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RISE TO THRIVE: STUDENT-CENTERED SYSTEM-WIDE EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

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The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated systemic inequities, making stark an unconscionable reality: our public school system fails too many students and families, particularly those of color and from low-income backgrounds. Calls to create a “new normal” abound, with educators and scholars referencing a future of “reimagined schools” and their “transformation.”

Yet many visions for the future of education offer only tweaks and updates to the ways schools currently operate. As helpful as tutoring to combat learning loss and civics courses on a racially just society may be in the short run, they leave fully intact the foundational systemic flaws that keep tens of millions of Black, Latinx, and economically disadvantaged students from learning and growing.

Other reimaginings are bolder but still promote only one strategy for all of a system’s schools simply because it may have worked well for a few. It makes no sense to treat some new technology as an end in itself without first unraveling systems that are incapable of any adaptation to student and family needs and instead are set up to leave yet more generations of children at the margins, barred from reaching their potential.

This resource takes a different approach. This moment of grave disruption is also one of extraordinary opportunity. It is a chance to rethink long-held assumptions, redesign systems, redefine students’ and families’ role in public schooling, and recruit all innovations—big and small, pandemic-driven or not—to the task of helping all kids and communities learn and flourish.

Rather than tinkering at the edges, we started with a blank page and a question: “How might we design an education system that prepares every child, of every race and background, to thrive in school and in life?”

Our answer grows from our conversations with over 300 students, families, educators, organizers, community members, and education leaders since the pandemic began. It is a vision for the education system of tomorrow—of new democratic governance and operational practices that power a responsive, equitable, and sustainable system capable of adapting all available instructional and support strategies to students’ individualized

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strengths and needs and generating new strategies as required. In this system, students, families, communities, and schools work together to “RISE”—to Realize Individualized Student-centered Education—so that all children and communities thrive.

Now is a time to think big. Kids have urgent needs, families have an unprecedented level of transparency into the limits of the existing system and a new reservoir of experiences trying to augment it one child at a time, and schools and school systems are flush with creative delivery models invented on the fly without the usual rules and conventions. With stimulus funds from the American Rescue Plan entering the system, the time is now to tackle long-standing system flaws that stand in the way of learning and equity.

I. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Five principles guide an equitable RISE-to-Thrive system.

1. **Focus on equity to reach equality and justice.** Children enter a system that is built on and perpetuates race—and class—based inequities. Focusing on equality of easily-quantified inputs, the system treats as the same students who enter public schooling at very different starting places. Opportunity gaps arise before students enter kindergarten and persist throughout their K-12 experience.

In an equitable RISE-to-Thrive system, difference matters. Leaders and educators partner with families to individualize learning for each child. They continually measure student progress, identifying what is working for each student and what to change or adapt. Customization to context and need, not uniformity, drive equitable opportunity and equal and just outcomes.

2. **Learning is the constant; operations, instruction, and time are the variables.** In an equitable RISE-to-Thrive system, the goal is student mastery and wellbeing; the rest of schooling responds to and supports that mission. Class schedules, staffing structures, learning supports, instructional materials, assessment practices, and enrichment opportunities set all students—especially those who have been traditionally underserved—up for growth and achievement.

Learning doesn’t stop with students. For all students to thrive, everyone in the system must learn how to get better at supporting all students and their diverse needs. Leaders and educators assess their services and make improvements when they fall short of goals. Schools and school systems use data collection and analysis to spot trouble early, and they incentivize staff, families, and students to be reflective and report concerns. When issues surface, they respond promptly and supportively in collaboration with affected students, families, and others.

Educators, schools, and school systems don’t keep learning to themselves. They share failure, solutions, and ideas broadly and

intentionally, spreading knowledge across roles, divisions, campuses, and home-school boundaries.

3. **Getting better requires democratic participation and partnership with families, students, and community members.** Realizing equitable RISE-to-Thrive schooling requires collaboration with students, families, community members, educators and other school staff, and system staff and leaders. Schools and systems break down long-standing walls between staff and families, confront existing biases, and build partnerships grounded in mutual respect and care.

School and system leaders empower families to participate actively and consequentially in shaping their children's learning and futures and, by extension, the institution of public education. Ongoing interactions build trust, and systems become responsive to the diverse communities they serve. Schools, communities, families, and students solve problems together and co-create solutions tailored to student and family needs. Meaningful participation begets more participation (both in the education system and other public institutions), and all students and families succeed in the classroom and beyond.

4. **Effective, not best, practices drive student learning.** This isn't semantics. Schools and school systems that RISE to Thrive do not hold to a set of practices to be applied uniformly. Instead, they recognize that what works is specific to context and that contexts change constantly. And they recognize that practices that work can be made to work better. So, they continually measure the effectiveness of their practices, using collaborative inquiry to pinpoint: (1) the degree to which practices are working and (2) in what contexts. Using this information, they expand effective practices into areas in which they are likely to work and adapt practices as contexts change.
5. **Student opportunity and learning must transcend traditional boundaries.** Equity demands that a student's life chances not be constrained by her zip code, her grade, her assigned school or teacher, or other traditional "givens." In order to expand opportunity and access to unevenly distributed resources, school systems committed to equity and that RISE to Thrive constantly break down barriers of convenience, convention, contract, and geography. Using technology and thoughtful partnership, schools and school systems connect students back to their communities and beyond to peers and educators across the city, region, state, and globe and to learning opportunities outside of school. As needed to distribute resources equitably within and across localities, they move resources and

students themselves across attendance zones and school system lines.

II. PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Acting out RISE-to-Thrive principles requires: (1) new and evolved governance structures and operations and (2) strategic and equity-driven approaches to deploying funding and resources.

Core to the RISE-to-Thrive model is a student-centered planning and improvement process. Through collaborative planning, monitoring, implementation, problem solving, and celebration, the team learns to “RISE”—to Realize Individualized Student-centered Education—by getting progressively better at providing education that builds upon each child’s strengths and meets each child’s needs.

A. The RISE Team and Individualized Whole-Child Plans¹

Each child enrolls in a school (physical or virtual) that serves as her home base and core school community. In partnership, each child’s family and school assemble a RISE Team that:

- Creates annually a student’s individualized goals and learning plan;
- Monitors a student’s progress, learning, and wellbeing;
- Works together to solve problems as they arise; and
- Documents, communicates, and celebrates success.

RISE Teams consist of the student and the student’s family, teachers, and community and family support coordinator, along with master schedulers and other professionals who are crucial to the student’s growth and development (e.g., doctors, counselors, interventionists) as needed and appropriate.

Each RISE Team meets the spring before the upcoming school year to discuss: (a) the student’s current state of wellbeing and achievement, (b) the ways the student learns best and what the student finds challenging, (c) successes and challenges from the previous year, (d) expectations, preferences, and opportunities for the upcoming year, and (e) formal and informal wraparound supports and services. Students and families may be invited to fill out learning preferences and expectations surveys in advance

¹ Apart from referencing individualized plans, this system has little to do with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This system avoids the inflexible strictures of IDEA, creating around every child a non-adversarial community that supports the student and acts nimbly and responsively to the student’s goals, preferences, progress, and needs. This system’s closest cousin is the governance structure for Finland’s schools that has enabled that nation to become and persist as an educational powerhouse because its lowest performing students out-perform their counterparts worldwide.

of the spring meeting, and some RISE Teams may need to meet more than once to create plans.

In the spring meetings, RISE Teams craft academic and social-emotional goals for the year, detail an educational program that works for the student and family, and agree upon interim milestones to help mark and monitor progress.

Key programmatic flexibilities include:

- The number of full and partial days per week students attend school in person (typically three to five full days).
- The extent to which students engage in remote programming with students from the home school and/or other schools.

While some students attend in-person class five days a week, other students who work well in remote schooling split their days between in-person and virtual learning (done at school, at home, or elsewhere).

All students have the opportunity during in-person days to attend daily virtual classes in select subjects. These virtual classes may combine students from various schools in the school system, region, or beyond, or be in partnership with local, state, or national museums, businesses, cultural sites, or institutions of higher education.

During the year, the RISE Team meets three to four times (virtually or in person) at a rhythm that aligns to the goals and milestones in a student's annual plan. The team convenes for additional meetings as needed and repurposes other meetings, such as annual parent-teacher conferences that exist in the current system. Each student's progress is celebrated and documented over the course of the year, and each student's plan is updated based on what is working and what needs to be improved.

Throughout the year, the community support team helps students and families with basic needs and works to address challenges that arise that might prevent students from fully participating in school.

B. The Role of the Teacher

Teachers facilitate students' learning experience and ensure students master learning standards and meet learning goals. In the RISE-to-Thrive model, they use standards-aligned, culturally responsive, and sustaining instructional materials to support student learning and mastery-based assessment to track and celebrate student progress. They use aligned diagnostic and formative assessments (qualitative, project-based, and standardized) to identify problems and their root causes and tailor both enrichment opportunities and additional supports. Tech-enabled instructional materials support personalization, learning across remote and in-person modalities, and learning across geographies.

Teachers are organized into instructional teams. Teams may be organized around cohorts of students, by subject matter, by interests (e.g.,

athletics, fine arts), by instructional modality (in-person, virtual, hybrid), or by other groupings that make sense for a particular school.

In the case of cohort-based teaming, all teachers on the team will serve as the teacher-lead on RISE Teams for a set of students in the cohort. The team of cohort-based teachers will be responsible for participating in the development and monitoring of students' annual plans and for solving challenges and improving upon services throughout the year. They facilitate the learning of their student cohort in some or all academic subjects and facilitate learning for students in other cohorts or schools in some or all academic subjects. They may divide up teaching responsibilities by subjects, by student learning levels, by instructional modality, or by combinations of the three and other factors.

Staff in a RISE-to-Thrive model use the school's learning management system to share information about student interests and needs across silos. Professional learning and instructional coaching practices are inquiry-based and focus on effectively partnering with diverse families; facilitating content-rich, standards-aligned, culturally responsive and sustaining learning;² and assessment and monitoring practices, among others.

The role of teachers' unions evolves in this system as well. In geographies with active unions, unions participate in rethinking collective bargaining agreements and paving the way for teachers to retain some of the flexibilities (e.g., virtual teaching) experienced in the pandemic that benefited them, students, and families.

C. School and System Management and Governance

Schools are nested within a public system (district or charter) that serves as their home system and provides primary oversight over their functioning. These systems may be existing local education agencies (LEAs), or they may be new ones that emerge as LEAs merge or regionalize.

Each school is obliged and expects to partner with other schools in and outside of its home system and with museums, businesses, cultural sites, and institutions of higher education to offer remote programming to its students.

² Culturally responsive approaches use “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.” GENEVA GAY, *RESPONSIVE TEACHING: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE* 31 (Teachers College Press, 2nd ed. 2010). Culturally sustaining approaches “seek to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling.” Django Paris, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice*, 41 *EDUC. RESEARCHER* 93 (Apr. 2012). Culturally sustaining not only takes into account the many ways students learn, but it also requires that students are supported in “sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.” *Id.* at 95.

Non-school-based offerings are reviewed and authorized by local systems (district or charter), states, and other charter authorizers.

The role of the local system shifts in the RISE-to-Thrive model. It no longer is a prescriber of daily schedules, curricula, scopes and sequences, instructional materials, work rules, grade levels, grade spans, and the like. Instead, it is:

1. A specifier of standards that maintain the deep principles of public education (e.g., open and equal access, health and safety, learning progress towards happy and stable futures and productive civic participation).
2. A mobilizer of resources, of supports, of lines of access to and collaboration with different schools, school systems, and other public and private service providers, and of learnings from within and outside the district.
3. A direct provider of services as to which economies of scale can be achieved (e.g., trauma centers, schools for incarcerated youth, provider of centralized services to students with special needs).
4. A facilitator, formative reviewer, and source of transparency as to the cumulative results of the RISE structure in action at all relevant levels (areas, schools, classrooms) and for all relevant categories of kids.

Within this new structure, school leaders are responsible for overseeing and facilitating the learning and improvement of their home school staff, as well as for providing feedback to partner schools and organizations. School leaders manage their schools using the principles of continuous improvement. They have a theory of action that guides their school model and management approach, and they use qualitative (e.g., student and family feedback, information generated through RISE meetings) and quantitative measurement practices to help them understand what works and what doesn't throughout the course of the year. They make transparent operational decisions and structures, and they communicate and partner with students, families, school staff, community members, and other leaders and educators to address challenges, co-create solutions, and get better all the time.

System leaders, like school leaders and other staff, embrace the principles of continuous improvement to constantly examine existing systems and strategies. They have a theory of action for school improvement and adjust operational practices that fail to support student learning. When implementing changes, system leaders leverage information from diverse staff, families, and students, and communicate transparently about how differences in opinion will be resolved. Through their actions and words, system leaders demonstrate that individualized, whole-child learning and authentic family partnership are embedded in the school's culture, systems, and processes. This requires leaders to establish a common system-wide

lexicon to make complex concepts concrete and effectively build alignment around key school system goals and guiding principles among families and other community members. Finally, system leaders are constantly learning from other school systems and networks, bringing those learnings back to their staff and students, and identifying opportunities to partner with other schools and organizations.

State agencies set learning standards, provide resources, incentivize and support the creation of programmatic partnerships, authorize non-school-based programmatic options, assure equitable student funding, and source, distribute, and support the application of effective practices.

D. Accountability

In a RISE-to-Thrive model, accountability is multidirectional. Schools and systems are accountable to multiple internal and external sources, each helping school leaders and staff recognize and celebrate successes and identify areas and strategies for improvement.

In an improved, student-centered system, all families engage with members of their child's RISE Team, providing ongoing accountability and feedback to help staff better meet each child's needs and preferences, and improve internal practices.

Lateral accountability is also paramount. Each member of a RISE Team depends on all other members in order to support their assigned student. If the teacher or counselor fails to come prepared to a meeting or disregards a caretaker's input, other members of the team cannot do their jobs, and thus are incentivized to address any issues that arise. If schools fail to deliver high-quality, student-centered learning, families can exercise choice, electing to homeschool or enroll their child in an alternate school.³

Finally, both states and local systems must iterate on existing accountability systems, so they reward schools and systems not only for

³ Families have exercised choice in increasing numbers throughout the pandemic, causing steep declines in school districts across the nation. While difficult to quantify nationally, many states have reported double or triple increases in homeschooling. Private schools, charter schools, and virtual charter schools report spikes in applications and enrollment, as well. See Kalyn Belsha, Gabrielle LaMarr LeMee, Leah Willingham & Larry Fenn, *Across U.S., States See Public School Enrollment Dip as Virus Disrupts Education*, CHALKBEAT (Dec. 22, 2020), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/12/22/22193775/states-public-school-enrollment-decline-covid>; Arianna Prothero & Christina A. Samuels, *Home Schooling Is Way Up With COVID-19. Will It Last?*, EDWEEK (Nov. 11, 2020), <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/home-schooling-is-way-up-with-covid-19-will-it-last/2020/11>; Paul Sullivan, *Private Schools Hold New Attraction for Rich Parents*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 12, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/your-money/private-schools-wealthy-parents.html#:~:text=Schools%20offering%20in%2Dperson%20teaching,%2450%2C000%20a%20year%20or%20more>.

supporting learners enrolled at their home school but also learners in other communities. Under this updated approach, schools are primarily responsible for students in their RISE cohorts—they are evaluated based on both process and outcome indicators to measure when, and to diagnose why, schools are achieving their outcome targets or appear to be falling short of expectations. Key process indicators reveal the extent to which schools actively partner with families and communities to deliver student-centered learning. Schools also receive credit and recognition for entering into and sustaining successful partnerships.

III. KEY RESOURCES

Many of the resources for enacting this RISE-to-Thrive vision already exist in school systems. A few that are crucial to the success of this vision and that have been purchased, distributed, and used at increased levels since the pandemic began are set forth below:

1. Tech-enabled, rigorous, and culturally responsive and sustaining instructional materials. High-quality tech-enabled instructional materials not only make learning accessible and engaging to the child, but also make supporting their children accessible and actionable for the family. When coupled with effective professional learning, tech-enabled instructional materials equip teachers to gather more frequent formative assessment data, better differentiate instruction, offer personalized learning opportunities in which students drive learning activities based on preferences and needs, and incorporate additional project-based learning into the classroom. These materials also expand access to unevenly distributed resources by allowing students to move seamlessly between in-school and at-home learning and connecting students with learning opportunities in other regions and across the globe.
2. One-to-one devices and broadband access. Individual devices and high-speed and reliable broadband (both in the classroom and at home) are essential to a system in which student learning transcends traditional boundaries. Both are prerequisites for students to participate in twenty first century learning opportunities and develop the digital literacy skills needed for full participation in schooling, communities, work, and society at large. Improved broadband access and one-to-one devices also help teachers more effectively deliver personalized instruction tailored to student strengths and needs, families better support at-home learning, and students participate in academic discussions via multiple communication channels aligned with their strengths.
3. Master scheduling and scheduling tools. Scheduling is the structural foundation for schools. Master schedules orchestrate the movement of students and staff through time and space. They coordinate

learning opportunities, instructional time, learning location and modality (virtual, in-person, hybrid), student groupings, and teacher assignments. In the future state, master scheduling is a dynamic tool used to match both educators and students with opportunities aligned to their strengths, needs, and preferences. To realize an individualized, whole-child system, the master schedule is fully integrated with scheduling software and student information systems that transform an expanded menu of opportunities into coherent, logical, student-centered learning plans. Such schedules can also be a tool to combat inequities,⁴ matching experienced teachers with high-need students, creating more time for teacher collaboration and planning, and helping to identify both promising and inequitable practices, among other improvements.

4. Learning management systems. Learning management systems facilitate knowledge sharing, instructional delivery, progress monitoring, and communication with and between students, families, and schools. All school-based members of RISE Teams leverage a learning management system to: (1) share essential information and feedback regarding student schedules, learning opportunities, assignments, strengths, and needs; (2) memorialize both educator practices and student achievement; and (3) analyze and identify encouraging practices and adapt practices that worked elsewhere.

A. Becoming a RISE-to-Thrive School System, State, or Network

School systems, state agencies, foundations, and intermediary organizations can support and motivate the RISE-to-Thrive transformation in stages, growing the depth and reach of the implementation over time. For example, a school system, state agency, or network hub might take a three-year cohort-based approach to catalyze transformation. In the first year, they might select, launch and support a first cohort of sites, while also identifying the next round of sites and identifying the degree to which practices work and in what contexts.

In the second year, the school system, state agency, or hub would provide ongoing support to the first cohort, while launching the second and identifying sites for the third. All the while, the system, agency, or hub would continue to improve upon practices based on data collection and analysis.

The third year would entail providing ongoing support to the first two cohorts, launching the third, and strengthening data collection, analysis, and synthesis as a means to improve implementation. In this third year, the

⁴ Karin Chenoweth, *ESSA Offers Changes That Can Continue Learning Gains*, 97 PHI DELTA KAPPAN, 38–42 (May 2016).

system, agency, or hub might also generate a new strategic plan for bringing the transformation closer to scale.

To support this transformation, systems, agencies, or hubs might decide to engage external providers to support the transition, including to support with design and implementation; to provide tech-enabled, culturally responsive and sustaining, standards-aligned instructional materials; to support family-school partnership and participation; to provide or conduct formative and summative assessment; to provide master scheduling services and system integration; to provide job-embedded professional learning; and to help plan for financial sustainability.

In the short term, the American Rescue Plan can catalyze this RISE-to-Thrive transformation. These funds flow to states, school systems, networks, and schools, and provide system leaders the opportunity to make investments that both respond to students' experiences during the pandemic and bring about a more equitable, student-centered system over the long-term.⁵

School systems must dedicate at least twenty percent of funds received from the stimulus plan⁶ to combat learning loss through evidence-based interventions. These interventions—summer learning and enrichment, extended day programs, comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school-year programs—empower systems leaders to expand their schooling models, provide programming outside of traditional times, and make the changes needed to ensure more equitable student access to unevenly distributed resources. The bill directs systems to allocate these funds with an equity lens, creating additional student learning opportunities that respond to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic.

With the remaining eighty percent of funds received, school systems and schools have latitude. These funds can be used to invest in the infrastructure, resources, staffing, and training necessary to support the broad transformation of the schooling model and student experience.

The stimulus bill also includes an “Emergency Connectivity Fund,” creating an opportunity for systems to make sustainable, long-term investments in the technology (both within the school building and in students' homes) needed to expand learning opportunities across traditional

⁵ The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 represents a historic infusion of funding into the education system. Allocating more than \$122 billion to education, funds flow first to states (who may keep at most 10 percent) then to local education agencies. American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, H.R. 1319, 117th Cong. § 2001 (2021). For approximations of each state's stimulus funding, refer to the tables in the Congressional Service Report.

⁶ As states allocate funds to local education agencies and use state procedures to modify existing budgets, the amount each school system receives may vary.

boundaries and connect students with peers across the city, region, state, and globe.⁷

States can use their share of the stimulus funding to support and catalyze this transformation. With the funding that state agencies are not obligated to pass through to local education agencies, departments of education can strategically allocate support to expand school programming across traditional boundaries and outside of the traditional school day and calendar.⁸ These funds, as the bill directs, must be allocated equitably, targeting support to student subgroups most impacted by the pandemic. State agencies can also leverage a portion of this new funding to incentivize and support transformative practices, providing school systems the financial, infrastructural, and systems support necessary to create equitable, student-centered learning opportunities.

⁷ Throughout the pandemic, many systems relied on short-term connectivity fixes funded by community donations or time-limited promotional offers. The E-Rate expansion provides much-needed certainty around the future availability of funding, paving the way for long-term investments that systems may have been hesitant to make in the past. See Sam Sabin, *Timing of \$7 Billion E-Rate Expansion Has Education Advocates Eyeing Long-Term Connectivity Planning Over Quick Fixes*, MORNING CONSULT (Mar. 11, 2021), <https://morningconsult.com/2021/03/11/erate-stimulus-funding/>.

⁸ Of the ten percent of funds that state education departments may keep, the American Rescue Plan directs that at least seventy percent must be used to combat learning loss through evidence-based interventions (at least fifty percent), summer enrichment programs (at least ten percent), and comprehensive afterschool programs (at least ten percent). American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, H.R. 1319, 117th Cong. § 2001(f) (2021). With the remaining unobligated funds, states have discretion to support initiatives that “address issues responding to the coronavirus,” paving the way for investments that advance equity and transformation. Rebecca R. Skinner, Joselynn H. Fountain, Cassandra Dortch & Emma C. Nyhof, *Estimated FY2021 Grants to States and Institutions of Higher Education Under the Education Stabilization Fund Based on the Senate-Passed Substitute to H.R. 1319*, CONG. RSCH. SERV. (Mar. 8, 2021), https://www.democrats.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/CD%20memo_ESSER_EANS_HEERF_Senate%20passed%20sub%20to%20HR1319_3-8-21.pdf.