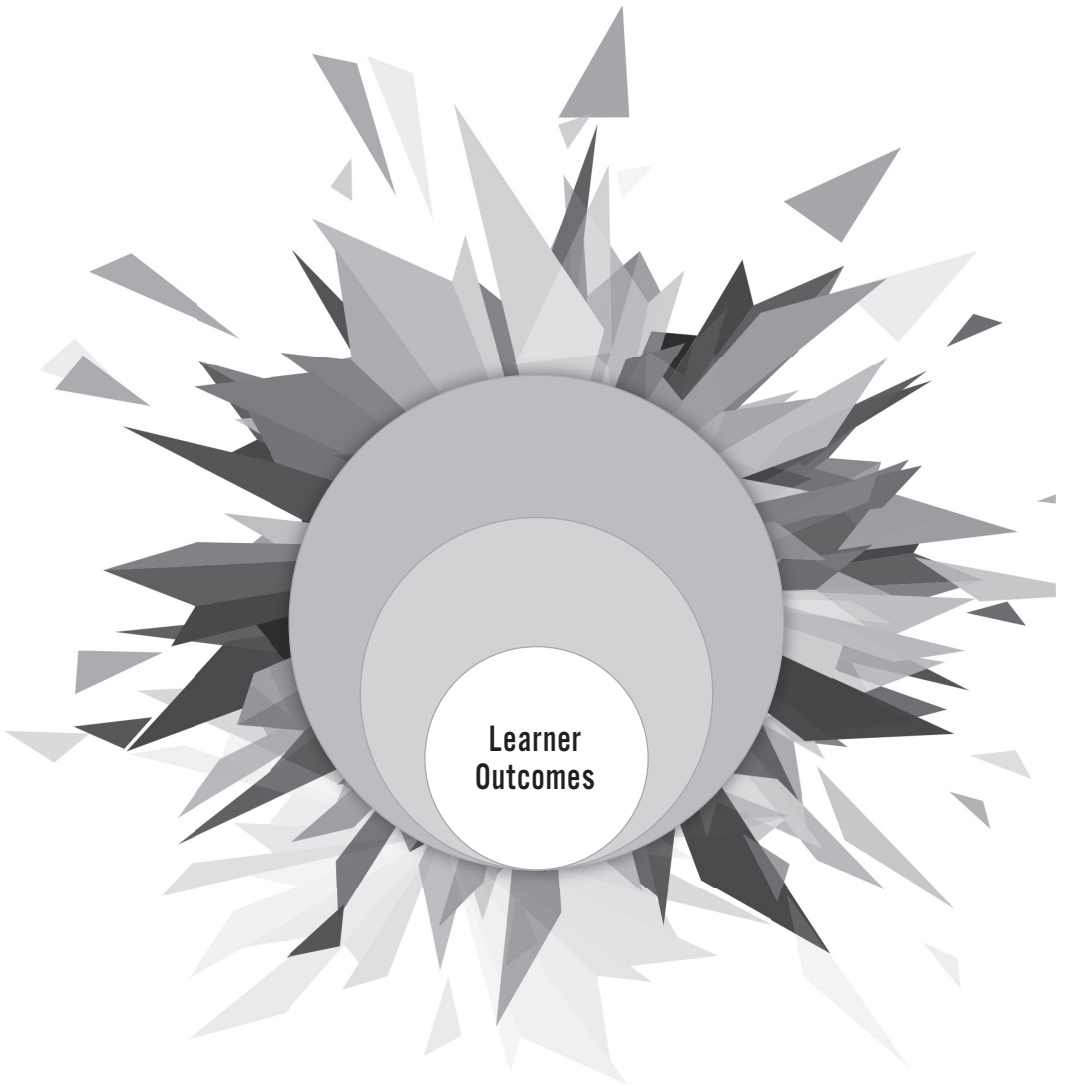


PART I

WHAT ARE OUR ASPIRATIONS FOR LEARNERS?



In part I, we will start with why it matters to create a holistic understanding of each learner as an individual rather than emphasizing averages and standardization. We'll look at how to get to know each learner and what's possible when you believe each learner is capable of learning and contributing in their own meaningful way. And we'll explore what it might look like to redefine success and expand measure beyond GPAs, standardized tests, and traditional methods of assessment.

Through chapters 1 to 4, these key shifts will be addressed.

From School-Centered	To Learner-Centered
Teach to the average and manage expectations.	Variability is the norm, and the uniqueness of learners is something to build upon.
Relationships and SEL are secondary to learning.	Relationships and SEL are the foundation of effective learning communities.
Learners are sorted and ranked.	Everyone is capable of learning and contributing in meaningful ways.
Success is defined by GPAs and standardized test scores.	Success is defined on an individual basis; each learner has their own unique strengths, interests, and goals.

CHAPTER 1

KNOW YOUR LEARNERS (AND HELP THEM KNOW THEMSELVES)

Teach to the average and manage expectations.

Variability is the norm, and the uniqueness of learners is something to build upon.

Zack is my youngest and has always been a very sweet and caring boy. He is known to be a great friend, one who always makes sure the new kids in class are included and one who loves when everyone can play and get along together. He loves playing sports and winning, and most importantly, his coaches have always commended him on his “coachability” and sportsmanship, which makes us so proud. He leaves me sweet notes or sends me his favorite GIFs when I travel. Zack recently made the leap from binge-reading *Captain Underpants* to devouring the *Harry Potter* series and determining that he is a Hufflepuff, whose characteristics include a strong sense of justice, loyalty, patience, and a propensity for hard work.

Zack also loves to solve puzzles and has an incredible knack for numbers. He has always been a builder and loves his LEGO sets. He can sit for extended periods of time with an intense focus on puzzles, projects he values, or Minecraft world-creating. His independence and confidence in his creations is a beautiful thing.

KNOW YOUR LEARNERS (AND HELP THEM KNOW THEMSELVES)

I am sharing this because, like all parents, I think the world of my son, but also because I want you to have the context of who my son is and how I see him before I share how he was seen in school. This is his midyear progress report from second grade.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS			
Reading: Reads a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts to construct and convey meaning	2	2	
Writing: Conveys information and ideas in writing for a range of purposes and audiences	2	2	
Speaking and Listening: Employs effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences	3	2	
Language: Demonstrates command of academic language and the conventions of English when reading, writing, and speaking	2	1	
Foundational Skills: Applies grade-appropriate word analysis skills to support accurate and fluent reading	2	2	

Although Zack is funny, curious, and caring, among so many other things, he wasn't always recognized for those traits in school. What was measured and valued didn't create a holistic account of his strengths and challenges. He had mostly twos (out of four) on his report card in the first marking period, and what is even worse is that we saw his scores decline during the second marking period.

When I looked at a sample of his work, I could certainly make the argument that his work clearly earned those ones and twos. He often wrote one-word answers, and his penmanship was hard to read. The grading and lack of meaningful feedback in the form of a few question marks he received from his teacher confirmed that this type of schooling was certainly not working. And Zack was miserable. He painfully pointed out that although I was working so hard to fix schools, it wasn't working. He looked at me pleadingly and asked, "How much longer do I have to do this, Mom?" #MomFail

Zack was in a school that was rated very high on conventional metrics based on their exceptional test scores. I also knew his teacher cared about him and all her students. She was working very hard in

a system that was designed for an industrial era. The result was often standardization, compliance, isolated content, and the completion of tasks. Like all systems, it was perfectly designed to get the results it got.

What the late Sir Ken Robinson helped me and the world understand through his powerful TED talk “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” is that “one of the roles of education is to awaken and develop the powers of creativity. Instead, what we have is a culture of standardization.”¹ It is increasingly clear that we need to honor and develop students’ abilities to think differently, solve problems, and navigate new and different situations. We also need to teach and support the development of skills that enable students to develop their own path along with social and emotional intelligence so they can thrive in a constantly changing and unpredictable society. This means we can’t structure the learning experiences with a fixed curriculum that is outdated or fails to reflect the complexity of diverse perspectives. We can’t be satisfied with merely covering content or meeting standards. Endless possibilities exist to structure learning experiences for students to discover problems to solve, ideas to develop, and feedback to receive on the value of their ideas and products.

A Learner-Centered Environment

Fast-forward to the following school year. Zack came home in the first few weeks and said, “Mom, did you know I’m smart?” I said, “Of course I do, buddy, but what made you realize it?”

He explained, “Miss Hassey gave us a really hard math problem and we all used our own strategies to figure it out. She picked mine to share with the class!” It was a simple and powerful strategy that began to shift his mindset. This validation and encouragement that he had value and could solve problems in ways that made sense to him instead of just completing a worksheet was one of many breakthroughs he experienced as a result of a caring educator who intentionally created a learner-centered environment. His teacher was focused on developing the knowledge, skills, and mindsets of learners and, in doing so,

created an equitable learning community that prioritized personalization, learner agency, authentic work, and meaningful contribution.

We saw just how impactful this approach was for Zack during parent-teacher-conference week. Miss Hassey started the conference by providing time for each of us to highlight something we were proud of Zack for. This alone was powerful and gave us an opportunity to celebrate the strengths my son has. Then, Zack led the conference by sharing how he was doing overall in school based on the goals he had discussed with his teacher and classmates, how he was doing socially, and some of his goals in both areas. He then showed us some strategies he had been learning in math and discussed what he was reading and the challenge of finding anything that could compare to *Harry Potter*. The struggle was real! As he opened his notebook and shared what he had been writing, I could see he was so proud of his work. He looked at us, and I looked at the full pages he had filled. His teacher looked at us, and Zack read his favorite reading response, which he had preselected. As Miss Hassey shared how she had seen Zack improve so much over the past year in his writing, especially with his organization and effort, I could barely keep it together. In fact, I am sitting here in tears as I write this.

We all celebrated his unique gifts, then he proceeded to present a slideshow he had prepared. He talked about how he had grown as a writer, reader, and mathematician. With each slide, he shared the skills he'd learned and his strengths, challenges, and goals. He was articulate, proud, and honest about his next steps as a learner. It was a dramatic shift in his confidence and competence.

After Zack presented his work to us, Miss Hassey shared her assessment of where he was in regard to academic norms on reading, writing, and math, what standards he had mastered, and what he still needed to work on. More importantly, she shared, "Zack is a wonderful friend. He jumped right into his new class and has flourished. Zack understands the importance of making others feel included, has a healthy, diverse range of friends, and is considered a good friend by

many. Zack's positive and welcoming spirit is impressive for his age." In that moment, it was so clear why Zack was flourishing: he had a teacher and a community who saw him for his many gifts, just as we got to see outside of school. To be fair, she also acknowledged his areas for growth. "Zack is working on compromising and problem-solving by meeting in the middle of multiple people's points of view." Yup. She really got him.

I barely held back my tears when I asked him what had changed to make such a dramatic improvement in his writing. He said, "I decided that I really wanted people to be able to read and understand my ideas, so I slowed down and have been trying much harder to organize my ideas." All attempts to keep it together were a lost cause, and through tears, all I could say was, "I am so proud of you!" but I was feeling so much more—relieved, hopeful, inspired, and so grateful for his amazing teacher who made the choice to focus on learners and learning first then design her systems, policies, and learning experiences to meet students where they were and foster the unique and special individuals they were becoming.

Every time I tell Zack's story, people come up to me and say they know someone—maybe even their own child—who has experienced the same thing. This is because the system was designed for standardization. Even though many educators and other highly successful people will say the system worked for them, the reality is we have too many learners who don't feel seen or valued. Too often, these students and families have suffered in silence or without options, thinking there was something wrong with them instead of something wrong with the system. We can and should have many modes to meet learners where they are. We don't need young people to adapt to a standardized system; we need the system to adapt to the unique learners.

Building on the Strengths, Interests, and Goals of Each Learner

Rather than approach learners with a deficit-based lens, we can work to understand and build on their unique strengths and talents to help them develop the skills, knowledge, and mindsets they need to see their full potential. Implementing graduate profiles, profiles of success, or learner profiles is increasingly popular, as these models can help expand the collective idea of success, foster foundational knowledge and content, and elevate the essential knowledge, skills, and mindsets learners need to thrive now and in their future.

I am all for this and believe it is a critical step, but I also know that it has to move beyond posters and the strategic plan to truly make an impact on learners and their learning. Too often, the learner profile acknowledges the skills we value, but when it comes to report cards, only the academics standards are assessed, measured, and shared. When we set goals, capture evidence, and share what students are doing in connection with our learner profile, we expand the view of success and help students develop the skills to get there.

Make the Knowledge, Skills, and Habits That are Valued in Your Community Explicitly Clear and Accessible to Students

The words in the learner profile matter, but defining them and showing examples is a critical step in making them accessible and creating a shared understanding of the goal. I like the way Oak Knoll Elementary School in Northern California created indicators to help make this clearer.²



Exemplary Scholar	Valued Friend	Courageous Citizens
<p>Critical Thinking I can solve complex problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask on topic questions to understand problems <input type="checkbox"/> Seek and consider different perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> Judge the credibility of sources <input type="checkbox"/> Notice and explain different solutions <input type="checkbox"/> Apply thinking skills to new and challenging tasks 	<p>Self-Reflection I know myself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and communicate emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Use strategies to work through challenging emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Identify strengths, interests, and areas of growth and then build from them <input type="checkbox"/> Know family history, culture, and various personal identities <input type="checkbox"/> Understand and explain their impact on others 	<p>Agency My voice matters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Share ideas and opinions with others <input type="checkbox"/> Speak up for myself and others, even when it's hard <input type="checkbox"/> Explore passions and interests <input type="checkbox"/> Make intentional choices to advance learning
<p>Creativity I can use my imagination to generate ideas and solutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions about the world around me <input type="checkbox"/> Generate and evaluate multiple solutions and strategies <input type="checkbox"/> Improve ideas by testing, collecting feedback <input type="checkbox"/> See challenges and problems as opportunities to be creative 	<p>Compassion I care about myself and others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Actively listen <input type="checkbox"/> Build relationships with peers and adults <input type="checkbox"/> Build an extensive vocabulary of emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Have empathy and ask questions to understand other perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> Take action to help others 	<p>Resourceful I can find the support I need to achieve my goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Notice and use the resources available <input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions when I don't understand <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for help and use resources from others <input type="checkbox"/> Understand what environment helps me to succeed
<p>Growth Mindset I believe hard work will help me learn and grow.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Understand that people are not born smart and that hard work and perseverance help people achieve their goals <input type="checkbox"/> Be willing to make mistakes and learn from them <input type="checkbox"/> Persist when things are challenging and less enjoyable <input type="checkbox"/> Identify emotions when faced with challenges and strategies to keep learning <input type="checkbox"/> Seek opportunities for challenge and improvement 	<p>Collaboration I can work with others to make great things happen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Set collective goals/norms with a group <input type="checkbox"/> Do my part to contribute to the group <input type="checkbox"/> Respect other opinions even when different from my own <input type="checkbox"/> Resolve conflicts in a group <input type="checkbox"/> Seek out and work with people who are different than me 	<p>Civic Engagement I can make my community a better, more inclusive, place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Help and support others <input type="checkbox"/> Operate with a shared responsibility to the community <input type="checkbox"/> When I notice examples of injustice and prejudice, I take action <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and pursue opportunities to make a positive impact in school, community, and the world

As I have worked with many educators to identify the skills and strategies that support the development of the learner profile, one thing we found really powerful is curating spaces to empower both educators and students to discuss powerful examples. It is important to note that the way these noncognitive skills show up is contextual and personal. The measures of habits and skills are their best when they are informed by self-reflection, peer assessment, and educator observations over time. This shows evidence of the patterns and trends that inform ongoing student development. The goal is not to check a box, give a grade, or mark a criteria as met or not met, but instead it is to help educators, families, and most importantly, students, focus on these skills and develop them in productive ways.

If your school or district doesn't have a learner profile, talk to your community, colleagues, and students about what you value most and create your own school or classroom profile that defines the knowledge, skills, and mindset everyone should strive for. Make it visible and accessible for students.

Empower Learners to Self-Assess Connected to the Learner Profile

Once you break down the skills—or you do it together with your students—it is important for students to have opportunities to reflect on these skills and self-assess to gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and challenges aligned to the larger goals. Creating a self-assessment that is aligned to the profile can be a powerful tool to revisit across classes and grade levels by helping learners develop agency and motivation to grow these valuable skills and habits over time. Having a shared understanding of where students are in relationship to the goal can help you build relationships with them. This also allows educators and students to recognize and remove potential barriers to learning in a positive and constructive manner. When you know students' strengths, preferences, and potential challenges, you

can better design learning environments and create opportunities that build on their interests and experiences to maximize engagement.

Highlight and Celebrate Actions Connected to the Learner Profile

It is fairly common for awards to focus on grades, GPAs, or attendance. It is less common but very powerful for them to focus on the skills that are critical to learners' success and growth in life, work, and citizenship. Imagine if students were celebrated each week or month for how they demonstrated characteristics of the learner profile, like being a risk-taker or inquirer or being open-minded. What you celebrate and acknowledge gets focused on, and if these skills are important, we have to show that we truly value them.

As a middle school teacher, I used to cut up paper and give the pieces to students when I noticed they completed a task or demonstrated a skill that aligned with our desired learner outcomes. Then, with those pieces of paper, they could enter in a raffle for a piece of candy or a sticker (yes, in middle school, and they loved it) at the end of the week. It was very informal but personal, and they rarely cared about winning; they just loved being recognized! Many teachers have students nominate their peers or recognize others on a shout-out wall. Consider how you might acknowledge students for demonstrating skills that align with your learner profile.

Reflect and Set Goals Connected to the Profile

Did you know we are more likely to achieve goals when they are meaningful to us and we write them down? Making time in the day for students to reflect and set goals can help them take ownership and develop agency. The beauty of a learner profile is not that everyone is the same; it is that everyone is unique and valued for who they are. When this is true, individuals are more driven to accomplish goals that matter to them personally.

Monitor Progress by Capturing Evidence of Learning and Growth

One of my favorite ways to document progress came from a kindergarten classroom where each month, students drew a picture and wrote a sentence to create a book. In August, it was a few squiggles and letters that were not fully legible. In September, you saw shape in the pictures and a few letters strung together. By January, there was more definition in the pictures and a few words. At the end of the year, there were ten snapshots of where the students were, and the progress over time was evident. Each series was as unique and special as each child. In reading, you could have students read a passage and record their growth monthly by reflecting on their progress. Older students can document their drafts, share their writing process, and grow in their ability to craft stories. I used to block out a day each quarter before I had to submit grades so students could reflect on what they had learned in relation to the key standards and their goals, identify key pieces that showed evidence of growth and mastery, and document it all in their portfolio. It was a great way for students to take ownership of a process that is too often taken on by teachers alone. Each year, students make tremendous progress in classrooms all around the world, and we often reduce this growth and their strengths and challenges to numbers or letters. Collectively gathering and using evidence to measure progress can show us what the learner can do and provide multiple means of representation.

Share Evidence of Growth in Academics and in the Skills, Habits, and Mindsets Outlined in the Learner Profile

Beyond academics, we can also help learners reflect on their skills and habits. When learners are at the center, you can focus on growth and progress over time and acknowledge the strengths and areas for improvement for each individual rather than as a class or cohort. Technology can make this easier and more visible. There are many tools that can help students document and share their learning process

EVOLVING EDUCATION

and their development of key knowledge, skills, and mindsets over time. These eighth-grade résumés from Vista Innovation and Design Academy (VIDA) are one of many great ways students can highlight who they are and their accomplishments and develop some great communication skills while they are at it.



Vista Innovation and Design Academy Eighth-Grade Résumés

Ignite Curiosity, Develop Passion, and Unleash Genius

The difference in Zack's experiences was not the standards, accountability systems, or resources; it was an intentional choice to focus on learners and learning first, then design their systems, policies, and learning experiences to meet them where they were and mold them into the unique and special individuals they were becoming. As a learner, he experienced a shift from a school-centered paradigm to a learner-centered paradigm, which is possible in each and every classroom. Teachers in many types of schools use these strategies and more to empower learners, and I can't wait to share them with you throughout this book.

I am incredibly grateful for the teachers who have helped both of our kids love school, feel more confident, and develop the skills and mindsets they need to thrive. The impact of a teacher who sees their students as individuals, who gets to know them and cultivates their creativity and curiosity while developing academic skills, is invaluable. When we focus on learners and connect to their interests, needs, and goals, we can create experiences that ignite curiosity, develop passion, and unleash genius.

As Zack and so many young people experience benefits from their teachers, it is clear that it's not the programs or resources that make the difference in the lives of students; it's teachers who look to learners and evolve their teaching methods in the pursuit of providing optimal learning experiences that meet their needs. This starts with the belief that all of us have genius and talents worth cultivating and the desire to create models of learning that provide opportunities to do so.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Jot down your ideas and share them with your colleagues near and far. **#EvolvingEducation**

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

How might you use an existing learner profile or design a new learner profile for your context?

YOUR PLAN:

How might you help learners understand their strengths and opportunities for growth?

YOUR PLAN:

How might you help learners set goals, track their progress, and share their growth over time?

YOUR PLAN: