among individual, collective, and environmental thriving. Thriving is context-dependent, and contextual factors promote or constrain thriving.

Resilience and well-being are important parts of the thriving journey because adversity is normative, and trauma and ill-being undermine thriving. Well-being also includes subjective well-being, which is pivotal to thriving. Resilience and well-being are necessary but not sufficient conditions for thriving; rather, they set a lower threshold. Interventions should incorporate thriving as a goal so that supports for well-being are designed to build the individual and social capacities that undergird thriving.

While thriving has physical and material dimensions, thriving also has an important subjective dimension. An individual's sense of thriving can reflect growth or success in any number of domains – physical, social, civic, intellectual, spiritual, economic, and others. An individual's situation, including their cultural lenses and their social networks and other reference points, influences what thriving domains they see as important, and how they view success. Since people learn over time and encounter new situations, their perceptions of thriving may also change.

Thriving involves children, youth, and adults supporting each other both in every moment as well as over time in dynamic relationship with each other and to culture, social structures, and the physical environment. The ability of individuals and groups to thrive affects as well as is affected both by equity and individuals' and groups' capacity to

realize their potential through learning and development. Considering thriving when we address equity necessitates that we address physical and social emotional and economic wellness including subjective well-being. Considering thriving when we support learning and development necessitates that we focus on learning and development across all parts of a young person's life; provide culturally responsive youth driven conditions for learning and the development of portable social, emotional, and cognitive assets; expand the array and richness of learning opportunities and address agency, engagement, and meaning-making.

## Robust Equity

**Robust Equity** is the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.

- **Requires the essentials – intentionally countering inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, addressing contextual deficits, building on individual and community assets and creating conditions that support overall well-being.**
- **Multi-dimensional – mindful of overall thriving, and how well-being or ill-being in one area contributes to well-being or ill-being in others (e.g., education and poverty).**
- **Cumulative – rooted in historical awareness, with a commitment to long-term, complex change.**

The terms equity and equality are not the same. Equity is more than a commitment to equal access. Equal access to one service (e.g., higher-level courses) without attention to issues of quality, identity, stereotype threat, implicit bias, and opportunities to learn make it unlikely that all children are equally able to participate – emotionally and cognitively – and, therefore, will not result in equal outcomes. Efforts to achieve equity in a single area or to reduce disparities between populations will be limited as these domains interact at an individual, group, and social system level. For example, housing inequities contribute to, and can be reinforced and exacerbated by health and educational inequities.

Robust equity efforts should address thriving in multiple domains as their goal – not just well-being in one domain or equalized odds for success between specific groups. Robust commitments to equity in each domain need to be expansive and address both the individual and collective dimensions of thriving. Expansiveness involves multiple subdomains (e.g. agency plus identity plus sense of purpose and meaning plus spiritual grounding).

Robust equity-oriented strategies address both macro societal, cultural, system, agency, group, provider level, and individual factors that enhance or limit equity. At a socio-political level they intentionally counter inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, address contextual deficits, and create conditions that support individual and collective well-being. They provide opportunities for individuals and groups of individuals to build connections, perspective and competencies and make changes that can transform their lives individually and collectively. Robust equity efforts ensure that the most marginalized, minoritized, disenfranchised, and excluded individuals and communities have access to and create for themselves, mechanisms to thrive, achieve social and political mobility and voice in naming their realities, addressing how these systems of oppression play out, and developing solutions that draw upon and build individual and collective strengths.

Robust equity is cumulative. Even though equity decisions may focus on one outcome or apply to one domain or system at one moment in time, the results of these decisions are affected by individual and collective equity status in other dimensions and over time (e.g., income security vs. wealth accumulation). Therefore, it is important that decisions take into account the cross system and domain effects and address longer-term consequences.

## Transformative Learning & Development

### Transformative Learning & Development

is the optimization of a learner’s ability to translate specific experiences and content into generalizable knowledge, competencies, and perspectives.

- **Broader than schooling and academics**
- **Critical for understanding human capacity to thrive, not just survive**
- **Holistic—involving social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, aesthetic, kinesthetic, and expressive dimensions**

Learning and development are not limited to schools; both occur in all settings in which individuals participate. Learning and development are distinct but intertwined processes. The science of learning and development tells us that learning begins immediately and continues throughout the life span, with heightened opportunities to shape and develop social, emotional and cognitive skills occurring in early childhood and adolescence. Definitions of learning and development that focus on skill mastery or achievement are insufficient. More powerful definitions of learning and development should emphasize transformation over information transmission and/or accumulation. The goal of learning is not only knowledge and skill acquisition but transferable, transformative competencies. Because competencies are developed and demonstrated in multiple contexts, it is possible that young people, especially marginalized young people, develop and demonstrate these competencies outside of formal school environments. Young people’s inability to feel safe and respected in formal environments then limits their ability to master required content, creating vicious cycles.<sup>143</sup>

Transformative environments are intentionally constructed, refined, and maintained in order to build social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and optimize the individual and collective ability to make meaning of experience<sup>144</sup> and build portable competencies, skills, and attitudes that individuals and groups can use to assess and transform their own lives, contexts and communities. While doing so, transformative environments should enrich learners’ whole being and connection to others and to the world. This includes addressing and providing opportunities to: develop mindsets, self-awareness, perspective taking and compassion; build senses of identity and purpose, agency and hope; imagine a future self and community; experience spiritual and cultural grounding, connectedness, and civic engagement, awe and wonder along with aesthetic, kinesthetic design and opportunities for expression; and the ability to build and use creativity and critical thinking.

Transformative learning & development emphasizes the development of psychological, social, and intellectual assets over rote learning and scripted performance. It enhances youth’s sense of self and others, develops habits of mind, and equips youth with portable and fungible skills, competencies, and experiences. Transformative learning & development involves agency, community, and the practice of freedom—not passivity, competition, or compliance. Transformative learning & development includes critical thinking, metacognition, and the skills necessary to collaborate with diverse individuals to solve tough problems and disagreements.

The science of learning and development and research on transformative processes indicate the critical role adults can play in supporting transformative learning when they recognize and address: a) the potential all young people and adolescents have to succeed and the inherent unevenness of learning and its pacing, b) the role that social, emotional and cognitive needs play not only in supporting content learning but in developing complex skills needed to thrive, c) the importance of environments, experiences and cultures in shaping learning and development, and d) the transformative power of developmental relationships where adults deliberately and consciously create a safe environment, build trust, help learners overcome their fears, create possibilities, foster self-discovery, and work with the whole person.<sup>145</sup>



Adults can create safe supportive environments for learning and development that foster strong relationships, relational trust and community; support motivation, competence, senses of possibility, and self-directed learning; infuse opportunities for collaboration and social and emotional learning that fosters skills, habits, and mindsets that build agency; and coordinate a system of supports that respond to young people's needs, build as well as build upon their strengths, and support enable healthy development and thriving.<sup>146</sup> For example, adults can adopt educative and restorative approaches to rule development and enforcement (e.g., codes of conduct) so youth do not experience exclusion, learn empathy and responsibility, feel more a part of the group or community, and develop their capacity to be responsible for and to themselves and to their group or community.<sup>147</sup>

Recent efforts from the Alliance for Excellent Education and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Mathematics expand the research on learning and development to underscore adolescence as a period of significant development and opportunity. Adolescents are both (a) active agents in their own learning and development and (b) benefit from supportive relationally rich environments that are culturally responsive and provide youth with opportunities and supports that enable them to thrive.<sup>148</sup> This, in turn, depends upon the supports provided to build the readiness of adults to attune to and address the needs of each young person while appreciating the strengths of the young person, their family, their culture, and their community.

### Adolescence as a Window of Opportunity

1. Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity.
2. Adolescent brains are adapting to the developmental tasks of this stage of life.
3. Adolescents are drawn to novel experiences.
4. Adolescents are highly sensitive to respect.
5. Adolescents starts earlier than we think and lasts longer than it used to.
6. Adolescents are a force for good.

Source: Dahl, 2019

Learning and development approaches should be youth-driven and transformative. Young people learn with and from each other. They learn best in environments that provide rich opportunities to learn that are marked by physical, emotional, psychological, identity, and intellectual safety; support and connectedness; challenge and engagement; support for developing transformative social and emotional skills and dispositions; and include spiritual, kinesthetic, and aesthetic dimension. Transformative learning environments are culturally responsive and attend to intersectionality and to intersectional identities. These environments address young people as whole individuals and as members of families and communities, which have histories and are actively being built and rebuilt each day by members. Context is crucial for learning and development, and this context is affected by the individual well-being, collective thriving and equity, and the well-being and capacity of the adults who support youth.



## Beyond Business as Usual

Opportunities to thrive across and within the three dimensions of thriving (well-being, grounding, and agency) are not systematically available and are sometimes systemically denied. It is important to build upon community, individual, and systemic assets to strategically address opportunity-deficits and disparities at a policy, system, program, and setting level.

Changing business is not just changing the actions or intentions of individuals (e.g. teachers, youth workers, police and security officers). It requires systemic efforts at every level of intervention that ensure that every adult 1) understands how relationships and experiences across contexts drive learning and development,<sup>149</sup> 2) recognizes the power they have to influence youth thriving and success, 3) is empowered to create opportunities and nurturant for transformative learning and development *that support inclusivity and robust educational equity*, and 4) uses that power in support of thriving and robust equity.<sup>150</sup>

Facing History and Ourselves is an organization that challenges biases and segregated thinking. Facing History and Ourselves uses lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate. The organization supports educators and transforms schools through curriculum and professional development and convenes community members to create meaningful dialogue about complex and challenging topics, such as race in U.S. history, antisemitism and religious intolerance, global immigration, and more.

Source: Facing History (2020)

That said, change only registers when policy and procedural changes are consistently implemented and continuously assessed at the point of service— the settings where young people and adults come together. Relationship-rich settings that support transformative learning and development optimize two strategic approaches:

**Opportunities for Transformative Learning & Development:** instructional strategies, processes, protocols, and assessments that support youth learning how to think creatively and create solutions and reinforce the vital nature of this learning in daily lessons, activities, and longer-term cooperative projects,<sup>151</sup> and

**Supportive Conditions for Learning and Development:** restorative, relational, and developmental approaches to behavioral support and rule enforcement, so that youth learn and develop active citizenship skills, see themselves as part of a community, contribute to the community, and understand their responsibility for themselves and their community.<sup>152</sup>

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## Opportunities for Transformative Learning & Development

Youth benefit from transformative opportunities for learning and development that provide and support:

- ▶ **Meaningful work** that builds on youth prior knowledge and experiences and actively engages youth in rich, engaging tasks that foster deep learning and development and help youth achieve conceptual understanding and transferable knowledge and skills.<sup>153</sup>
- ▶ **Inquiry as a major learning and development strategy**, thoughtfully interwoven with dialogical approaches, explicit instruction, and well-scaffolded opportunities to practice and apply learning.<sup>154</sup>
- ▶ **Well-designed collaborative learning and development opportunities and service-learning projects** that encourage youth to think critically, question, explain, elaborate their thoughts and co-construct solutions.<sup>155</sup>
- ▶ **Formative assessments and timely, supportive feedback** so that youth can develop and exhibit competence and improve upon their efforts.<sup>156</sup>
- ▶ **Opportunities to develop metacognitive skills** through planning and management of complex tasks, self- and peer-assessment, and reflection on learning and development.<sup>157</sup> This includes the up-front time to think in new ways and for planning that addresses the nature of a problem (or challenge), how to solve it, represent it, and monitor ones work and think in new ways.<sup>158</sup>
- ▶ **Opportunities to develop and use social, emotional, and cognitive skills**, such as self-awareness, perspective taking and empathy, the ability to collaborate and resolve conflicts as a part of their work to acquire required content or skills (academic, vocational, behavioral) and to apply them broadly, including opportunities for civic engagement.
- ▶ **Opportunities for critical analysis to challenge biases in knowledge sources, learning opportunities and skill assessment** through the intentional support for and encouragement of systemic and critical thinking that includes not is not limited to the critical review of texts and information and the application of critical thinking to salient current events.
- ▶ **Challenging biases and segregated thinking** through embracing diversity of group membership and interaction, creating emotionally and identity safe spaces, supporting perspective taking, explicitly raising elephants that may be in the room (e.g., racism, colorism, privilege, homophobia, sexism, minoritization ) and upstanding against them when they are manifest, and using historical and literary sources and experiential learning to learn from and about diverse perspectives.

Relationship rich settings that provide these opportunities can help youth individually and collectively to realize their full potential as intelligent, creative, socially responsible, critical thinking whole persons. For example, creativity-rich environments enable youth to experience themselves as “active authors of their own development, strongly influenced by natural, dynamic, self-righting forces within themselves” which opens the path to growth and learning.<sup>159</sup>

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## Supportive Conditions for Learning and Development

Relationship rich settings build supportive conditions for learning and development. These conditions reflect and contribute to the dynamic interaction of everybody. They include organizational (or group/family) culture, rules and how they are developed and enforced, the physical environment including greenspace, the supports available to young people and adults, the way in which these supports are organized, and the social and emotional conditions for learning and development.<sup>160</sup>

The supporting conditions for learning and development include:

- ▶ **Safety** – Physical, emotional, psychological, identity and intellectual safety (e.g., to feel safe to think outside of the box).<sup>161</sup> This includes health promotions and preventing and addressing the stereotype threat, microaggression, and bullying and their impacts. This also includes actively involving youth in creating, realizing, and assessing procedures and rituals that create predictability and ensure safety which respect youth needs to experience voice and autonomy. This includes youth participation in setting rules, boundaries, and expectations, and employing relational and restorative approaches to discipline.<sup>162</sup>
- ▶ **Connectedness** – Belonging, membership, connectedness; feeling part of a warm and caring community that is culturally inclusive embraces, values, and addresses diversity among individuals and groups and their families.<sup>163</sup>
- ▶ **Support** – Instrumental and emotional support regarding learning and development; this includes the availability and accessibility of effective support and experiencing that support of having developmental relationships with adults and near peers, and experiencing all adults as caring and supportive.
- ▶ **Challenge** – The experience of personally relevant learning and development expectations and support to realize those expectations. This includes the stretch youth feel, an emphasis on learning and development, not performance, as well as how engaging learning is; how youth experience feedback, and whether they experience learning and development as related to the current and future lives.
- ▶ **Peer and adult social and emotional competence** – Although social and emotional competencies are individual, they function as a condition for other members of the community, both individually and in aggregate.<sup>164</sup>
- ▶ **Cultural competence and responsiveness** – A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enables adults to work effectively (ideally proficiently) in bicultural and multicultural interactions and for youth and their families to experience respect, humility, as well as emotional and identity safety.<sup>165</sup>

The social and emotional conditions for learning and development interact. For example, safety is strongly associated with peers' and adults' social and emotional competence and challenge with the experience of support.<sup>166</sup> Social and emotional conditions for learning & development reflect the co-actions among all members of a community, how these interactions are interpreted, and how people play out (as well as continue to shape) the setting's structure and culture.<sup>167</sup>

The effects of social and emotional conditions for learning and development are both direct (e.g., through their effects on learner identity and self-concept) and indirect (e.g., through effects of adult stress and capacity to support youth).<sup>168</sup> Social and emotional conditions for learning and development do more than affect learning and development; they affect youth development, and well-being.<sup>169</sup> Social and emotional conditions may be particularly important for children who face hurdles, whether the hurdles are developmentally normative such as transitions between types of school or socially created adversities such as homelessness.<sup>170</sup>

Cultural responsiveness and competence provide an example of the many ways the conditions for learning and development and the processes that frame them can affect learning and development. Cultural responsiveness is particularly important for culturally and linguistically diverse youth who experience disconnects between curricula and pedagogy on the one hand, and on the other, their experience, knowledge, and cultural capital.<sup>171</sup> These disconnects place cognitive and emotional demands on students, who must master new knowledge without the benefits of culturally embedded prior knowledge.<sup>172</sup> These cultural disconnects undermine challenge as they make it harder for youth to perceive themselves as successful learners and to visualize the connection between their schoolwork or program experiences, lives, and promising futures.<sup>173</sup>

Culturally responsive approaches leverage cultural resources additively, and employ culturally sustaining approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive learning and development, which include literature and the arts. These approaches provide an equitable and transformative alternative to subtractive approaches that ignore the cultural and experiential assets and funds of knowledge and skills that youth, their families, and their communities bring with them or viewing those collective assets as a deficits.<sup>174</sup> Instead, culturally responsive approaches build upon youth strengths and create a learning and development environment where they feel they belong and where they are emotionally and intellectually safe, supported, and challenged. While doing so, culturally responsive approaches promote thriving and address emotional, motivational, interpersonal, and learning and development needs.<sup>175</sup> Culturally responsive approaches connect what youth know to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing.<sup>176</sup> Culturally responsive approaches also support meaning making in that they reference what youth are familiar with and offer a connection.<sup>177</sup>

Cultural competence can help programs, schools, and communities systematically address the disconnects, challenges, and adversities that culturally and linguistically diverse youth and their families routinely face due to their culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Barriers include institutionalized processes and individual behaviors and are related to disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes.<sup>178</sup> Institutionalized processes include resource allocation, rituals, policies, protocols, and practices. Individual behaviors include harassment, macroaggressions, and negative stereotyping. Institutionalized processes negatively affect student goals, attention, effort, identity, and self-efficacy,<sup>179</sup> and drain the psychic energy available to address particular tasks.<sup>180</sup> For example, stereotype threat increases anxiety, negative thinking, and can limit working memory and other executive functions.<sup>181</sup> While many individuals persevere, these barriers can create stress, place extra demands on working memory, drain cognitive resources, and impact health.<sup>182</sup>

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## From Bright Spots to Systems Change

These settings exist in schools, districts, and communities across the country. However, there is ample documentation that these are not equitably distributed within states, communities or even within school buildings. There is also evidence that, in the absence of an intentional focus on inclusivity and robust equity, these strategies may fall short of the goal: supporting the thriving of each and every young person. This is why targeted efforts to create setting and system-level guidance for linking commitments to transformative learning with commitments to robust equity are critical.

While systemic change that addresses all dimensions of individual and collective thriving is important, we can also start in one primary dimension – as improvements in any one dimension enhance the chances for positive developmental outcomes.<sup>183</sup> There are several examples in the state of California.

**Partnership for Children & Youth is an advocacy and capacity-building organization championing high-quality learning opportunities for underserved youth in California, with an emphasis on after school, summer learning, and community schools. In 2015, Partnership for Children & Youth launched an initiative called Expanded Learning 360/365, which created professional learning communities to address cross-sector (in school and out-of-school) alignment on SEL and school climate. The initiative brought together leaders from school districts and expanded learning organizations to focus on planning, aligning, and implementing SEL across the school day, afterschool, and summer.**

**Another example comes from California Afterschool Network, which provides professionals, advocates, and community members the tools and resources necessary to build high-quality out-of-school time programs in California. The California Afterschool Network launched their Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative in 2019 to create a statewide strategic plan to promote prevention, and positive health and wellness outcomes for families, schools, and communities. California Afterschool Network is engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the strategic planning process, including expanded learning, education, intervention, public health, health care, behavioral health, social services, and treatment stakeholders.**

**Most recently, the California Department of Education called for school districts to reach out to their expanded learning partners in their re-opening efforts.<sup>184</sup>**

At their best, each intervention provides opportunities and supports to affirmatively develop mindsets, self-awareness, perspective taking and compassion; build senses of identity and purpose, agency and hope; imagine a future self and community; experience spiritual and cultural grounding, connectedness, and civic engagement, awe and wonder along with aesthetic, kinesthetic design and opportunities for expression; and the ability to build and use creativity and critical thinking.

## The research evidence presented in this paper can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Thriving youth are the goal. Thriving is the dependent variable we want to define, research, and work to increase. Research confirms that thriving is more than a status or a state of well-being in a single area (e.g., health). Thriving reflects a sense of growth or success in any number of domains.**
- 2. Thriving is influenced by internal characteristics and attributes and external conditions. Other things being equal, young people with access to more and better resources (opportunities/advantages) are more likely to thrive. At the same time, young people who are resilient are better equipped to overcome adversity and take advantage of scarce opportunities.**
- 3. Characteristics and conditions interrelate – each influences the other through the common door of experiences. Research describes how a young person’s characteristics are not only influenced by their experiences but also influence the adults who shaped the experiences.<sup>185</sup>**
- 4. These characteristics and conditions can be improved independently with intentional investments. Individual characteristics and external conditions naturally change over time. They can also be improved by design. Young people, especially in their adolescent years, can make intentional choices and undertake efforts to build skills and competencies needed to experience agency even in the face of adversity. Systems and communities can make intentional efforts to address social and economic inequities.**
- 5. These intentional investments must be designed to fundamentally enhance the everyday relationships and experiences of youth. It is the intentionality of these experiences and the relationships with adults and peers within them that multiplies their impact to transform the learning and create the equity that leads to youth thriving.**
- 6. Expanding access to equitable, transformative environments that focus on thriving (beyond a single outcome), optimize transformative learning (beyond knowledge transfer), enhance development (beyond early adolescence) and address multiple determinants of inequity is a targeted and effective way to accelerate individual and collective thriving.**

## Conclusion

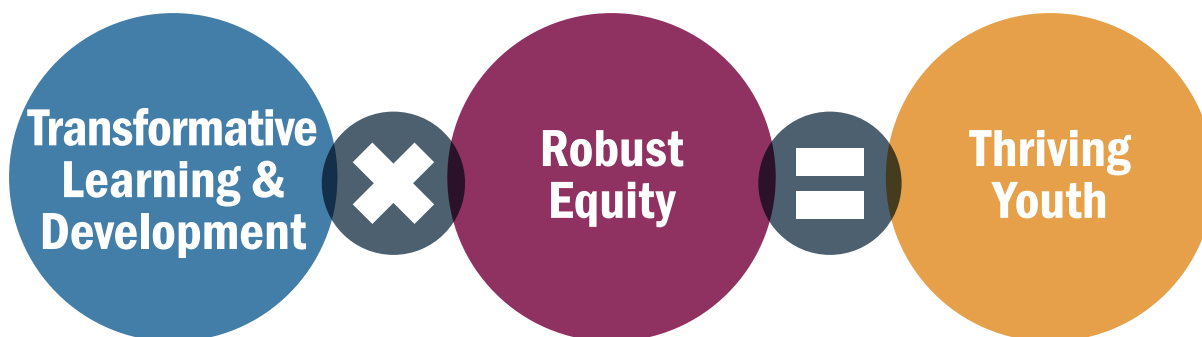
Developing more powerful conceptualizations of thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning and development – and considering them together – enriches our understanding of each. It helps us recognize and address the social factors that act as constraints as well as forge pathways forward that promote both individual and collective thriving, in the moment and over time. These more powerful conceptualizations of the contributors to youth success are grounded in the research evidence. To be actionable, they must also be rooted in a deep understanding of the broader societal contexts.

Young people develop within contexts marked by inequality (e.g., wealth, income, neighborhood resources) and institutionalized privilege and prejudice that can result in disparities, implicit bias, marginalization, micro-aggressions, cultural disregard, segregation, and discrimination, among other effects. These adverse experiences and environmental conditions can expose some youth to excessive risks and repeated stresses that can lead to trauma and toxic stress which, in turn, can impact one's ability to thrive and learn. Many individuals succeed in some ways despite those disadvantages, often because they have benefited from individual and collective supports. However, universal thriving and robust equity cannot be realized without intentionally dismantling privilege, inequity, and injustice that routinely burden learning and development and contribute to social, emotional, physical, and economic ill-being.

Although some may say tackling these challenges are an impossibility, especially in hard times, it is ever more important given the cumulative impacts of pandemics, global warming, population growth, environmental degradation, racism, colonialism, and privilege. While the challenges are increasingly undeniable, they are driving an equally undeniable and collective movement for change.



# A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success



## Transformative Learning & Development

is the optimization of a learner's ability to translate specific experiences and content into generalizable knowledge, competencies, and perspectives.

### The powerful definition of learning is:

- ▶ Broader than schooling
- ▶ Intertwined with development
- ▶ Holistic – involving social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, aesthetic, kinesthetic, and expressive dimensions

### Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Shaped by their experiences of having or building the competencies needed to respond, adapt, achieve
- ▶ Influenced by messages received from others
- ▶ Anchored in the confidence that they have the ability to develop and a key role to play in it
- ▶ Enhanced by their ability, as a part of belonging to an identified group, to make collective meaning of their experiences

### Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Transformative learning & development can occur in all environments if the adults in these environments are intentionally equipped to optimize experiences the potential for learning in all contexts
- ▶ Transformative learning & development is youth-driven
- ▶ Transformative learning & development is culturally responsive

**Robust Equity** is the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.

### The powerful definition of equity is:

- ▶ Requires the essentials – intentionally countering inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, addressing contextual deficits, building on individual and community assets and creating conditions that support overall well-being.
- ▶ Multi-dimensional – mindful of overall thriving, and how well-being or ill-being in one area contributes to well-being or ill-being in others (e.g., education and poverty).
- ▶ Cumulative – rooted in historical awareness, with a commitment to long-term, complex change

### Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Influenced by the degree to which they and their peers have needed experiences and relationships
- ▶ Informed by their awareness and experience of how their groups are treated

### Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Focus on thriving, not just surviving
- ▶ Create access and accountability working from the margins into the mainstream
- ▶ Surface and address complexity – across systems, across domains of development, and over time

**Thriving** is a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency.

### A powerful definition of thriving is:

- ▶ Strengths-based – more than well-being and resilience.
- ▶ Multi-dimensional – reflecting growth or success in any number of domains from physical to economic to spiritual
- ▶ Linked to key internal and external characteristics and assets that interrelate to enable or thwart progress

### Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Summative, reflecting an overall sense of well-being and future success or growth
- ▶ Relational, reflecting an individual's sense of connection to others
- ▶ Calibrated to cultural lenses and social networks
- ▶ Adjusted over time as experiences and perceptions change

### Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Establish well-being as a threshold
- ▶ Affirm the importance of resiliency as a socially supported individual response to adversity
- ▶ Create explicit accountability for strengthening individual and group capacities to thrive

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