How Students Thrive:

Positive Youth Development in Practice

In fall 2016, Springpoint published Designing New School Models, A Practical Guide, which outlines a three-phase process for new school model development, together with a set of planning tools for designers and leaders who want to engage in the work of doing school differently. The materials in the guide represent key insights gleaned from our work supporting school designers in the design, implementation, and iteration of new school models. For us, this work is anchored by three core priorities: young people, great practice, and iteration.

This paper is an exploration of this first and most essential priority— designing schools around young people in order to support them on their developmental journey toward adulthood.

We tend to think of schools as places where students go to gain knowledge and skills. But schools are—first and foremost—places where young people form their identities and begin to see themselves as independent adults. Much like adults, young people learn best in environments that offer a balance of autonomy, support, and high expectations. They thrive in environments where they can explore new interests, exercise meaningful control over how they spend their time, and know their contributions and perspectives are valued. As educators, one of our first responsibilities is to develop schools that offer opportunities for authentic relationships between young people and adults to develop. This foundation of trust and mutual respect will spur the growth of thriving learning ecosystems in which students have choice, voice, and agency.

In this paper, we outline some of the seminal research behind positive youth development, and provide a few concrete examples of what it can look like in practice, featuring the voices of young people who speak to the impact of youth-centered school design on their lives.

Introduction

YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE CENTER OF SCHOOL

Great schools are transformative. They take the practice of moving students toward the achievement of benchmarks and turn it into a profound learning experience through which young people build a path to a bright future. This kind of intentionally designed school nurtures creativity and critical thinking. It's a place where young people can follow their instincts, take ownership of their learning, and develop self-direction while learning to collaborate successfully with others. It's a place where students are exposed to ideas that excite them and are guided to explore potential career pathways where those ideas might take flight. A great school is a place where students know that real learning—learning that matters to them, and that helps them connect to their dreams—takes place. We believe that every student deserves to attend a great school.

How do you design such a school?

You start with young people themselves.

In supporting educators to design innovative schools that strive to be great for all students, we have found three essential priorities are key: young people must be the central focus of any school design process; great practice must be deployed with the needs of students in mind; and schools must grow as students do, practicing iteration to meet emerging challenges.

Decades of research and practice in youth development and education point to positive youth development theory as a foundation for the design of a great school. The central insight of the theory is that all young people will always pursue their own development, and they will do so regardless of what opportunities the environment presents. The developmental achievements they care most about are the stepping stones to a successful adult life: relationship formation; cultivating a sense of identity, self-worth, and belonging; and discovering meaningful interests and building mastery of them. Positive youth development theory helps us understand that young people's developmental goals are the

engine that drives their engagement in the world and their motivation to learn. Great schools facilitate learning by making these developmental achievements central to their mission and integrating them seamlessly into academic goals. At great schools the work of learning and the work of becoming one's self are inextricably bound together.

However, schools have long treated developmental outcomes as distinct from and secondary to academic outcomes, typically relegating them to outside of the classroom. Often framed as "social-emotional learning," essential developmental tasks are frequently addressed in schools as add-ons: a weekly class in bullying prevention; an advisory program; supportive groups for students considered at-risk. Even school-wide initiatives that seek to promote respect or support positive student behavior can marginalize young people's developmental trajectories. While such programs rightly link students' social and emotional well-being with their academic performance, they often do so through a problem-focused lens, providing services or supports to students so as to stave off difficulties or address particular concerns. They fail to fully recognize the essential value of making developmental growth a priority for all students, and undervalue its role in fueling academic achievement. Young people's emotional development and their academic growth are woven together and influence each other. Schools need to be designed so they can address both as one.

Positive youth development theory means focusing on young people, and tapping into their assets and ambitions in order to support them in achieving academic success and deep personal enrichment. Schools that employ positive youth development practices are flexible, responsive, and engaging places to learn; they intentionally surround students with opportunities to form authentic connections, find and pursue their passions, and master skills that are meaningful to them and linked to their goals for the future. When students walk into a school like this, they know they have entered a place where they matter and where adults see their potential and are eager to foster it. They know they are in a place where they belong.

Many traditional school models miss a critical opportunity to embed—across the school and within the classroom—a positive youth development approach that capitalizes on the powerful drive behind young people's central developmental concerns. We have seen first-hand that when schools recognize this relationship—explicitly and consistently—they can succeed in continually engaging even the most disconnected students in a rigorous education. Centralizing this relationship promotes an educational approach that connects students to a meaningful future for themselves, and prepares them to thrive in the world outside the classroom.
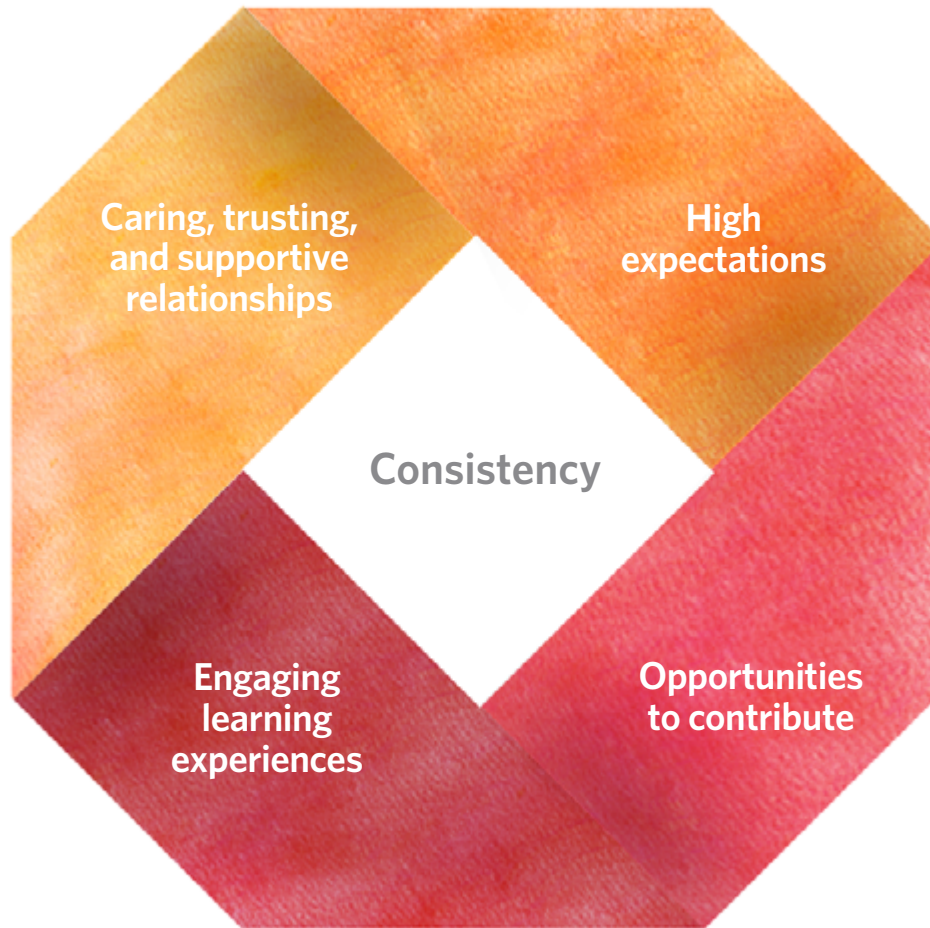
POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: A FOUNDATION FOR SCHOOL DESIGN

The research literature makes a convincing case for placing youth development at the center of school and instructional design. We know that young people will thrive in settings that offer them opportunities to form an identity, and build the competencies that will connect that identity to a purpose and pathway in life. In the context of new school design, adults, peers, and social institutions can be valuable assets in this journey, providing support and scaffolds where necessary, and protecting autonomy where possible. There is now strong scientific evidence from across a range of disciplines—social psychology, cognitive science, and education—that a balance of support and autonomy is intrinsic to learning and academic achievement, and not incidental to it.

Caring, trusting, and supportive relationships

High expectations

Consistency

Engaging learning experiences

Opportunities to contribute

Our work in schools reflects this notion: when schools tap into students' central development concerns, they strike at the essence of what activates and sustains student engagement in learning.

Among the many tenets of positive youth development theory, we believe that these five—drawn from across the field—are especially relevant for the design of learning environments that enable the personal development necessary for academic achievement:

- Young people need caring, trusting, and supportive relationships with adults and with other young people.

- Young people respond to high expectations.

- Young people need opportunities to contribute (often referred to as "choice and voice").

- Young people need learning experiences that intentionally engage their interests, offer opportunities to succeed, and provide feedback to enable them to reflect on their accomplishments.

- These tenets are consistently present— young people know to expect them from the environment.

Key Tenets

CARING, TRUSTING, AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are the context in which development occurs and therefore must be an intentional consideration in the design of any school. Relationships are an "incubator" of growth for young people, and play a central role in shaping the environment in which young people access supports, opportunities, and resources.[1] Strong relationships between adults and young people are consistently found to be associated with positive student outcomes[2]—in fact, young people with strong adult mentor relationships are *twice as likely* as others to have positive outcomes by the end of high school.[3] School reform efforts that focus on relationship characteristics show greater success than others[4] and demonstrate dramatic increases in student engagement, along with changes in classroom attention and focus, and grades and test scores—especially among high school students.[5] Students who experience high levels of teacher support not only have better attendance, they are more engaged in school and ultimately demonstrate greater proficiency.[6]

These findings don't surprise us. In our work with students and schools, we regularly see the value that young people place on connection, and the influence that connection can have. When schools are attentive to this basic need, they boost the capacity of their students to engage productively in school.[7] When young people attend schools where they feel known and cared about, they are more engaged and more likely to perform well academically.[8] This also increases the likelihood that young people will have more positive interactions in school. For young people who may be used to interacting with a principal or dean only for disciplinary reasons, an emphasis on trust, connection, and positive relationships for these students is game-changing.

Students' motivation to learn is intimately tied to their experiences of feeling known, welcomed, and valued by their teachers. Motivational psychology research offers a compelling rationale as to why this is so. When relationships are caring and genuinely meaningful, they become powerful motivators. When young people feel highly connected to others, they begin to identify with the beliefs and values of these trusted others. The strength and meaning of the relationship enables the extrinsic motivation of wanting

rewards (e.g., praise, academic success) to evolve into a deeper, more sustainable intrinsic motivation to learn.[9] Strong relationships with trusted adults in the classroom promote richer, more authentic learning. This has profound implications for how teachers view their students and their own role in the classroom.

This is especially apparent in the case of struggling students who may disengage in the face of academic difficulties. Student disengagement is often misinterpreted, perhaps seen as disinterest in learning or even low ability, rather than an unsuccessful strategy to cope with any number of issues that might impede attention or the motivation to learn. Students may need the warmth of a consistent and personal invitation to learn in order to experience the school setting as one of possibility and success.[10] They may also need an astute teacher who knows that encouraging students to take risks, to view mistakes as opportunities for learning, and to perceive the need for help as an indicator of a growing mind are all powerful messages that can stoke achievement motivation among reluctant learners. Cognitive science confirms what those who have closely watched young people know:

the motivation to learn is not a static, internal attribute that some students possess and others lack. It is a byproduct of students interacting with their social environment, eminently malleable and sensitive to social relationships.[11]

Caring and trusting relationships across the school culture enable young people to develop a sense of belonging. Given that the experience of belonging to a learning community is very important for identify formation, it is not surprising that empirical evidence documents that it also has a powerful impact on academic performance.[12] Our work in schools has borne this out as well. Young people want to feel that they are part of a community, and indeed, their academic success depends on it: when students are in an environment in which they feel they belong, they feel more competent, more motivated, have more positive attitudes about school, and are more invested in learning.[13]

In practice, this means:

- Adults are trustworthy.
- Adults are supportive.
- Adults are accessible.

1 PL Benson et al., Positive Youth Development So Far. *Insights and Evidence*, Vol 3(1) Nov 2006, Search Institute.
2 PL Benson et al., 2006.
3 MA Gambone et al., Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth. Youth Development Strategies, Inc., 2002.
4 Turning the Tide: The Achievements of the First Things First Education Reform in Kansas City, Kansas Public School District, Youth Development Strategies, Inc, 2004.
5 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
6 CA Farrington et al, Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners. The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Review. University of Chicago, Consortium of Chicago School Research, June 2012.
7 Gambone et al, 2002; Connell et al, 2004.
8 Grolnick & Ryan, 1987 & 1989, cited in Connell et al, 2004.
9 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice, Jobs for the Future, April 2012.
10 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
11 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
12 CA Farrington et al, Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners. The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Review. University of Chicago, Consortium of Chicago School Research, June 2012.
13 CA Farrington et al, June 2012.

Caring, Trusting, and Supportive Relationships

Adults are trustworthy. They follow through on promises and commitments, and they are clearly invested in the growth and success of young people in their community.

Look for...

- Communication protocols and practices that emphasize respect, trust, and follow-through
- Respectful invitations to participate in community activities and learning experiences
- Behavior that is calm, kind, and caring, even (or especially in) moments of stress or challenge
- Protocols and expectations that are fair, transparent, and consistent to promote equity

Notes...

Adults are accessible. They have frequent, regular, predictable, and consistent conversations and check-ins with young people about their paths, decisions, and questions.

Look for...

- Published, consistent office hours (before, during, and after school), contact information for adults and students, and clear methods for communication
- Assigned advisors, or "primary person" matches
- Space configurations that allow for large and small group meetings, as well as one-on-one conversations
- Published routines and expectations for communicating with both students and adults
- Access to a college coordinator or a designated person who can support students through the college process

Notes...

Adults are supportive. They both understand their students' assets and challenges well, and possess a broad knowledge of appropriate supports that enables them to effectively match support to need. They welcome students into learning experiences—by word, by deed, by practice—regardless of what history or emotion they bring with them. They scaffold new or intimidating "asks," and encourage risk-taking in new learning. They present failure or struggle as an opportunity to learn.

Look for...

- Assessment practices—including interviews, self-inventories, and observations—that reveal students' assets and challenges, and that do not punish students for practice or struggle

- Instructional practice shaped to close the gap between student needs and rigorous achievement, and to celebrate the opportunities presented by struggle

- Orientation and coaching practice that supports students in identifying their assets, goals, and challenges, and that respects the range of their choices

- Intentional outreach to engage students—in initiating new projects, college and career planning, and the pursuit of personal enrichment—throughout their high school journey, and in periodic reflection, as needed

Notes...

Caring, Trusting, and Supportive Relationships

Talk with students and ask them...

☐ Are all members of your school community kind and respectful toward each other? In what ways do members of the school community communicate and work with each other that show kindness and respect?

☐ Which adults do you trust in your school? Why?

☐ How do you know how adults in your school feel about you? Can you give examples?

☐ About how many adults know you by name?

☐ How do you know how you're doing in your classes, day to day? How well do adults in your school know how you're doing in your classes?

☐ How do adults in your school get you to try new things?

☐ If you struggle, who helps you?

☐ If you need to ask for help, how do you do that?

☐ How does your school view failure—as opportunity, or as something to punish?

☐ If you succeed, do you get recognized? Can you give examples?

☐ Do you know where to find the adults in your school when you need them? Do you know when they're available and how to contact them?

☐ Are you able to seek them out and meet with them when you need to? Do you use these opportunities? Can you give examples?

CARING, TRUSTING, AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

" In 9th grade, I felt that I was a little lost. I didn't know what I wanted to do, or if I even wanted to be at this school. Our principal speaks to us about our problems and concerns. It's heartwarming to see that from my principal. It makes me feel good that my principal even knows my name. I didn't know my principals at my other schools. "

Jose, Grade 11

" Schools should motivate students and recognize them when they do something good. When I come in in the morning the principal says 'good morning' and teachers always ask me about my day. All of that motivates me. This community watches out for me. It makes me feel, not just like a number, but that I am a person and part of a community. "

Leonard, Grade 12

" Each teacher devotes their full attention to you when you're talking. "

Anaya, Grade 10

" A lot of our teachers have that instinct. They know when something is wrong and they care and ask us how they can help. The parent coordinator at our school once said to me, 'You spend the most time at school, more than at home, so we know you and we know when something is wrong.' So it's like a parenting relationship as well as a friend one. "

Jazlyn, Grade 11

" It's very important to have a school that builds really cool relationships between students and adults. Actually sitting down and talking to the teachers is really cool because whether you know them or not, even if you don't have them as a teacher, they'll know who you are. And it says a lot about the school that they care about the students. You're not just another student walking around here; if something happens to you everyone knows. "

Kimberly, Grade 12

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

High expectations must pervade a school's design—clearly embedded throughout course standards, instructional design, student learning experiences, college planning, and enrichment opportunities. Youth-centered school design also means creating regular and consistent forums for adults to convey these expectations clearly to young people—who will know what they need to do in order to meet the challenges of a rigorous curriculum—and provide a variety of strategies and supports to ensure students' success. In a study of effective small schools of choice in NYC,[14] one of the key factors mentioned by teachers as a source of their schools' success was high academic expectations. As one teacher noted in the study report, "You've got to show the kids what they're capable of doing by expecting them to do it."[15]

This matters because shifts in beliefs about what we can achieve have marked effects on what we do and how we perform. A solid research base suggests that when students believe they are capable of succeeding and understand that it is their own effort that will lead to mastery, they are more likely to take on and complete challenging

work.[16] These ideas are implicit in a youth development framework, which stresses young people's inherent strengths, their drive toward mastery, and their responsiveness when significant adults hold positive beliefs about their potential.

The classroom is a prime context for shaping attitudes about academic ability. Research by Carol Dweck and her colleagues on beliefs and attitudes about learning—referred to as "academic mindsets"—tells us that even small shifts in attention to student mindsets can have sizable and long-lasting influence on school performance.[17] Cognitive and social psychology research provide powerful evidence that these critical academic beliefs are not a fixed aspect of the student, but rather a highly malleable trait that is responsive to changes in teacher behavior and classroom climate. Students' ability to focus, work hard, and meet academic challenges is now understood as a belief system that is learned. Students who come to understand that they can succeed through their own effort are more likely to work hard, persist, and achieve than those who believe it is intrinsic ability that will

lead to success.[18] This is also the case for how students perceive their failures—when students understand poor performance as a consequence of poor effort, they are likely to rebound at the next opportunity, whereas if they see their missteps as a result of limited ability, they are more likely to give up. It is students' beliefs about the value of effort, rather than actual ability (as measured by standardized tests) that is most clearly associated with academic performance. For teachers, this means that a core attribute of an effective classroom environment is regularly expressing to students a belief that their efforts working toward high standards will bear results.[19] Notably, these findings are relevant for young people at all levels of achievement. [20]

We have seen successful school designs incorporate these findings by blending high expectations with a supportive, nurturing approach in the classroom. Scaffolded goal setting, for instance, helps young people develop action plans in which they identify and work toward personal achievements. Indeed, research suggests that it is neither supportive teaching nor a challenging environment that best facilitates learning, but the optimal combination of both.[21] In addition, students prefer it, indicating that they work harder when a teacher's approach in the classroom is a balance of control, caring, and high expectations.[22]

In practice, this means:

- ⊗ Expectations are rigorous.
- ⊗ Expectations are consistent.

14 HS Bloom & R Unterman, Sustained Progress: New Findings about the Effectiveness and Operation of Small Public High Schools in New York City, MDRC, August 2013.
15 HS Bloom & R Unterman, August 2013, p. 21.
16 CA Farrington et al, June 2012.
17 DS Yeager & GM Walton, Social Psychological Interventions in Education: They're not Magic. Review of Educational Research, 2011; CA Farrington et al, June 2012.
18 CA Farrington et al, June 2012.
19 CA Farrington et al, June 2012.
20 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
21   E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
22 S. Yonezawa et al, Personalization in Schools. Jobs for the Future, April 2012.

High Expectations

Expectations are rigorous. Expectations outline the standards, goals, and milestones students need to achieve, and are calibrated to a college and career preparatory trajectory.

Look for...

⊘ Course standards, instructional design, and student learning experiences are built around college and career preparatory expectations; scaffolding provides a path to meeting those expectations (rather than diluting them)

⊘ College planning assumes that students will begin mapping their path to college in their first year at the school, and accelerate along that path each year until they gain admission to the college of their choice; career planning is seamlessly embedded

⊘ Personal enrichment support assumes that all students have unique passions, assets, experiences, and needs, and provides sufficient opportunities for each student to find her/his path to personal enrichment

⊘ Goal setting is utilized around personal behaviors and to develop action plans for students to identify and achieve personal behavior goals; designated adults follow through on these goals and support their development

Notes...

Expectations are consistent. Expectations remain in place throughout all aspects of a young person's experience within the school community, and are respected by both young people and adults.

Look for...

⊘ Published, promoted, and practiced expectations for positive, respectful ways of engaging in the community, which all members are held to—young people and adults alike; adults communicate their belief that young people can meet the high expectations laid out for them

Notes...

High Expectations

IN CONVERSATION

Listen for the answers to these questions to see that this tenet is in practice.

Talk with students and ask them...

☐ How does your school define success?
How do you define it?
Are those two definitions the same?

☐ Does your school expect you to go to college?
How do you know?

☐ Are your academic classes preparing you for college?
How do you know?
Can you give examples?

☐ Are the expectations/rules the same for everybody in your school?
Why or why not?

☐ Do you believe that adults in your school understand the school's expectations?
Do they hold everyone accountable for meeting them—even themselves?
Can you give examples?

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

" Our teachers and our principal don't really let you fail. You can't just turn something in and take the grade. They are like, 'no, I know you can do better than that, we've seen you do better, and we're going to push you to do your best.' I think it's important that we're challenged but we don't dread it. The teachers talk to us and support us and give us helpful feedback so we understand what we need to improve on. "

Blake, Grade 10

" I am 100% certain that my school expects me to go to college. I have not gone an entire semester without hearing 'You'll need this for college.' I have been given lessons on how to look for the right college for me, and what it is I need to be successful in college. Our school doesn't only focus on college readiness in the classroom but out of the classroom as well. There are many programs that our school promotes to help with college readiness. I've joined multiple programs so far and I plan on doing even more. "

Sahian, Grade 11

" This is a mastery-based school. You work on something until you master it, so there is no possible way for you to fail. You don't get lower than a C. "

Student from Problem-based Academy of Critical Thinking

" Our teachers definitely push us out of our comfort zones. For example, this year in English we were challenged to write whatever we wanted when given a vague topic. And I think that has made me struggle but in the end it made me realize that I can do anything. I can write about anything in any format I want. So it definitely pushed me outside my comfort zone but I think it was for the better. "

Sayema, Grade 11

" I feel like the support system here holds you to high standards because of the responsibilities placed upon you. It changed me in a way because I became a better student; I became more focused. I stopped getting into spats with teachers over minor stuff. Now, I found out a month ago, I got early admitted to Skidmore. "

Keshawn, Grade 12

VOICE, CHOICE, AND CONTRIBUTION

Young people develop through active participation in their own learning. Schools have to design opportunities that allow students to take on challenges, have authentic responsibilities, and make real decisions—with real consequences. This is the foundation of authentic learning in adolescence. And agency—the ability to effect change in oneself and in the world around you—is a strong predictor of academic success.[23] Active engagement in learning is now recognized as crucial to sustaining the focus, attention, and persistence that is needed for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.[24]

The opportunity to shape decisions that have an impact on their lives is fundamental for ensuring that young people develop and maintain a sense of agency in their learning. When young people have agency, they orient themselves to learning what resonates most with their interests and needs, pursue the knowledge and skills that matter deeply to them, and monitor and regulate their efforts.[25] A wealth of research indicates how critical student voice is in promoting agency

and how profoundly individual choice and decision-making are linked to academic performance.[26] Student choice, challenge, and control are also linked with academic improvement and achievement as well as decreases in problem behaviors.[27] When schools and classrooms are designed to create structures and supports that engage and utilize students' need and desire for agency and voice, students are more likely to expend their creative and constructive energies engaged in learning tasks. For example, supporting young people in exploring their authentic interests and passions can open them up to new career options, for which they consequently work to develop a deeper knowledge and skillset. If the environment in the classroom stifles these urges and interests, they will make choices to engage elsewhere, or not at all.

In practice, this means:

⊗ Expectations are transparent.
⊗ Young people have autonomy.

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23 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
24 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012; C. Hinton et al, Mind, Brain and Education, Jobs for the Future, April 2012.
25 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
26 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.
27 E. Toshalis & MJ Nakkula, 2012.

Voice, Choice, and Contribution

Expectations are transparent. Expectations are articulated in advance, and students understand both their paths to success and what scaffolding and support practices are in place to help them succeed.

Look for…

⊗ Published, current, and accessible academic course plans, learning assets, college planning scope and sequence, and guides that outline opportunities with associated support documents

Notes…

Young people have autonomy. Adults recognize and respect young people's autonomous decisions and choices and also support them as they evolve.

Look for…

⊗ Teachers review measures of success with students—including course requirements, expectations, and sequence—and collaborate with students to map a path to success, including, where possible, the opportunity to personalize learning experiences and products to student passions, needs, and ambitions

⊗ Advisors review the requirements for college matriculation and success with students, including timeline, cost, application requirements, and preparation guidelines—and collaborate with students to identify goals and map a path to success, as students define it for themselves

⊗ Advisors support students in identifying their passions, interests, and goals, and collaborate to map a path to explore them, and provide tools and resources to capture and share students' achievements and successes

Notes…

Voice, Choice, and Contribution

IN CONVERSATION

Listen for the answers to these questions to see that this tenet is in practice.

Talk with students and ask them...

☐ Do you know what you need to do to graduate from school?
Can you tell me what that is?

☐ Do you know what you need to do to "complete" a course?

☐ How do you know if you are doing well in a course or on an assignment?

☐ How much say do you have in your daily schedule and what your classes and activities are over the course of the day?

☐ What do you believe are the biggest obstacles you're facing in preparing for college?

☐ How often do you talk about your plans for after graduation?
Do you know what your options are?
How did you decide on your post-graduation plan?

☐ What are your next steps for college planning this year—are you visiting schools, researching them in class, meeting with a college counselor, taking the SAT, etc.?

☐ What opportunities do you have outside of your classes to explore things you enjoy?

☐ What are the kinds of internship, jobs, pre-college programs, or other discovery opportunities that your school makes possible for you?

☐ How is your school changing you as a person?
Can you give examples?

VOICE, CHOICE, AND CONTRIBUTION

" Our flex block can be used for advanced opportunities. There are certain days where we can take extra classes or AP classes. I do student leadership during that time but I'm also taking an engineering class. The fact that I'm able to take a bunch of classes and work on community projects too is great because I'm not restricted to the amount of time in the school day. "

Walker, Grade 10

" Our freshman year grading system made us input our own grades. And it was a pain—we'd spend 20 minutes trying to figure it all out. As time went on, teachers recognized that this was frustrating for students and they quickly changed it. "

Justin, Grade 11

" If there is a topic we're interested in that's not already covered in a class or elective, the teachers here will create it for us or let us choose how to use our interest in a class we're already taking. For instance, if we need an art credit, but we love to write, we can write essays on an artist or a painting that reflects on our beliefs. "

Alyssa, Grade 12

" I was interested in technology, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I got to this school. Coming from an arts middle school, the transition was hard to adapt to. At this school they said, 'we can help you with anything you want to do.' They connected me to extracurriculars around the city to help me figure out what I wanted to do. Now, I'm between computer science and political science. "

Jose, Grade 11

" When we hired the teachers, it wasn't just the principal hiring them. We had teachers come in and students would interview them. Then as a whole school we would decide if we wanted to hire the teacher and we had to have reasons why. "

Gilberly, Grade 10

INTENTIONALLY ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The search for identity is young people's chief occupation—and preoccupation—during the high school years. Schools must design experiences that encourage young people to pursue their passions, question the world around them, and challenge the status quo as they attempt to identify their own values and beliefs. They need to find out what they are good at, what is important to them, what motivates them, and what their limitations might be. Decades of youth development work in community settings have made it clear that young people gravitate toward experiences where they feel these pursuits are supported and where the growth that they are most invested in can happen.

Cognitive research demonstrates that motivating interest is an essential feature of the deeper learning that characterizes the richest educational experiences.[28] Experimentation turns to knowledge, and knowledge to mastery through a complex interplay among interest, practice, and identity.[29] Deeper learning appears to exist at the intersection of mastery, identity, and creativity, where identity fuels the intrinsic motivation to learn, which deepens as the relevance of the material becomes more important to the learner's sense of self. Classrooms facilitate this experience when teachers understand the importance of shifting the learner's status from passive observer to active participant.[30]

> ## In practice, this means:
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> - Learning experiences are engaging.
> - Learning experiences are explicitly tied to learning milestones.
> - Learning experiences are both challenging and scaffolded.

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28 J. Mehta and S. Fine, *The Why, What, Where and How of Deeper Learning in American Secondary Schools,* Jobs for the Future, 2015.
29 Mehta and Fine, 2015.
30 Mehta and Fine, 2015.

Intentionally Engaging Learning Experiences

IN PRACTICE

Use the tool below to look for indicators like these to see that this tenet is in practice in a school.

Learning experiences are engaging. Adults know their students well, and design learning experiences that engage student interests and build upon their assets.

Look for...

- There are a variety of pathways, opportunities, and authentic assessments available to students in a class or within a learning unit
- Assignments can be completed in multiple ways and students have varied opportunities to demonstrate their skills
- Assignments are tied to personal behavior development
- Multiple post-secondary opportunities are presented to students and conversations about the pros and cons of each are conducted
- A "no assumptions" approach to college knowledge in which students and families are fully introduced to and supported through the application process across 4 years of exposure by a knowledgeable and sensitized advising staff
- Intentional development of students' leadership competencies through transformative programmatic experiences both inside and outside of school, building a strong foundation in each of these areas:
  - Confidence and skill in navigating professional spaces
  - Persistence as self-directed learners
  - Awareness that struggle and failure over time can lead to discovery and success
- Navigation of groups and teamwork
- Accountability to other adults and young people in professional contexts
- Experiences can include topical history units; writing projects that respond to student experiences, assets, and knowledge; math exercises that build on and deepen students' essential questions and curiosity; etc.

Notes...

Learning experiences are explicitly tied to learning milestones. Students understand their progress, achievement, and challenges.

Look for...	Notes...
ⓥ Assignments draw from the best innovative instructional design practice and incorporate content that is relevant to student experiences and environments ⓥ Goal setting and action planning are part of completing larger assignments ⓥ Self-reflection and revision are built into learning opportunities ⓥ Timelines and goal-setting with respect to college and graduation are developed and revisited	

Learning experiences are both challenging and scaffolded. Student understanding is frequently assessed, with results shared immediately or soon thereafter, so students can see where they are and what they need to do next in order to grow.

Look for...	Notes...
ⓥ Assignments provide opportunities for students to reflect and articulate next steps ⓥ A set of scaffolded enrichment activities including those that have competitive selection criteria, bear college credit, and/or include apprenticeship/ work-based components; some of these can serve as entree experiences for students who will require more time to succeed in out of school time opportunities	

Intentionally Engaging
Learning Experiences

IN CONVERSATION

Listen for the answers to these questions to see that this tenet is in practice.

Talk with students and ask them...

☐ What is the most interesting assignment you've worked on this year?
What made it memorable for you?

☐ How did you work to get to the end of this assignment, and were you successful in completing it?
What support did you receive along the way?

☐ Can you describe an experience working with an adult at your after school program, job, or internship?
What has been memorable about working with this person?

☐ How do you think participating in this experience has changed you as a person?

☐ How do you receive feedback on your assignments?

☐ Do you have an opportunity to revise assignments?

☐ Are you able to track your progress in your classes?

☐ Do you have opportunities to reflect on previous assignments and rate yourself on how you think you did on those assignments?

INTENTIONALLY ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

" I have a model UN class and my teacher is picking five students who he thinks represent the class the best to go to the actual UN, which is a great opportunity that a lot of people don't get to experience. Our teachers look out for students with specific interests and reach out to them knowing what they want. "

Khadija, Grade 11

" For one project in history class, we had to play different parts within history—like the laborers, the workers. We had to jump from multiple perspectives. You had to play parts, you had to really do the research. It was challenging but exciting to see what you're capable of doing and how far you can really go. "

Mario, Grade 10

" Intersession at our school is a period between two semesters where students have the opportunity to do an internship, or take a class at school and earn a full credit. In my Intersession class this year, we learned about the history and chemistry of making chocolate and earned a physical science credit. We also learned about budgeting and marketing our own business. Our final project was to collaborate in a group of three to four other students to create our chocolate business. I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in this class because I believe I learned a lot about the science of chocolate, as well as real life skills such as managing a successful business. "

Gabriela, Grade 12

" The intensive that I took was Law and Order. I was exposed to more of the criminal justice field. I really wasn't interested at first, but I wanted to try something new to see if I might like it. And it was pretty interesting. We had a 9/11 dispatcher, a forensic scientist, and a police officer come in and we went to the precinct. That was really cool because we got to see that the criminal justice field is not only about cops. There's so many things included in criminal justice, you don't necessarily have to be a cop to be in that kind of field. "

Sarah, Grade 11

" Since our school is partially in a hospital, we get to choose our mentors. I chose a pediatric neurologist because I want to be a neurologist. "

Mario, Grade 10

CONSISTENCY

The presence of the four tenets described in this paper are essential design features of rich learning environments built intentionally for young people and aligned with their developmental needs. The last tenet, consistency, speaks to the need for these elements to be reliably present and embedded across the school ecosystem. Every program and policy, and every staff member, should exemplify the notion that what is best for young people's holistic development is a priority. Consistency is the backbone of the positive youth development approach to designing and cultivating great schools; it is what allows students to feel safe in the learning environment, and secure that their expectations—the promises that the school makes to them—will be met continuously.

The concept of consistency reiterates the distinction between a holistic approach to youth development in school design, and a superficial, additive one. Young people interpret the consistency of a school's youth development efforts as an indication of the school's commitment to them. Schools with an authentic youth development approach do not only offer "one-off" experiences such as the occasional teacher who really "gets" kids, or a few classes where students have opportunities for hands-on work. In student-centered schools, these experiences define the school, and students know to expect them. Youth development practices are echoed in every aspect of the school, from its curriculum and approach, to the arts, to the way it delivers social support and helps students navigate their pursuit of post-secondary options.

In practice, this means:

- ⊗ An unwavering belief in young people.
- ⊗ Positive youth development practices are assessed.
- ⊗ Positive youth development practices are always evident.

Young people interpret the
consistency of a school's
youth development efforts
as an indication of the school's
commitment to them.

Consistency

An unwavering belief in young people. All members of the school community believe that young people will thrive in settings that offer them a balance of support and autonomy, and therefore will help them build identity, a purpose, and a pathway in life.

Look for...

- Regular professional development that highlights the integration of positive youth development in the school's design and practice; staff demonstrates an understanding of this in daily practice

- Students are explicitly supported in gaining a concrete and actionable understanding of how their socio-emotional development and academic development are inextricably intertwined

- Personal behaviors and growth mindset models are utilized with students

- Staff routinely build opportunities for student choice into learning activities, and leadership performs formative checks for quality to facilitate growth in this area

Notes...

Positive youth development practices are assessed. These practices are essential to school evaluation, on par with standardized test scores or other more "traditional" measurements. This self-reflection is considered in the continuous improvement practices of a school.

Look for...

- Regular self-evaluation of how positive youth development is part of the everyday aspect of the school

- Reviews of curriculum and instruction for positive youth development

- Students are regularly asked for feedback and insight into school systems and structures through interviews, surveys, focus groups, etc.

Notes...

Positive youth development practices are always evident. These practices are explicitly built into every system and structure of the school. The school's mission centers around providing opportunities for students to pursue developmental tasks and achievements.

Look for...

- Behavior and discipline interventions reflect positive youth development
- Rituals or routines are developed to emphasize positive youth development
- Consistent academic expectations are used across the school (i.e., common rubrics, competencies, formats, etc.)
- College readiness and post-secondary planning is a given and woven into the school day for all students
- Positive youth development structures are implemented across all grades and disciplines

Notes...

Consistency

Talk with students and ask them…

☐ How often do you feel your voice is heard and your insights are considered?

☐ How supported do you feel by ALL staff members both academically and personally?

☐ To what extent do you feel you understand what to do every day and in each of your classes?

☐ What are your main goals as a student right now?
In 3 months? Next year?

☐ How much independence do you feel you have in your learning?

☐ To what extent do you feel you are in-charge of your education?

CONSISTENCY

" We have homecoming—and home-coming is when the alumni of the school come here and talk to the 11th graders and the seniors about the college experience. That also shows how much they care about you and your life after high school. The school follows up with you when you're not even in the school anymore! "

Leonard, Grade 12

" One thing that's consistent is the enrichment office and the opportunities we have, like new programs. The school sends emails every quarter. You can look through this list of programs to find whatever interests you. And then they also remind you of application deadlines for these programs. So the programs are con-sistent, they will always be there. "

Daniel, Grade 11

" The relationships we have with teachers are constant. My freshmen teachers are still talking to me. We're able to maintain the relationship even when they are not our teachers anymore. "

Jazlyn, Grade 11

" I think something that's very unique is that we can go to our teachers because we have a very close relationship with them. They do teach us but I also feel like they're my friends and also part of my family. I feel like I can go to any of them at any time. Like, 'oh Christy's not here? Sucks. Where's Anna?' Anywhere I go, there's someone who can support me, which I really like. I feel very comfortable around these people. "

Khadija, Grade 11

" This school sets up the curriculum so you get a little bit of everything, which gave me a clear view of what I want to study in college. I used to think you just pick your path once you get to college. But then I saw I needed to think about it earlier. For example, in 9th grade we got acclimated to college; we were guided through the process of the college transition. In 10th grade, we talked about career options and what credits and classes you need for that career path. Now in 11th grade, we're talking about financial aid and how to get to your goals in college. "

Daniel, Grade 11

The Long View:
Sustaining Focus

Central to the creation of a youth-focused school is the **interrelationship** between the five elements of positive youth development described above. For an effective youth development culture to take hold, all the tenets we have proposed must be present and pervasive. They operate as a whole—inextricably linked together, building on and influencing each other. As teachers prioritize efforts to build supportive, trusting relationships, students are more likely to internalize the high expectations they have set; as these teachers commit to students' choice in assignments, students' engagement in their work grows. As students become more engaged in their assignments and find them increasingly relevant, they work harder to meet expectations. As this cycle persists, across time and beyond the classroom to the entire school community, it deepens and broadens, shifting the entire school culture toward high expectations and strong student engagement. As these experiences begin to define the school, students' attachment to school and their academic success grow.

We are continuously encouraged by the strong implementation of positive youth development that we have seen in our partners' schools, and in high schools across the country. We have seen great leaders structure schools and classrooms—and think about teaching—not as a way to deliver information or to transfer knowledge, but rather as environments that can ignite student interest and optimize opportunities for students to develop agency as self-directed learners. Schools cannot create these conditions through add-on programs or targeted interventions—and they cannot sustain these conditions without ongoing cultivation. To ensure that the school environment can continuously support positive youth development, the entire school staff must understand and accept the philosophy, and own the core tenets. Training in the theory and practices of positive youth development is critical, as is on-going norming and re-visiting of practices with school and district teams.

It is equally critical to ensure that youth-centered environments are sustainable. To ensure that the authentic focus on young people endures, schools need to consider youth development in their reflection and iteration as well. Monitoring youth engagement, the establishment of caring relationships, high expectations, engaged learning environments, and meaningful participation are as crucial to determining school success as are ELA or math performance or year-to-year academic growth. Schools that successfully serve all students are intentional about tracking these environmental attributes, and include them as indicators of continuous improvements. As with any practice that would fall under a continuous improvement rubric, practices identified with supporting positive youth development in the classroom and across the school are reflected in educational planning and are subject to frequent formative and summative assessment.[31]

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31 Coalition of Essential Schools, Continuous School Improvement, www.essentialschools.org/benchmarks/11.

We offer below some questions that educators can regularly ask themselves to assess how successfully the school design, curricular strategy, classroom structure, and lesson delivery reflect the primacy of youth development in their model:

⊗ How do schools create environments that foster youth development and learning, rather than focus on what students need to know?

⊗ What is the relationship between the needs and competencies that young people strive to address and the essential academic tasks of building knowledge and skills required for college readiness?

⊗ What do these relationships tell us about how to design schools so that we support holistic youth development and promote learning and achievement?

These questions, in addition to those at the end of each preceding section, should be incorporated into a school's ongoing self-evaluation strategy. Answering these questions repeatedly and honestly over the life of a school enables youth development to remain at the heart of a school, and to truly support learning and fulfill the promise of a great school for all young people.

Further Reading

These resources are a mix of practical and theoretical works that offer a wide range of research, examples, and ideas in positive youth development and related fields. In addition to several seminal works that have shaped the field of youth development, we've included some newer works that wade into the ongoing and fluid conversation in these areas. We hope this list is valuable to practitioners as they build their knowledge and expertise around positive youth development and work to implement these practices in their schools.

Bransford, John D., Brown, A.L., Cocking, Cocking, R.R. (2000) How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition. Washington, D.C: National Academy Press.

This book from the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning of the National Research Council was published to bring important new research findings on learning, brain development, and teaching to practitioners in schools. The book explores research and insights from a wide range of works, outlining pertinent ideas and practical suggestions from cognitive science and beyond. It discusses how to craft teaching practices and curriculum design around the science of learning.

Cahill, M. & Ellis, S.E. (2013, December 03). Retrieved January 25, 2017, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qa_FTn_dJI.

In this video interview, Michele Cahill, an expert on positive youth development, speaks with Sabrina Evans Ellis (Youth Development Institute) about youth development and its impact on school design. Cahill discusses her wide-ranging experience in designing schools with youth development principles in mind, and ways in which youth development research can support student success in high school, college, and career. Additionally, Cahill cites numerous ways school design leaders can ensure youth development principles are woven into the fabric of their schools.

Cole, S. F. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn: supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence.* Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

A study by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children that highlights the impact trauma has on children and their learning. This study defines trauma and indicators of trauma in students, which are not always as obvious as many believe. More importantly, it provides recommendations for how school can be a place that is responsive and supportive in helping students navigate the far-reaching social, emotional, and academic effects of past trauma. A great beginning for anyone interested in learning environments responsive to trauma.

Duckworth, A. (2016). Grit: the power of passion and perseverance. New York, NY: Scribner.

This book hypothesizes that success across careers is determined by a combination of passion and persistence referred to as "grit." The book is filled with anecdotal evidence to support the claim, as well as Duckworth's development of ways to measure grit. Chapters 5 and 6 specifically provide some ways to help build, grow, and develop grit that could be applied to school design.

Duckworth, A. (2016, March 26). Don't Grade Schools on Grit [Editorial]. *New York Times*, p. SR5. Retrieved January 12, 2017, from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/sunday/dont-grade-schools-on-grit.html.

In response to some school districts trying to hold schools and students accountable for "grit" through various quantitative methods, Angela Duckworth published this editorial to outline her reasons for concern over this and caution people around using her "grit" theory as a way to measure schools. She highlights several pieces of research that examine the potential harms of these so-called "high stakes character measurements."

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: the new psychology of success.* New York: Random House.

Dweck's original book explains the idea of mindsets and the impact of growth mindsets on student achievement. A good place to start

understanding how mindsets can be a related framework that can help promote positive youth development especially with respect to engagements and high expectations. It includes concrete tools that can be used with school design teams, as well as a theoretical framework to inform the school design process.

Dweck, C. (2015, September 22). Carol Dweck Revisits the 'Growth Mindset' [Editorial]. *Education Week.* Retrieved January 17, 2017, from http://www.edweek.org/ew/ articles/2015/09/23/carol-dweck-revisits-the-growth-mindset.html.

In this editorial, Carol Dweck addresses several of the misconceptions around her mindset work that have become prominent in the field. She spends time addressing each misconception and the potential negative impacts on schools and students when trying to implement only portions of the mindset work. Dweck highlights how schools can plan strategically for systemic change using the mindset research and notes that there must be long-term investment to see results.

Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T.S., Johnson, D.W., & Beechum, N.O. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

This report explores the role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance. It presents research on five factors—academic behavior, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, and social skill—and examines the impact that each has on academic performance. It also makes the argument about the false dichotomy between cognitive and noncognitive factors, presenting a strong case for how the factors might all fit together.

Finley, T., & Wiggs, B. (2016). Rethinking classroom design: create student-centered learning spaces for 6-12th graders. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

This book highlights ways school leaders can think about how physical space in the school can promote student engagement and ownership. The author pulls together research around ideal learning spaces and specifically provides a guide for thinking about the classrooms of 6-12th graders.

Kallick, B., & Zmuda, A. (2017). Students at the center: personalized learning with habits of mind. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

This book gathers field-based research to describe methods of putting students at the center of learning. The authors describe how to get educators to rethink instruction from top to bottom to prioritize student voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery. The work blends theory, research, and practical tools.

Masten, A. S. (2014). Invited Commentary: Resilience and Positive Youth Development Frameworks in Developmental Science. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43(6), 1018-1024.

This commentary examines the positive youth development framework through the lens of resilience science in human development. It summarizes research on positive youth development and the history of resilience science. The commentary goes on to compare positive youth development and resilience to identify similarities, differences, and future impacts of these two frameworks, which could be used to inform policy and school systems and structures.

Pittman, K. & Cahill, M. (1992). Youth and caring: The role of youth programs in the development of caring. Commissioned Paper for Lilly Endowment Research Grants Program on Youth and Caring. Presented at Youth and Caring

Conference, February, 1992, Miami, Florida. Washington, D.C.: Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development and Policy Research.

This policy paper articulates how youth programs promote youth development, in particular the "cultivation" of young people who are able to "convey and promote caring." The paper includes concrete examples of program activities.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2013). What Role Does Grit Play in the Academic Success of Black Male Collegians at Predominantly White Institutions? Journal of African American Studies, 18(1), 1-10.

Published in 2013, this article, discusses the results of a study done on black males in predominately white schools to explore the role "grit" plays on their success. The article discusses how they quantified the characteristic of "grit" to understand if it has an impact on predicting college grades. While the population is specific, it provides insights on the validity of measuring "non-traditional" traits and qualities in students as a way of understanding college success. The authors also provide recommendations for schools and families based on the research.

Vuong, M., Brown-Welty, S., & Tracz, S. (2010). The Effects of Self-Efficacy on Academic Success of First-Generation College Sophomore Students. Journal of College Student Development, 51(1), 50-64.

This article looks at the effects of self-efficacy on first generation students in college. It discusses previous research as well as the impact of self-efficacy on this group of students. The article goes into how self-efficacy is inextricably linked to many of the positive youth development tenets, specifically student voice and ownership and student engagement.

Yeager, D. S., Romero, C., Paunesku, D., Hulleman, C. S., Schneider, B., Hinojosa, C., . . . Dweck, C. S. (2016). **Using design thinking to improve psychological interventions: The case of the growth mindset during the transition to high school. Journal of Educational Psychology, 108(3), 374-391.**

This in-depth study on the impact of a user-designed mindset intervention program on student achievement explores the validity of such programs when replicated. The study focuses on 9th grade students from high schools across the US and Canada and reported promising findings around mindset intervention programs with this population of students. The paper also discusses policy and school-based recommendations utilizing the information and data found.

Yeager, D., Walton, G., & Cohen, G. L. (2013). **Addressing Achievement Gaps with Psychological Interventions. Phi Delta Kappan, 94(5), 62-65.**

This article gives a lens and context to "psychological interventions" that can help students navigate some of the developmental achievements promoted by positive youth development. Yeager and his team inform readers more about the way developmental goals complement academic goals rather than replace or support them. It includes concrete practices that can be built into the design of a school, while also providing some brief theory to help norm understanding.

Youth Development Institute (2008, March). *Promising Practices in Working with Young Adults* (Publication). Retrieved https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55e5e13ee4b0300afc3 16341/t/567318ec05f8e24f350e5 7b6/1450383596582/Promising Practices %28Youth Development Institute%29.pdf.

This research paper includes profiles of successful alternative schools, a discussion of the primary person approach, best practices on engaging young adults and returning learners, advice for post-graduation planning, and strategies for establishing and maintaining school and community partnerships.

ABOUT US

Springpoint is a national organization that supports the design and launch of innovative secondary school models that connect young people to postsecondary success. Our mission is to enable all students, regardless of environment or background, to succeed in high school, college, and beyond.

Through customized training, support, and resources, the organization supports school designers, system leaders, and other partners as they develop, launch, and grow school models. Partners include districts, charters, networks, foundations, and other leaders in the field of education.

Springpoint seeks to advance a broader understanding of how intentional school design and implementation can result in transformative success for students and their communities. This paper is a part of that ongoing effort.

For more, please visit our website:
www.springpointschools.org