Moving from Passive Compliance to →

Active Self-Direction

For many learners, school has not just been the context where they learn essential knowledge and skills but also the one where they learn to be compliant. In these contexts, learners are expected to passively absorb what they are taught by adults and are pushed to comply with rules and routines developed for them through extrinsic rewards and punitive consequences. This has unfairly impacted some students more than others, often based on who they are and where they are from. But if all learners are going to be prepared to thrive in and transform the world, this can no longer be the case. Learners must become active drivers of the learning process.

When students direct their own learning, it drives motivation and deepens learning. This is because they have a sense of control and are able to shape learning to be relevant to their interests, needs, and goals. In addition, active learning helps to more meaningfully encode knowledge, skills, and mindsets into long-term memory, which makes learning more long-lasting. Ensuring young people are active participants in the learning process also prepares them for postsecondary success, whether this means college or immediate entry into a fulfilling career. In fact, if current trends—like the rise of automation and the rate of scientific advancement—persist, our learners will need a different set of skills that enable them to be self-driven, autonomous, lifelong learners who are able to make decisions that fit their unique needs and goals.

Transcend’s Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning are informed by the science of learning and development; equity in education; and contemporary societal, political, economic, and scientific trends.

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Active Self-Direction at
One Stone

One Stone is a tuition-free independent lab school and non-profit for high school students in Boise, Idaho. One Stone believes in the power of students and believes that each student brings a unique background, skillset, and sense of passion to the learning environment. Students have many different lab opportunities on campus, all aimed at cultivating agency via real-world opportunities that enable them to arrive at their personal “whys.”

▶ Labs – Instead of a four-year high school where learning happens in seven or eight periods per day, One Stone operates three labs: (X), (D), and (Y), based on readiness. While each lab is slightly different, they are all designed and implemented in collaboration between learners and coaches. Read more about One Stone’s labs here.

▶ Immersions – Immersions are a primary way students learn. They are three- to four-week experiences where learners are free to pursue personal learning objectives. Students can opt into immersions or codesign one aligned to a personal interest with a coach. Immersions can cover mathematics, humanities, science, or technology in a variety of hands-on, real-world environments, often outside of school.

▶ Living in Beta – The Living in Beta program empowers One Stone students to explore their passions and discover their purpose while developing the tools to live, learn, and practice with intention. Through engagement in scaffolded wayfinding activities, students design experiences that bring relevance to their learning. As students unpack their passions, identify their personal values, and create a personalized and meaningful why statement, they develop a greater sense of identity, belonging, and purpose.

▶ Student Board Members – Young people are active participants in the governance and direction of One Stone. Its board of directors is two-thirds students, attesting that young people are definitely in the driver's seat.

▶ The Curation of Me – Students create and manage a digital portfolio, which displays their work, reflects on their growth, and demonstrates their passions. Upon completion of their One Stone experience, students reflect on what they've learned and how they've grown, and present The Curation of Me, which is conveyed to the entire school in a 30-minute presentation.

▶ Cannonballs and Deep Dives – Cannonballs and Deep Dives are one- to three-week experiences where learners have the opportunity to explore a range of ideas or topics in which they are interested, largely through tours, readings, visits, and hands-on learning. Cannonballs are a time for students to explore the breadth of a topic, issue, or skill, whereas Deep Dives enable a more narrow and intimate understanding.

Additional School Examples to Explore

Avalon Charter Schools – At Avalon, students create their own projects as a way to complete state requirements and pursue their passions. Through these projects, students learn time management and collaborative skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century.

Red Bridge – The mission of Red Bridge is to develop a sense of agency in every child as the foundation for academic and life success. In order to make this happen, Red Bridge has made aligned design decisions such as grouping students based on “autonomy level” versus grade levels, reframing the roles of teachers as guides, and more.

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