



Community Toolbox
**Advocating for
student-centered
learning**

COMMUNITY TOOLBOX:

Student-centered Learning - From factory floor to learning laboratory

This toolbox is designed for community organizers, parent leaders and other advocates in order to raise awareness and drive for change in their community high schools.

In this toolbox you'll find:

- A collection of relevant articles and resources to share with your community
- Newsletter copy to send out to your subscribers
- Social assets for your network (on Facebook, Twitter, Thread, Instagram, etc).
- A short presentation deck for in-person or online meetings, which you're encouraged to copy and adapt for your community.

We hope these tools will equip you to build understanding and public will for transforming the high schools in your community into vibrant centers of relevant learning that support each and every student to fulfill their potential.

Many of these tools are designed to be customized to your community needs. Look for the **red ink** to find places to customize. But don't stop there, please do whatever it needs to suit your purpose!

Focus on Student-Centered Learning

What is student-centered learning? This is a relatively new term in education that covers a lot of pedagogical approaches, practices, and even whole school models. But underlying all of these different things, student-centered learning describes education that is more flexible, more personalized and affords more individuality to each and every student. In high school when students graduate to go off to a vast array of colleges, careers and postsecondary experiences, there's a growing consensus among educational experts that student-centered learning is especially important. (There's still a consensus that all grade schoolers need to learn to read, but does every high school

student need 3-4 years algebra-to-calculus progression and 3-4 years of American/English literature?)

Student-centered learning can describe lots of different approaches. It includes broad educational models like [blended learning](#) and [mastery-based learning](#), which often leverage technology to allow students to work at their own pace and shift teachers to take on roles beyond “the sage on the stage” (aka lecturing at the blackboard). There are also pedagogical approaches (like [project-based learning](#) that gives students “[voice and choice](#)”) and special offerings ([internships](#), [capstone projects](#), [student exhibitions](#)) all of which encourage students to choose and define their own individual areas of study for a given project or out-of-school experience. Finally, programs (like [Project Lead the Way](#) and most [pathway programs](#)) encourage students to actively choose their path of study like a college major.

But student-centered learning isn't simply about adopting one of these approaches or programs. When fully embraced, it should shift the mindset of the educators and therefore the culture of the school. True student-centered learning adapts to the differences between students – emotionally and academically – whether they have [learning disabilities](#), mental health issues, or cultural/language differences. In this sense, [restorative justice](#) is a student-centered approach to discipline because it places the student's experience at the center of behavioral issues. Similarly, [trauma-sensitive pedagogy](#) and [antiracist education](#) both place the student experience at the center of the educational process. For this reason student-centered learning is often a strong choice for schools that are focused on providing more equitable learning opportunities. (Check out our community tool box on equity, too!)

The following resources explore the many practices of student-centered learning, offer spotlights on innovative educators who are centering their students in their work and school models designed with student-centered learning in mind. One word of warning with these examples: no single approach or class or school model is guaranteed to be authentically student-centered. The practice or program needs to be accompanied by whole school culture that cares and invests in the potential of each individual child. For a deeper look at an excellent school quality framework, check out Springpoint Schools' [Indicators of School Quality](#).

From the [Transforming High School](#) series

- [Giving students voice and choice](#) – Article
- [Understanding the power of project-based learning](#) – Article
- [The value of senior capstone projects](#) – Article
- [The power of student exhibitions](#) – Article
- [Does your child's high school offer internships?](#) – Article
- [Sampling the future](#) – Podcast
- [Navigating the future](#) – Podcast
- [How high school pathway programs help students get on the right track](#) – Article
- [How mastery-based learning helps every student succeed](#) – Article
- [Is blended learning the future of schooling?](#) – Article
- [Trauma-informed teaching](#) – Article
- [How to get support for your child's learning disabilities](#) – Article
- [The most important class in high school isn't what you think](#) – Article
- [A school culture makeover: Salem Charter Academy](#) – Podcast
- [A radical rethink in a North Carolina high school](#) – Podcast
- [The inclusive school](#) – Article
- [The power of giving students voice and choice](#) – Video
- [What if all students got accommodations](#) – Video
- [When does your child thrive?](#) – Tool for Community Events
- [Who will your child be when they graduate?](#) – Tool for Community Events

Additional GreatSchools resources

- [How high school pathway programs can make dreams come true](#) – Article
- [Cracking the code on STEM success for Black and brown students](#) – Article
- [Practicing restorative justice](#) – Article

Additional resources from Highlander Institute

- [Student Experiences Survey](#) – Survey
- [Family Experiences Survey](#) – Survey
- [Engaging with Schools](#) – Article
- [Supporting Children at Home](#) – Article
- [Family Learning Walk Guidance](#) – Article
- [4 Strategies for Fam/Educator partnership](#) – Article

Additional resources from National Parents Union

- [Connecting with school administrators and elected officials](#) – Article
- [How to reach local press and media](#) – Article
- [Parent toolkits](#) – Tool
- [Join National Parents Union](#) – Tool

Recommended resources from other organizations:

- [How to institute restorative justice in your school](#) – Tool
- [Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy \(CSRP\) framework](#) – Tool
- [Project Lead the Way](#) – Article
- [What is Project Based Learning](#) – Article

Newsletter

Subject line: Does [\[your community\]](#) high schools offer student-centered learning?

Headline: How to advocate for student-centered learning at [\[your community\]](#) high schools.

Think back to your own high school experience. Did you feel like the school was designed to adapt to what you needed or were interested in? Or did you need to adapt to what the school offered?

If you ask 100 people about what they loved about high school, you get 100 different answers. But when you talk to people about what *didn't* work for them, similar themes recur: boredom, disconnection and a lack of relevance. Research shows that the longer our children are in school, the more bored and less engaged they are.

By high school we are forming increasingly individual selves, with distinct life experiences, interests and skills. What's more, this generation is inheriting complex world problems that will require a vast array of talents, skills and commitments to solve. High school should be designed to accommodate differences to fulfill each individual's potential. That's why we need student-centered learning.

But what is student-centered learning? It can include:

- [Pathway programs](#) that allow students to choose their field of study
- [Project-based learning](#) that enable students to design their own assignments
- [Internships](#) that get students out of the classroom to explore passions connected to their interests.
- [Personalized or blended learning](#) that structure lessons so that students work at their own pace.

Do the high schools in your community have student-centered learning? Sometimes it's hard to know from the outside, especially since it can take so many different forms.

Here are some questions you can ask:

- Does the school have any out-of-school learning opportunities such as internships or project-based learning clubs (like a Maker Club) or science fairs or [exhibition programs](#)?
- Are the teachers trained to incorporate student-centered learning into their classes, such as [project-based learning](#)?
- How much flexibility do students have to choose classes at the local junior college or other learning institution that will show up on their transcript?
- Does the district have an individualized learning plan for students who can't or don't want to attend traditional classes?
- Are the teachers trained to teach students with learning differences and different life experiences?

Schools with student-centered learning are not all the same. Far from it! But they all are making efforts to include students' voice and choice and teach to students' very different needs and interests.

Where do we parents come in? Parents can push a school or teacher to adapt to the needs of their individual child – and that can work – but it rarely changes the system, and sometimes it focuses limited resources on the individual children whose parents are the squeakiest wheels. That's neither equitable nor sustainable. We need the whole school to adopt practices and programs that enable student-centered learning – for everyone.

How do we encourage schools to embrace student-centered learning? We parents and community organizers need to work together! These changes can't happen in a day or a month or sometimes even in a few years. But there are successful tools, programs and

practices that we can push for, we can look to experts on student-centered learning – and most importantly, we can raise our voices together.

Let's start by [\[Insert methods/actions for your community\]](#).

Social thread

The [modern high school](#) was designed to provide factories with workers during the 1900s. That's why the bell sounds like factory bells...

... and schools move students through a standardized system with common learning goals. But now the world looks different. It's vastly more complex...

... we need a new high school to cultivate all the different kinds of people and talents. In a word we need student-centered learning!

This means the school adopts practices, programs and an overall philosophy that elevates individual talents, needs and interests...

...all over the country, high schools are becoming more student-centered with [pathway programs](#), [internships](#), and [project based learning](#)...

This kind of learning is linked to more motivated students, higher academic performance and more college-going...

...The children in [\[your community\]](#) deserve this too. How can we get [\[your community\]](#) high schools to embrace student-centered learning?

We need to work together and we can start with...[\[Add call to action here.\]](#)

Facebook/Instagram post (with or without links)

Everyday the world becomes more complex and yet many of our high schools are still operating on a model build for the early 1900s. We need to evolve our high schools to embrace practices, policies and models that enable student-centered learning.

We need to think about what kinds of learning experiences the kids in [your community] need and work together to shift, improve and reinvent our current high schools to provide those opportunities.

This could mean adding [pathway programs](#) to traditional high schools. Or making sure teachers are trained in [project-based learning](#). Or [creating a lab school](#) that will allow us to innovate on what works best for our students.

Whatever the solution, we parents and community folks need to join in and help our schools evolve. Let's start by [\[add call to action here\]](#)

With support from our core partners, National Parents Union and Highlander Institute, we were able to create this community tool to help you advocate for better high schools in your communities. For more information about transformative practices, visit <https://transforminghighschool.org>.