

Making High School Meaningful

A Vision for Transformative Learning Experiences



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Introduction



The Kids Are Alright, It's Schools That Are Not

Ask the average teenager about high school today and they will tell you that they don't particularly like school, that it is boring, that they don't care about what they are learning, and that they don't see its purpose.

These are not idle complaints. Students are speaking to a real and troubling phenomenon occurring in high schools across the country. Their boredom is a warning bell. It indicates a much broader and more serious problem about what and how students are being asked to learn, and whether they are being prepared to engage with and succeed in the world they will encounter after high school. As well, boredom negatively impacts student achievement¹ and puts students at higher risk of dropping out².

One reason students are bored is because, oftentimes, too little is being asked of them. Formulaic assignments and superficial coverage of content is the norm. Students have little say over what they are learning, they rarely know the "why" of what they are working on, and they are seldom asked to tap into their own curiosity or bring their own strengths and interests into the classroom.³

Over the past 10 years, we have visited hundreds of classrooms across the country, spoken with hundreds of students, and reviewed hundreds of pieces of student work. We have heard common refrains from students who say that school feels like a series of boring, meaningless tasks.

WHAT ARE STUDENTS TELLING US?⁴

"We don't do anything that's meaningful. We just stick to the curriculum. We do what they tell us to do."

"The work doesn't require much brainpower, to be honest."

"[I want] more hands on things and harder assignments...I want things to be more challenging."

"I've been learning the same things I have always learned. Nothing new, nothing exciting. Vocab, etc. But we could do things more engaging. I feel I am not benefiting from classes. I don't remember anything from previous years."

They often mindlessly plod through these tasks, which brings little satisfaction or sense of accomplishment.

In-depth research of classroom-based learning reveals that students spend vast amounts of time on work that is not grade appropriate, and only a small proportion of students demonstrate mastery of grade-level standards. Young people in traditionally marginalized groups, such as those in low-income communities, multilingual learners, and many students of color, have even less exposure to strong instruction and to highly engaging or appropriately challenging work.⁵ These students are more regularly exposed to repetitive and unchallenging lessons and instruction that focus on lower-level skills, rather than the kind of learning that enables complex analytical thinking.⁶ They miss out on the independent learning skills that are critical for later success,⁷ and the price they pay is steep.⁸

Another reason school does not excite students is that it seems so removed from their everyday concerns. Students live under the incessant thrum of social media, amid a global pandemic, a climate crisis, and a nation struggling to confront its history of racial injustice. And yet, most of what happens in the classroom seems disconnected from these realities.

Students want to develop the capacities to take on these challenges, they want to figure out who they are and how they fit into this complex and confusing world. They need to acquire the skills to engage competently with serious and substantive issues, and the confidence to know that they can make a contribution that matters. If high school does not support them in achieving these goals, it will fail to engage their deep interest. Students will experience school as a superficial pursuit, and they will tune out.



The Answer Is Right in Front of Our Eyes

Springpoint has seen these problems first hand in our work over the last 10 years partnering with high schools as they rethink teaching and learning and build new, student-centered models. We have observed hundreds of classrooms across the country in a wide variety of school types, from traditional comprehensive high schools, to small innovative schools, to charters. We have seen an enormous amount of heart poured into envisioning schools where all students can learn and succeed, and a high level of engagement from leadership and educators to actively make change.

We have seen educators embrace a growth mindset, focus on the importance of caring and trusting relationships, and engage more with their communities. Yet, despite best intentions and concerted effort, there is still so much missing: opportunities for students to delve deeply into topics that really concern or excite them; projects that challenge students to grapple with cognitively complex ideas in a sustained way; curricula that reflect a wide range of student identities; projects that connect students to the larger world; and the chance to build skills that students know they will use outside of the classroom.

We know schools can seize this opportunity. It is already happening in pockets. Students point to elective classes, after-school clubs, and activities like theater and debate as places where they are meaningfully engaged in learning. In these settings, students are often motivated and joy-filled, taking on demanding, rigorous, and purposeful learning that they feel personally connected to and really care about. These learning contexts are where “energy, passion, vitality, teacher passion, and student leadership” seem to live in school.⁹

High school can be a place where students fall in love with learning, feel energized by their assignments, and develop a sense of who they are.

We believe that students can feel this way about high school all the time—that they can be as excited to get to math class as they are to get to drama rehearsal. We believe that high school can be a place where students fall in love with learning, feel energized by their assignments, and develop a sense of who they are, and why what they are learning matters. In short, we believe that school can offer students **transformative learning experiences**, and that these experiences can be available to **all** students, **all** the time.

Learning Can Be Transformative

Springpoint's vision of **transformative learning** is informed by many years of classroom visits and direct work supporting school teams. Transformative learning happens when schools cultivate young people's natural curiosity and leverage their abundant passion to pique their interest in answering real-world questions. It happens when students from every background and culture are presented with challenges that have personal resonance, giving each student an entry point to complex material and providing them with an opportunity to acquire and practice skills that they want and need. Transformative learning experiences make schools more equitable places where every single student has access to deep, meaningful learning and multiple pathways to success.

We have seen these kinds of opportunities delivered through project-based learning (PBL), an instructional approach that improves engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy among students.¹⁰ PBL can positively impact student achievement and social and emotional well-being, and is equally effective regardless of the racial and socio-economic status of the student group.¹¹ Despite these findings, over the last 10 years, we have rarely seen PBL implemented in a way that creates transformative learning experiences for students. One significant reason for this is that curricula are rarely high-quality and do not foster true inquiry or

challenge students with complexity, or they are not grounded in purposeful and authentic learning. Our field has yet to fully capitalize on the promise of PBL to bring students consistently challenging and compelling educational experiences.

We have developed a framework that can help move our sector closer to making the promise of transformative learning a reality. We explored the research, extensively observed in-school teaching and learning, examined real-world examples, and piloted various approaches to clearly and concretely define what makes a learning experience transformative. We determined that the hallmarks of these types of learning experiences are that they offer real and consistent **rigor** and are deeply grounded in **purpose**. We also identified five components that must be present to embed rigor and purpose into learning to create experiences that are transformative.

Of this we are certain: the path to transforming high school runs directly through a reimagining of student learning experiences.



It is important to note that as critical as rigorous and purposeful learning experiences are for students, they have an equally significant impact on teachers. As students dig into projects, the role of the teacher transforms, becoming about facilitating learning, coaching students to support their efforts, offering meaningful feedback, and encouraging deeper thinking. And as students find meaning and purpose in what they're learning, teachers spend much less time managing behavior and attention.

This type of learning environment dramatically shifts the energy and feel of a classroom and connects teachers back to why they decided to teach in the first place—building relationships, having an impact on students, seeing young people grow and change, tapping into students' strengths and potential.

By sharing what learning can be, how students could experience it, and the impact it can have, we hope to inspire excitement and demand for transformative learning experiences.

At Springpoint, we are going all in on transformative learning experiences. We believe they are the solution to the central problems that plague high school education—inequity, student disengagement, and a lack of preparedness for postsecondary success. Of this we are certain: the path to transforming high school runs directly through a reimagining of student learning experiences.

WHAT WE HEAR FROM STUDENTS WHEN LEARNING IS TRANSFORMATIVE¹²

"In my Calculus class I got to do...assignments [that] were a lot different than any other class I had done, the rigor of the assignments and the way that you had to think to complete them. It pushed me to work a lot more with people. It was rigorous and created growth in me."

"You find a problem and do cause and effects and then you create a project that you actually go and do. Someone in my advisory is doing something about teen pregnancy so they are talking to Planned Parenthood. Another is doing something about body positivity and planning a fashion show. I'm doing something with African American teachers because for me being able to connect with teachers who look like me is important. If no one looks like you they might be hard to connect with because they don't know you."

"[One project I found meaningful was] the ode to my name assignment in the [Activism] class. It made me feel a way. How do you feel about yourself, how do you identify yourself. This was different. She made you push on your name, your culture. Dang, do I really know myself? Do I know where my name came from, do I know what it means? It pushed my thinking on how I think about myself."

Creating Transformative Learning Experiences



RIGOR & PURPOSE

Rigor and purpose are the backbone of transformative learning experiences and a true pathway to equity in the classroom. Together they create opportunities for deep—and deeply engaged—learning and the development of valued competencies.

Well-designed, meaningful learning experiences leverage rigor and purpose to challenge students to think critically, ignite engagement and personal interest, and give students a rationale for digging deep.

Understanding **Rigor**

Rigorous learning invites students to engage in the critical thinking needed to solve problems that lack obvious solutions. Rigor means that students are evaluating evidence and synthesizing multiple viewpoints. Rigor invites questioning and skepticism. It leads to novel ideas and logical conclusions that can be defended clearly with evidence. In a rigorous instructional setting, students have grade-appropriate and challenging materials, iterate on their work, and aim for standards that are clearly articulated and consistently high. Rigor also means that students, not teachers, do the thinking in the classroom—conversations and inquiry are guided by students’ ideas and student voice is nurtured.

It is critical to define rigor because without a clear definition rigor has been misconstrued to mean making work “harder” or piling on extra tasks. We believe this understanding of the concept does a disservice. Rigor can and should pose a challenge in a way that piques interest, deepens understanding, and promotes synthesis within and across disciplines.

WE BELIEVE THAT WHEN LEARNING EXPERIENCES ARE RIGOROUS:

- ⊗ Students engage in problem solving in which there are multiple ways to determine the solution.
- ⊗ Students reconcile conflicting viewpoints or ambiguities.
- ⊗ The knowledge and insights students develop necessitate elaboration, explanation, and defense.
- ⊗ Students engage in the core thinking of academic disciplines; they take on the role of the critic, the historian, the scientist, or the mathematician.
- ⊗ Students defend their arguments and conclusions to an authentic audience that can include content experts, practitioners, and other community members.
- ⊗ Students practice inquiry, developing and testing ideas, gathering evidence, and refining their work.

We find that a straightforward way to understand rigor is to think about the distinction between “finding out” and “figuring out.”¹³ “Finding out” typically involves searching. It is a surface-level phenomenon, wherein students are called upon to refer to a text or other media to locate a piece of information and report back on what they have found. “Figuring out” requires much more: students first determine how to approach a problem and where to begin. They reconcile competing views or ambiguities and develop an interpretation. In going through the process of figuring out, students construct knowledge and gain insight.

The following two examples clarify these distinctions:

| Topic/Area | "Finding out" vs "Figuring out" | | Rationale |
|--|--|---|--|
| Cooking (math, chemistry) | 1. FINDING OUT How many teaspoons are in a tablespoon? | 2. FIGURING OUT Your oven is broken and won't heat above 300 degrees. Your cake recipe says bake at 350 degrees. What change might you make to the recipe for the best chance at a delicious and fully cooked cake? | <i>The first question could be answered by looking at a set of spoons, or simply entering the query into a search engine. The second requires the student to understand that there is a relationship between bake temperature and time cooked, and perhaps to investigate the effects of time and bake temperature on specific ingredients.</i> |
| Slavery in America (history) | 1. FINDING OUT How did slavery start in America? | 2. FIGURING OUT Why did the labor system of slavery dominate in the colonial South and have a smaller yet substantial role in New England? | <i>The first question generates a response that could be drawn from a timeline marking the arrival of slaves in the colonies, along with descriptions of which industries slave labor supported and where this was concentrated. The correct answer could entail a reporting of facts and figures, with little reasoning evident. The second response demands reasoning. The student must demonstrate an understanding of differing conditions, supply a rationale as to why those differences lead to distinct outcomes, and support that rationale with compelling evidence.</i> |

See [Appendix](#) for a comprehensive presentation of the elements of rigor

Understanding **Purpose**

Purpose provides students with a meaningful and relevant answer to the question, “Why are we learning this?” Purpose is what activates the learning process by ensuring that students feel a real-world connection to the work at hand and find it personally valuable. It is what makes learning accessible to every student, regardless of their background or achievement level.

Putting purpose at the center of learning moves students away from passive, compliance-based activities and into explorations that are fueled by curiosity, passion, and an authentic desire to know more. What students care about becomes essential to what they study, opening the door for more culturally diverse narratives and representation in the classroom. Students engage in purpose-driven academic work because addressing the questions posed really matters to them. They stay engaged—and they engage with rigor—because purpose brings coherence to their learning.

WE BELIEVE THAT WHEN LEARNING EXPERIENCES ARE PURPOSEFUL:

- ⓧ Students are guided in answering questions on issues they care about and that connect to their interests and identities.
- ⓧ Students engage in addressing real-world problems.
- ⓧ Students experience a cohesive learning trajectory that builds on itself and allows them to see the connections between the lessons and tasks presented and the larger theme or issue.
- ⓧ Students move their learning beyond the classroom to encounter multiple perspectives and engage with the larger community.
- ⓧ Students create authentic work products that are presented to real stakeholders to express, persuade, or advocate for a position.
- ⓧ Students are encouraged to critique conventionally held views and to critically examine the status quo.

Purpose-focused experiences help students deeply consider fundamental questions about themselves, their communities, and their relationship to the world they inhabit. Purpose connects young people to their power to contribute, make an impact, and lead choice-filled lives.

Purpose encompasses many dimensions, including the following:

| Dimension of Purpose | Examples |
|---|--|
| <p>Identity Development and Cultural Relevance</p> <p>In what ways will this assignment help students explore and affirm their identities, cultivate their own cultural lens, and further their understanding of other cultures and societies?</p> | <p>A math unit begins with a career fair and then asks students to explore two career paths that they are interested in and to use their knowledge of linear systems and piecewise functions to make informed choices about pursuing their passions in the future.</p> <p>An English class leverages examples of slam poetry and coaching from professional slam poets to support students in crafting and delivering a poem about a meaningful experience, a facet of their identity, an overlooked historical figure, or a leader of their community.</p> |
| <p>Social Relevance and Local Impact</p> <p>In what ways is this an issue “of the moment” or an enduring societal controversy? In what ways does the question at hand impact people in the communities where students live and learn? In what authentic ways will they be a part of developing solutions to challenges and questions that adults are grappling with?</p> | <p>In an interdisciplinary math/social studies class, students are asked to explore the various sides of the debate around raising the minimum wage. Who does it help? Who does it hurt? Does everyone agree? What is the difference between the minimum wage and a living wage? Students will engage in mathematical modeling to argue for or against an increase to the minimum wage at the state or federal level.</p> <p>In a physics class, students use the principles of energy to redesign a space in their school to improve the energy efficiency of their school-building and pitch their proposals to a panel of school and city officials, along with engineers and architects.</p> |
| <p>Questioning the Status Quo</p> <p>How can students question dominant paradigms and received knowledge? Are there opportunities for students to provide new interpretations and arguments?</p> | <p>In a math class, students use exponential functions and compound interest in order to debunk the payday loan industry.</p> <p>In an interdisciplinary science/social studies class, students prepare and serve a meal to their family and friends and host a discussion that explores the ways in which the meal challenges the status quo regarding food production and the environment, access to healthy foods, and cultural preservation.</p> |
| <p>Confidence and Voice</p> <p>How will this help students to build confidence and help them develop a powerful voice for advocacy, arguments, and self-expression?</p> | <p>In a career class, students practice explaining their resume and interviewing with local business owners and hiring managers. Students enlist the support of their personal network as they plan for their future.</p> <p>In a social studies class, students interview those that favor and oppose new development in the city in order to determine the effects of gentrification locally. They then create a photo essay that illuminates the effects of gentrification and present it at a City Council meeting.</p> |

RIGOR & PURPOSE IN ACTION

Classrooms that are dedicated to making learning transformative through rigor and purpose are bustling with activity, conversation, and debate. Students are busy figuring things out: testing out various approaches, listening to experts, weighing alternatives, and planning action together. Some students will be in small groups, discussing how best to formulate a response to a particular question or showcase a certain perspective through a photo essay. Others will be in front of their laptops, analyzing data they have collected and figuring out how to represent it graphically. Another small group will be in conversation with a historian who is giving them feedback on an early iteration of a presentation they are putting together in partnership with a local historical society. Students are absorbed in work that they want to be doing, and invested in the final product because it has actual value in the world.

What you will not find is a teacher at the front of the room lecturing while students quietly take notes or complete worksheets.

The teacher in a transformative classroom has a role that is utterly distinct from that in a traditional classroom. The teacher sees themselves as a collaborator and facilitator, primarily responsible for ensuring that students understand the question they are being asked to address and that they have the tools they need to succeed. The teacher encourages students to think more deeply about how an issue affects them or their community, and offers feedback to clarify expectations and encourage students to stretch. They confer with groups of students to review exemplars to ensure

understanding of the competencies the learning is driving towards, as well as the level of work and thought required to get there. The teacher offers feedback that is specific and actionable, thoughtfully engaging with student work to encourage more precise thinking, a clearer connection to the target competency, and the development of the student's own critical capacities.

The work produced by students in transformative classrooms looks like work found out in the real world. It is a proposal presented at a City Council hearing, a Public Service Announcement that airs on cable television, or an op-ed that runs in the local paper. These are deliverables that not only demonstrate student comprehension and competencies—they inform, argue, and persuade in settings where they have an impact.

Sometimes, though, these classrooms will simply be empty, because transformative learning experiences fully engage students in the world outside of class, connecting them to partners in the community who are mentors, stakeholders, and experts. Students are developing relationships with people from community and cultural institutions, business and industry, higher education, nonprofit organizations, and health and service providers. These connections offer students real-world experiences, expert guidance, and exposure to career pathways and opportunities. Students see various competencies and disciplines in action, by hearing from and engaging with experts and by embodying the disciplines via labs, field work, or simulations.

Leveraging Rigor and Purpose to Promote Deep Learning

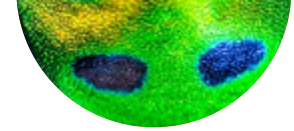


There are five components that are essential for creating transformative learning experiences grounded in rigor and purpose.

- 1. Driving Question**
 - 2. Creative Artifact**
 - 3. Written Commentary**
 - 4. Authentic Exhibition**
 - 5. Metacognitive Reflection**
-

To illustrate how these components come to life in practice, the following pages include examples of project-based units developed by Springpoint.





Unit Title: College Cents - The Mathematics of Career Planning

This unit invites students to think deeply about their short- and long-term goals, what it will take to achieve these goals, and the various quantitative and qualitative considerations that are important to them when determining the pathway they will take after high school.

In this unit, students will learn:

- Ⓧ How to use mathematical models to analyze short- and long-term opportunity costs.
- Ⓧ How to visually represent data using tables and graphs.
- Ⓧ How to represent multiple scenarios using systems of equations and interpret the solution.
- Ⓧ How to use financial best practices in order to strategically consider different career options.

Why this learning experience matters:

Students have big dreams for their futures, but when considering the pathways to achieving long-term goals, there is often far less clarity about what concrete steps they can take in the next one to five years in order to reach these goals. This unit pushes students to think deeply about where they would like to see themselves long-term, the various pathways to reaching this destination, and the resulting actions and financial decisions they will need to consider in the short- and long-term.

Unit Title: Gentrification Photo Essay

This unit asks students to explore the effects of gentrification on their community. They study Jacob Riis's "How the Other Half Lives," one of the most seminal photo essays in American history, along with works by Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, and others, in order to learn how to analyze photographs and understand the techniques of the genre. They then apply these techniques to create their own argument about the effects of gentrification.

In this unit, students will learn:

- Ⓧ To evaluate claims about the effects of gentrification and develop an argument about the effect of gentrification on their city or neighborhood.
- Ⓧ To analyze photographs and photo-essays in order to interpret the ideas and arguments they convey.
- Ⓧ To deploy photographic techniques to make visual arguments about the effect of gentrification in their city or neighborhood.

Why this learning experience matters:

This unit invites students into the complexities of a salient civic issue that could affect their neighborhoods and cities for generations to come. Students learn to question the status quo and to develop their own, creative voices as they seek to influence how people in the community think about an important issue.

1. Driving Question

The driving question establishes the purpose for learning and frames the inquiry for the project as a whole. It brings coherence to the lessons and performance tasks and offers students a compelling rationale for undertaking the work.

QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE DRIVING QUESTION:

- ④ **It is focused on a relevant and engaging topic.** The driving question is of particular interest to the lives and experiences of teenagers, relevant to the school or local community, and lends itself to real-world exploration and problem solving.
- ④ **It places high cognitive demand on students.** The driving question poses an open-ended challenge for which there is no easy or obvious solution. It requires “figuring out,” wherein students must synthesize, create, or argue in response, and use reasoning and disciplinary practices (e.g., thinking like a historian or scientist).
- ④ **It unifies all the elements of the learning experience.** Daily lessons tie back to it, and it connects to all aspects of the performance task.
- ④ **It is concise.** A driving question uses student-friendly language that avoids jargon and will resonate with young people.



1. Driving Question

EXAMPLE UNITS



College Cents -

The Mathematics of Career Planning

What are the different pathways available when planning for life after high school and how can an understanding of functions help me gauge the short- and long-term costs and benefits of these pathways?



Gentrification Photo Essay

To what extent can art influence social change, and how can the use of specific photographic choices and techniques influence how my community thinks about gentrification?

2. Creative Artifact

The creative artifact is the culminating “deliverable” of the project in which students synthesize their learning and address the driving question. It is an opportunity to bring students’ passions and talents into the classroom in a way that has real-world relevance. The creative artifact might entail a performance, presentation, video, piece of persuasive or creative writing or other art, a campaign poster, coded program, podcast, or even a cooked meal.

QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE CREATIVE ARTIFACT:

- ① **It is authentic.** The creative artifact is a product that has an actual function in the real world. It is something that is used to convey ideas, persuade others, or advocate for change. The authenticity of the artifact reflects the meaning and purpose of the work students have done; it is not something that exists only in the context of school.
- ② **It demonstrates synthesis.** The creative artifact encompasses the breadth of the lessons and ideas covered in the unit. It requires students to bring together the big ideas of the unit, in a way that conveys their understanding of the key concepts and demonstrates mastery of key competencies.
- ③ **It is process-based.** Creating the artifact requires study, sustained practice or iteration, and mastery of a selected medium. It is not something that can be completed in a day.



2. Creative Artifact

EXAMPLE UNITS



College Cents -

The Mathematics of Career Planning

Students will create a six to eight minute polished presentation that walks the audience through the student's research process, findings, and reflections. The presentation should include the following:

- ⊗ Overview of the two careers the student chose to research and why these careers are of interest.
- ⊗ The various pathways available for accessing these careers (e.g., degrees needed, required certifications, etc.).
- ⊗ Data comparing the cost of entry and long-term earnings for each of the two career pathways.
- ⊗ Three qualitative metrics (i.e., lifestyle considerations) the student researched for each of the two careers.
- ⊗ Summary of findings and impact that this research has on decisions moving forward.

The presentation includes mathematical modeling in which students apply their knowledge of linear systems and piecewise functions to compare, both graphically and algebraically, estimated earnings at different phases in the career pathways they researched.



Gentrification Photo Essay

Students will construct a photo essay that makes an argument about the effects of gentrification on their city or community. The photo essay must have a clear thesis or theme to which all of the photos tie back.

The photo essay must include:

- ⊗ A range of three to five photographs.
- ⊗ Each photograph must be paired with a short caption that provides context for the viewer:
 - Neighborhood and subject of the photo
 - Title of photo
- ⊗ The photo essay needs to be intentionally displayed, so as to construct an argument, on a trifold display board or equivalent.

3. Written Commentary

Written commentary is how students explain and defend the thinking represented in their creative artifacts. Writing builds critical thinking and improves recall and synthesis regardless of discipline.¹⁴ It makes student thinking transparent. The commentary can take a variety of forms, such as a letter to the editor, a persuasive essay, a judicial opinion, or a podcast script.

QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE WRITTEN COMMENTARY:

- ① **It requires that students make their thinking visible.** Students articulate the choices made in creating the artifact, as well as how the artifact connects to the key concepts of the unit.
- ② **There is a clear line of reasoning.** Students connect their insights, claims, and ideas to evidence, and present their ideas logically so that their reasoning is evident to the reader.
- ③ **It integrates credible sources.** Students use a rich variety of text and other sources to corroborate their claims with relevant and compelling evidence.



3. Written Commentary

EXAMPLE UNITS



College Cents -

The Mathematics of Career Planning

For each of the two careers they selected, students will write a short research report that walks the reader through each of the five components of the creative artifact, including all of the components of the creative artifact listed on page 22.



Gentrification Photo Essay

Part 1 - Overview of the Essay: The overview should be displayed with the photo-essay. It should consist of at least one paragraph explaining the core argument or thesis of the essay.

Part 2 - Analysis of One Photograph: Students will need to select one of their photographs and answer the following questions:

- ⊗ What is the argument or claim that this photo makes?
- ⊗ What are the specific choices you made in taking this photo? How do they contribute to the argument or meaning of the photograph? Discuss at least two choices, such as lighting and shading or patterns.
- ⊗ What purpose does this photo serve in your broader essay?
- ⊗ How is your argument supported by research? Cite at least two sources to support your argument.

4. Authentic Exhibition

Authentic exhibition is the presentation of student work that serves a purpose for a specific audience and is not created solely for the classroom. It reinforces the real-world application of what has been learned, raises the stakes for student work, and gives students an opportunity to experience pride in their accomplishments. Authentic exhibitions can be quite varied: a panel presentation, interview, video, submitted publication, gallery walk, or science fair booth.

QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE AUTHENTIC EXHIBITION:

- ④ **It is presented to an authentic audience.** Students present to stakeholders who have an interest in the topic.
- ④ **It creates opportunities for students to receive feedback.** Ideally, the exhibition would require the student to provide an oral defense of their work, but it must provide students with a chance to get responses from peers, teachers, and community members.
- ④ **It is a public display.** It presents an opportunity for students to showcase their work.



4. Authentic Exhibition

EXAMPLE UNITS



College Cents -

The Mathematics of Career Planning

Students invite a group of people with whom they would like to share their research and findings. This might be a family member, coach, friend, teacher, professional mentor, church leader, or even their current boss. In considering who to invite, students are encouraged to think about whose support it might be helpful to have as they consider which pathways they would ultimately like to pursue as well as who they believe might be positively impacted by their messaging. As part of the presentation, students will have the opportunity to hear viewer reactions, respond to follow-up questions, and discuss how the people in their lives can support them.



Gentrification Photo Essay

Each student creates a “station” or booth where they display their photo essay and written commentary, and where they act as docents for their work. Students invite an audience to view the work and engage in discussion about the essays.

The viewing of student work can occur in a variety of venues:

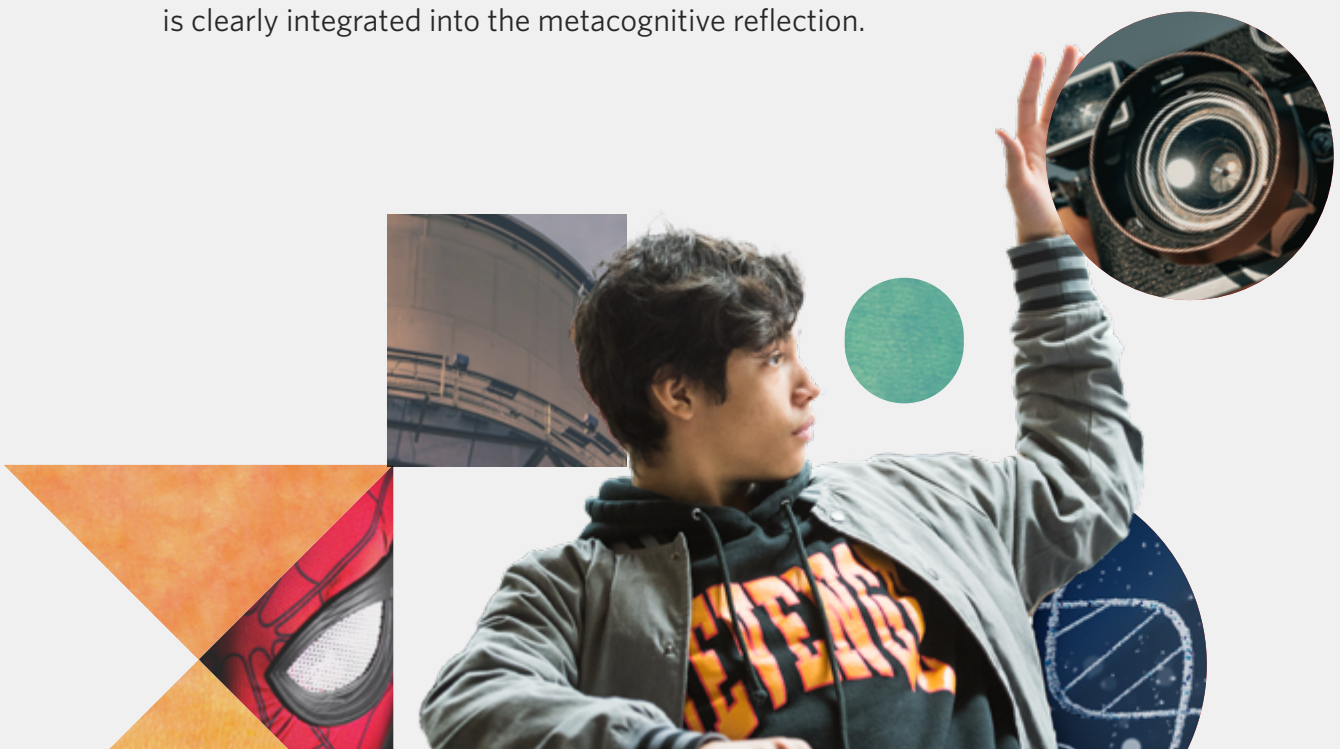
- ① The classroom.
- ② Common spaces at the school such as the cafeteria, atrium, library, or another highly visible space.
- ③ Community spaces such as public libraries, banks, community centers, doctor or dentist offices, etc.
- ④ Social media, for example the school could display the student’s work on their social media account and invite local photographers and community partners to comment. Students could also engage community partners to share on their platforms.

5. Metacognitive Reflection

A metacognitive reflection prompts students to reflect on how their thinking has shifted on account of the work they have done, builds awareness about the processes through which they learned across the unit, and promotes examination of where and why they may have gotten stuck and how they moved forward. The reflection helps students “learn about learning,” preparing them to transfer their learning to new contexts and, ultimately, to become independent learners.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE METACOGNITIVE REFLECTION:

- ① **It makes self-awareness explicit.** Students examine their learning both in terms of how they regulate their feelings and the strategies they pursue to overcome challenges.
- ② **It promotes transfer of learning.** Students identify the enduring ideas and concepts about content and competencies—and about themselves as learners—that they can transfer to novel situations.
- ③ **It aligns with the most essential skills.** The reflection prompt asks students to consider how their learning builds on the skills they practiced throughout the unit.
- ④ **It integrates feedback.** The feedback students receive from an authentic audience is clearly integrated into the metacognitive reflection.



5. Metacognitive Reflection

EXAMPLE UNITS



College Cents - The Mathematics of Career Planning

Students will reflect in written form on the learnings from the unit and how their findings will impact their short- and long-term actions and decisions.

- ① Reflect on your performance with the prioritized competencies. Where did you grow and improve and what enabled that? Where did you experience the most significant challenges?
- ② How has your thinking evolved since you first started this unit? To what extent has this process reinforced or weakened your interest in a particular career?
- ③ What are some of the immediate next steps you are considering taking as a result of your research into the two career fields you selected?
- ④ Who can you reach out to support you, guide you, and/or hold you accountable in following through on the “next steps” you named above?



Gentrification Photo Essay

Students will reflect in written form on the learnings from the unit and how their experience shaped their understanding of their own community and what it taught them about crafting a compelling argument.

- ① Reflect on your performance with the prioritized competencies. Where did you grow and improve and what enabled that? Where did you experience the most significant challenges?
- ② What are your biggest “ahas” about your response to the driving question, topic, or project in general (e.g., analyzing photography, the concept of gentrification, etc.)?
- ③ During what parts of the unit were you most successful? Where do you think you were most challenged or where did you get stuck? What have you learned about yourself and how you navigate challenges in learning?
- ④ Are there concepts, ideas, or skills that you would like to learn more about? Are there specific ways you would like to continue to grow as a learner?


Conclusion

Learning at its core should spark joy and ignite passion. We see it when we watch children in the early grades—rushing to class, fully immersed in classroom projects, proudly exhibiting their creations. They barely draw a line between work and play. Yet, as the years roll on, we see this joy in learning dissipate, as school becomes a chore rather than an adventure, something to endure rather than revel in. For many young people, high school becomes alienating, boring, and purposeless—an experience that erodes confidence and opportunities, wasting time and talent.

But high school can be meaningful and engaging. Young people can have learning experiences where they find challenges that have personal meaning for them, acquire skills that they need and value, and care deeply about the results of their efforts. These are the learning experiences that students treasure; they are vital in helping students define who they are and who they want to be, what the world is and how they can make it a better place.

How might our world be different if all students spent their high school years deeply immersed in transformative learning experiences, exploring their passions, grappling with challenging content, and engaging in meaningful and authentic projects?

This is our vision for the next generation of leaders, activists, engaged citizens, thinkers, and makers.



Making this vision a reality will require collective action and a coalition far larger than any one organization. It will require all of us—teachers, school leaders, administrators, family and community members, school support organizations, curriculum providers, schools of education, policymakers, and funders—to be laser focused on ensuring learning experiences are rigorous, purposeful, and resonant for ALL students. That focus should be our north star to guide how we reimagine schools, prepare educators, and measure our success.

At Springpoint, we are focusing our energy and expertise on building out a suite of project-based curriculum units rooted in rigor and purpose, with deep resonance for all students. We call them Transformative Learning Experiences (TLEs) and they are already essential in our work with partners. We are still learning with and from students and teachers about what it takes to truly transform the learning experience. And while it is early, we are inspired by what we're seeing: deep student engagement, increased self-efficacy, students genuinely grappling and growing—but most importantly, we are seeing a palpable passion for learning. TLEs have the potential to scale to reach thousands more students and we see them as our contribution to the collective quest for educational justice.

**We know all students are capable of extraordinary things.
Let's ensure high school is a place worthy of our young
people, honoring all that they are—and can be.
We invite you to join us.**



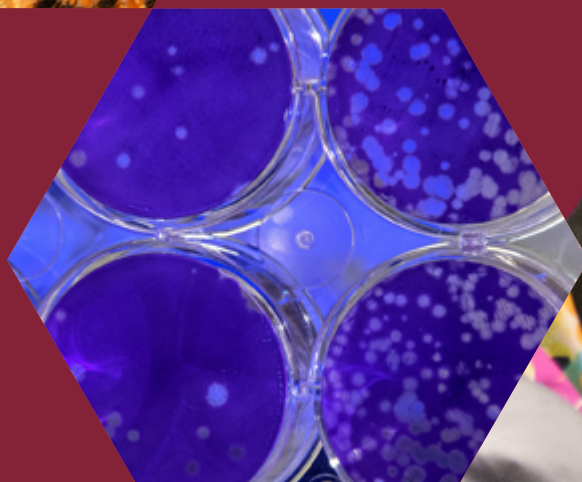
Join Us

SHARE:

ENDNOTES

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Appendix



Rigor and Purpose for Transformative Learning

Rigor and purpose are the backbone of transformative learning experiences and a true pathway to equity in the classroom. Together they create opportunities for deep—and deeply engaged—learning and the development of valued competencies. Well-designed, meaningful learning experiences leverage rigor and purpose to challenge students to think critically, ignite engagement and personal interest, and give students a rationale for digging deep.

This document defines rigor and purpose in learning experiences. At Springpoint, we see rigor and purpose as mutually reinforcing—both are essential to ensuring that students have a high quality learning experience. But in the interest of clarity, we have broken them out and zoomed in on the components that comprise each of these important practices.

For more practical resources and tools for transforming learning and creating student-centered schools, please visit www.springpointschools.org.

Rigor and purpose are mutually reinforcing. Together they create opportunities for deep—and deeply engaged—learning.

Rigor

Skills & Standards Alignment

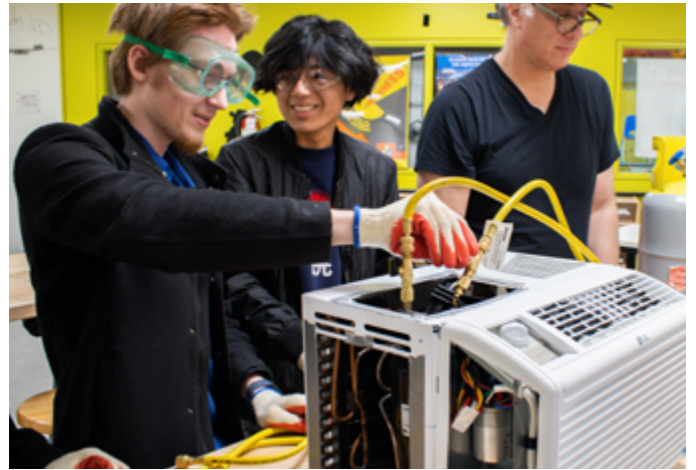
- ⓧ Learning experiences center transferable themes, concepts, and skills; they prioritize opportunities for students to practice critical thinking and other competencies most essential for post-secondary success.
- ⓧ Learning experiences promote coherence by spiraling key concepts and skills within and across units.
- ⓧ Learning experiences prioritize the most critical cross-disciplinary components of the Common State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, SAT, and other reputable sources of college and career-ready standards.

Student Thinking

- ⓧ Learning experiences are centered around a driving question that lacks an obvious solution or answer, often providing opportunities for students to challenge commonly accepted truths.
- ⓧ Learning experiences demand critical thinking, inviting students to be discerning consumers of text, data, and other media, empowering them with the tools to evaluate evidence, scrutinize the claims of others, and develop original assertions as they learn to think for themselves.
- ⓧ Learning experiences include opportunities for students to practice disciplinary reasoning through scientific and historical investigations, analysis and development of quantitative models, and frequent close-reading.

Cognitive Lift & Independence

- ⓧ Learning experiences incorporate opportunities that require students—not teachers—to construct and create meaning, as opposed to receiving and reciting information.
- ⓧ Learning experiences embed opportunities for students to engage in metacognitive reflection about the content as well as about themselves as learners so that they are able to transfer what they have learned to novel situations.



Materials, Modalities, & Student Products

- ⓧ Learning experiences ensure that instructional materials are at or above grade level in terms of Lexile level, thematic complexity, and standards-alignment.
- ⓧ Learning experiences leverage scaffolds that do not lower the rigor for students, but rather provide access to complex concepts through appropriate modification.
- ⓧ Learning experiences require students to formulate a written, analytic response using evidence to support all claims and analysis.
- ⓧ Learning experiences incorporate ongoing opportunities for students to collaborate, exchange ideas, and share their work, often in the form of a culminating exhibition.

Expectations for Student Work

- ⓧ Learning experiences push students beyond the easy and obvious to deepen their thinking through the use of transparent exemplars, rigorous criteria, and transferable feedback.
- ⓧ Learning experiences promote a mastery orientation offering students multiple opportunities to practice skills and revise their work.

Purpose

Authenticity

- ① Learning experiences require students to engage in authentic problem solving around existing tensions and challenges, and provide opportunities to advocate for change in their lives, in their communities, and at a global level.
- ② Learning experiences require students to create products that are used in the “real world”—such as editorials, podcasts, etc.—to express ideas, persuade others, and advocate for change.
- ③ Learning experiences puncture the “school to real world barrier” by giving students an opportunity to show what they know and who they are to authentic audiences of experts, community members, and peers.
- ④ Learning experiences connect students with experts who provide guidance, coaching, and/or feedback; learning is consistently connected to the outside world via field trips, guest speakers, interviews of community members, etc.

Relevance

- ① Learning experiences ensure that students understand what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how the content and/or skills that they have learned can be applied.
- ② Learning experiences intentionally tap into students’ funds of knowledge—their passions, relationships, and identities—so that they can see themselves in what they are learning and use new schema as a bridge to access unfamiliar content or challenging concepts.
- ③ Learning experiences prioritize a focus on content and topics that are “of the moment” and/or part of an enduring societal debate. Current events, conversations, video, music, film, and other iconic sources serve as a gateway for the exploration of broader historical themes.

Identity

- ① Learning experiences deepen students’ understanding of themselves, their culture, and their community, while also encouraging them to explore new questions, subjects, and experiences.
- ② Learning experiences embed creative expression, providing opportunities for students to unlock and showcase their interests and passions.
- ③ Learning experiences support students in unpacking and wrestling with the ethical considerations and questions embedded in the content they are learning, allowing students to develop or refine their own ethical framework and beliefs.
- ④ Learning experiences center on the lives, perspectives, and viewpoints of a diverse array of actors, groups, and individuals, explicitly emphasizing the strengths and stories of historically marginalized communities.

Agency

- ① Learning experiences develop agency in young people by intentionally and strategically phasing in purposeful opportunities for choice and voice in what is being learned, how it is being learned, and how students can choose to share what they have learned.
- ② Learning experiences empower young people and develop their leadership by valuing their voice and perspective and by giving them a seat at the tables where decision-makers are in dialogue.

NOTE

Springpoint’s approach to Rigor and Purpose has been informed by decades of research on adolescent development and psychology, cognitive science, culturally responsive pedagogy, and more. This resource draws on a variety of broadly accepted frameworks, including: [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#); [A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching](#); [Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards](#); [Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy](#); [Theories of Adolescent Development](#); [The Core Science of Adolescent Development](#); [CASEL Framework for SEL](#); [Transformative Social and Emotional Learning](#); [Self-Determination Theory](#); [Metacognition & Learning to Learn](#)



Reflection Guide for School Leaders

Transformative learning happens when schools cultivate young people's natural curiosity and leverage their abundant passion to pique their interest in answering real-world questions. It happens when students from every background and culture are presented with challenges that have personal resonance, giving each an entry point to complex material and providing them with an opportunity to acquire and practice skills they recognize as critical to their success.

By embedding rigor and purpose deeply into every learning opportunity, educators can deliver transformative learning experiences for all students. Transformative learning experiences make schools more equitable places where every single student has access to deep, meaningful learning, and multiple pathways to success. If we focus our collective efforts on fundamentally changing what is actually happening in classrooms, at the core of school, we can finally bring about deep and broad change. Read more about this in *Making High School Meaningful: A Vision for Transformative Learning Experiences*.

The following guidance serves as a set of strategies school leaders can leverage to initiate reflection and discussion around the student learning experiences in their building.

For more practical resources and tools for transforming learning and creating student-centered schools, please visit www.springpointschools.org.

Landscape Analysis:

To what extent are transformative learning experiences already happening?
In what classrooms or parts of the school day are these happening?

A Student Interviews:

Start with the end users—the students in your buildings. We know that this group is likely to give you the most honest answers so why not begin here? The following are some potential questions to guide these conversations:

- ④ What is the most meaningful assignment you've worked on this year? Tell us about what it entailed and what you accomplished?
- ④ Why was it meaningful to you?
- ④ What did you learn?
- ④ How will you use what you learned in the future?
- ④ Can you give us an example of a time when your learning really connected to who you are as a person and to your community? How often do you have learning experiences like that?
- ④ Do you ever have opportunities to learn from other people, outside of your teachers?

Note: Be sure to speak to a wide-range of students representing a wide range of backgrounds, skill levels, ages, etc. Additionally, in processes like these, it is important to find students who are succeeding in school and those who might be disengaged or for whom school is not currently working.

B Student Assignment Collection:

Call on five to seven teachers across a range of disciplines, grade-levels, and courses to provide you with a sample of student work produced within the last month. As much as possible, work samples should be more summative in nature—reflecting something that students have devoted an extended amount of time to creating.

Once work samples have been collected, analyze these using excerpts from Springpoint's Transformative Learning Experience Rubric, included below. The rubric contains the criteria and key indicators that we use when designing and evaluating the quality of transformative learning experiences.

INDICATOR 1: RIGOR

| Sub Indicator | Criteria | Rating |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Depth & Complexity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ④ Depth: Learning experiences demand critical thinking, inviting students to be discerning consumers of information (text, media, data, etc.), require them to carefully question and scrutinize information, and empower them to think, problem-solve, and reason for themselves. ④ Complexity: Learning experiences are centered around a driving question that lacks an obvious solution or answer. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |
| Cognitive Lift | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ④ Student-Centered: Lesson-level learning experiences incorporate opportunities that require students—not teachers—to do the cognitive lift. ④ Depth of Thinking: The modalities of each learning experience—such as modeling tasks, labs, research tasks, etc.—invite students to construct and create meaning, as opposed to receiving and reciting information. ④ Scaffolded: Scaffolds provided throughout the course of each project do not lower the cognitive lift for students, but rather give them access to complex concepts through appropriate modifications. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |

INDICATOR 2: PURPOSE

| Sub Indicator | Criteria | Rating |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Relevance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ④ Engaging: Learning experiences focus on high-interest topics and questions that are tied to student interests, passions, and identities. ④ Community-Based: Students are focused on topics that are connected to themes that affect the various communities students belong to in and outside of school. ④ Personally Meaningful: Learning experiences are designed so students can see themselves and their peers in the work; they can find personal applicability within key topics and focus areas. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |
| Authenticity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ④ Relevant & Transferable: Learning experiences are purposeful, lending themselves to real-world problem solving and applications that students value. ④ Authentic Product: Units require students to create authentic products—such as editorials, podcasts, etc. ④ Community Engagement: Learning experiences allow students to engage with and present to authentic audiences of experts, community members, and peers; students receive guidance, coaching, and/or feedback from these audiences. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |

INDICATOR 3: CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE

Adapted from “Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard” Developed by J. Bryan-Gooden, M. Hester, & L. Q. Peoples Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University.

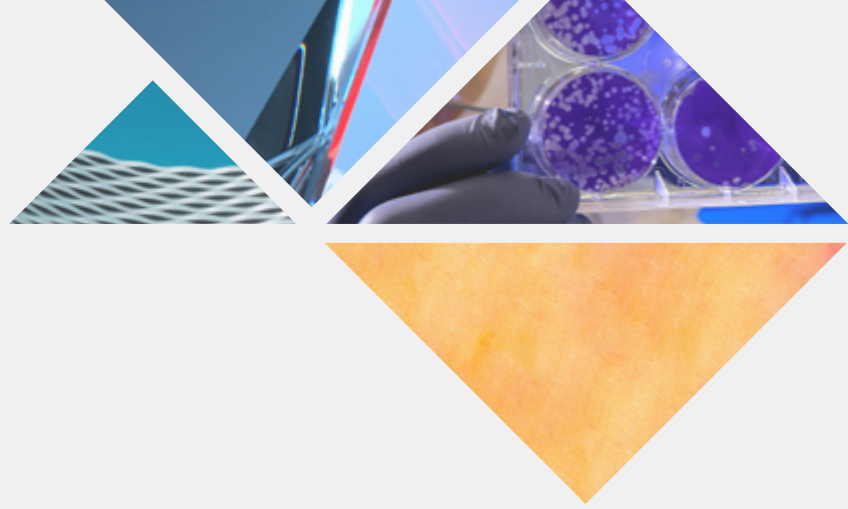
| Sub Indicator | Criteria | Rating |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Power and Privilege | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ⓢ Asset-Based: The curriculum communicates an asset-based perspective by representing people of diverse races, classes, genders, abilities, and sexual orientations through their strengths, talents, and knowledge rather than their perceived flaws or deficiencies. Ⓢ Critical Lens: Curriculum and instructional activities promote or provoke critical questions about the societal status quo. They present alternative points of view as equally worthy and challenge the status quo. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |
| Multiple Perspectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ⓢ Affirming: The curriculum recognizes the validity and integrity of knowledge systems that are present in communities of color, collectivist cultures, matriarchal societies, and non-Christian religions. Ⓢ Inclusive: The curriculum presents different points of view and perspectives on the same event or experience, especially points of view from marginalized people and communities. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |
| Values Experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ⓢ Prior Knowledge: Students are given opportunities to contribute their prior knowledge and experience, not just respond to the text and information presented. Ⓢ Validating: Instruction builds a bridge between home and school and seeks to incorporate students' culture and lived experiences. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meets <input type="checkbox"/> Approaching <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient |

Step 2

Reflection and Planning:

After speaking with students and reviewing a range of assignments, the following questions can help guide reflection and next steps.

- Ⓢ What were the trends that emerged?
- Ⓢ Where did you see examples of transformative learning experiences happening?
- Ⓢ What do you think led to this?
- Ⓢ To what extent might this be driven by the school leader? The teacher?
- Ⓢ Where do you see a lack of transformative learning experiences?
- Ⓢ What do you believe might be holding this back (e.g., curriculum, belief in student ability, policies and mandates, etc.)?
- Ⓢ What additional questions does this reflection prompt you to ask?



Reflection Guide for System Leaders

Transformative learning happens when schools cultivate young people's natural curiosity and leverage their abundant passion to pique their interest in answering real-world questions. It happens when students from every background and culture are presented with challenges that have personal resonance, giving each an entry point to complex material and providing them with an opportunity to acquire and practice skills they recognize as critical to their success.

By embedding rigor and purpose deeply into every learning opportunity, educators can deliver transformative learning experiences for all students. Transformative learning experiences make schools more equitable places where every single student has access to deep, meaningful learning, and multiple pathways to success. If we focus our collective efforts on fundamentally changing what is actually happening in classrooms, at the core of school, we can finally bring about deep and broad change. Read more about this in *Making High School Meaningful: A Vision for Transformative Learning Experiences*.

The following guidance serves as a set of strategies school leaders can leverage to initiate reflection and discussion around the student learning experiences in their building.

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Landscape Analysis:

To what extent are transformative learning experiences already happening?
In what classrooms or parts of the school day are these happening?

A Student Interviews:

Start with the end users—the students in your buildings. We know that this group is likely to give you the most honest answers so why not begin here?! The following are some potential questions to guide these conversations:

- ⊗ What is the most meaningful assignment you've worked on this year? Tell us about what it entailed and what you accomplished?
 - Why was it meaningful to you?
 - What did you learn?
 - How will you use what you learned in the future?
- ⊗ Can you give us an example of a time when your learning really connected to who you are as a person and to your community? How often do you have learning experiences like that?
- ⊗ Do you ever have opportunities to learn from other people, outside of your teachers?

Note: Be sure to speak to a wide-range of students representing a wide range of backgrounds, skill levels, ages, etc. Additionally, in processes like these, it is important to find students who are succeeding in school and those who might be disengaged or for whom school is not currently working.

B Student Work Collection:

Call on your school-based leaders (e.g., principals, assistant principals, etc.) to send three different samples of student work produced in classrooms that day or that week—the intent is to get a representative and objective snapshot of student work. Analyze these work samples against the following questions:

RIGOR: TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE TASK...

- ⊗ Require students to perform the cognitive lift themselves, constructing and creating meaning, as opposed to receiving and regurgitating information?
- ⊗ Include an open-ended task and/or a driving question that lacks an obvious solution or answer?
- ⊗ Prompt students to engage in the core thinking of academic disciplines. Are they called upon to take on the role of the critic, the historian, the scientist or the mathematician?

PURPOSE: TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE TASK...

- ⊗ Pose questions to students on issues they care about and that connect to their interests, identities, and/or real-world problems?
- ⊗ Require that students move their learning beyond the classroom to encounter multiple perspectives and engage with the larger community?
- ⊗ Involve the creation of authentic work products that are presented to real stakeholders to express, persuade, or advocate for a position?

Step 2

Reflection and Planning:

After speaking with students and reviewing work samples with the above questions in mind, the following can help guide reflection and next steps.

- ⊗ What trends emerged?
- ⊗ Where did you see examples of transformative learning experiences happening?
- ⊗ What do you think led to this?
- ⊗ To what extent might this be driven by the school leader? The teacher?
- ⊗ Where do you see a lack of transformative learning experiences?
- ⊗ What do you believe might be holding this back (e.g., curriculum, belief in student ability, policies and mandates, etc.)?
- ⊗ What additional questions does this reflection prompt you to ask?



Reflection Guide for Funders

Transformative learning experiences make schools more equitable places where every single student has access to deep, meaningful learning, and multiple pathways to success. If we focus our collective efforts on fundamentally changing what is actually happening in classrooms, at the core of school, we can finally bring about deep and broad change. Read more about this in *Making High School Meaningful: A Vision for Transformative Learning Experiences*.

The following questions can facilitate reflection and discussion around the extent to which investments are resulting in rigorous and purposeful learning experiences.

- 1:** To what extent are our investments impacting the instructional core of school and resulting in substantive improvements to what students are doing in classrooms and the quality of the student learning experience overall? What evidence do we have?
- 2:** What metrics do we use to assess our grantees' progress? Does this have an impact on our grantees' ability to create or cultivate transformative learning experiences? Might we consider other measures?
- 3:** Are there places where rigor and purpose show up in our portfolio and the work of our grantees? How might these bright spots serve as learning/demonstration sites for staff and the field? What might we do to support more grantees in their quest to get there?

Reflecting on these questions can prompt discussion of the role philanthropy can play to elevate the focus on the quality of the student learning experience—what students are presented with, what they are asked to do, and how they are required to engage—to truly shift outcomes for young people.

For more practical resources and tools for transforming learning and creating student-centered schools, please visit www.springpointschools.org.

About Springpoint

Springpoint is a national nonprofit that partners with communities to reimagine high school and empower young people to succeed. We pursue an ambitious vision: a world where every student feels that high school was designed for them. We support educators who share this student-centered vision, and who are striving to create more just and equitable educational experiences for all young people.



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