



Moving from Assimilation & Marginalization to →

Affirmation of Self & Others

Historically, schools were intentionally designed to assimilate large numbers of young people from various backgrounds into a common culture. The curriculum, instructional practices, and community norms reflected this singular perspective of beauty, brilliance, and worthiness. Sometimes, they reinforced—or even justified—racism, sexism, and other forms of bias. In many schools, this legacy continues today, even if the goal of assimilation has become less explicit. In these contexts, color-blind approaches, English-only policies, bans on ethnic studies programs, and other practices continue to convey messages that uplift some and diminish others—often students of color, LGBTQ+ learners, those living in poverty, multilingual learners, and those with a disability, among others.

However, in order to prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world, schools must acknowledge, celebrate, and nurture the diverse identities of all students in meaningful ways and help each learner develop a unique, positive sense of self as well as a deep respect for the identities of others. When schools affirm each learner’s unique identity, they promote the success of all learners. Seeing one’s community, values, beliefs, traditions, stories, and language reflected in the learning environment promotes a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. When young people feel confident in their ability to succeed and feel like they belong, they are more likely to see value in coming to school and are better able to learn when there. In addition, when schools truly view students’ identities as a valuable source of prior knowledge and connect learning to these identities, it can deepen learning and make it more long-lasting. Doing this work helps all students recognize that worthiness, beauty, and brilliance come from every corner and cultural background.

This Leap Means...

- ▶ Learners deepening their understanding of and pride in their heritage, community, and life story.
- ▶ Learners having opportunities to express their unique identities and truly be themselves without fear.
- ▶ Learners experiencing the representation, humanization, and celebration of diverse identities within the school community as well as what is being learned and how it is learned.
- ▶ Learners feeling respected and deeply known by others in the community, and like they belong.

Inequitable, Industrial-Era Learning

Assimilation & Marginalization

Learners from marginalized groups—such as people of color, LGBTQ learners, those living in poverty, multilingual learners, those with a disability, and others—are pushed to either conform to the dominant culture or risk alienation.

Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

Affirmation of Self & Others

Each learner develops a unique, positive sense of self and purpose as well as a deep respect for the identities of others; these diverse identities are celebrated, nurtured, and leveraged in meaningful and anti-oppressive ways to support everyone’s learning.

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](#).

Affirmation of Self and Others at **Empower Community High School**

[Empower Community High School](#) in Aurora, Colorado, is led by students, guided by educators, and co-created with the community. Opened in 2019, Empower was created by a Community Design Team of students, families, educators, and community members. It is a deliberately small school with a 20:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Empower's vision is that "Our students will claim their rightful place as agents of change, growth, and social progress. The world is ours, and we must educate and foster the scholars, writers, artists, and innovators who will build a just and equitable world." Students are empowered to design and personalize their experience of school in ways that are grounded in reality, community, and a multicultural curriculum.

- ▶ **Ethnic Studies Program** – Designed with professors from CU Boulder, the Ethnic Studies program is a rigorous four-year program that develops college-level literacy and critical thinking skills. All content courses taught are part of the Ethnic Studies program. Students study power and identity with a focus on perspectives of people of color.
- ▶ **Critical and Liberatory Instruction** – Instruction is dynamic; the co-creation process ensures that instruction and learning is always personally, culturally, and civically relevant. Every lesson, every course, every project has meaning to the individual student and to her community. This is guaranteed because nothing is designed or planned or implemented in isolation from the learners.
- ▶ **Diverse by Design** – Staff at Empower reflect the diversity of the student body. Empower actively recruited teachers and leaders of color who are from the community and can serve as authentic role models for students.
- ▶ **Student-centric** – Students serve on committees responsible for curriculum, hiring, professional development, school culture, and more.
- ▶ **FLOW** – FLOW is a 2-hour project-based learning block where students research and solve local or global community problems. All projects have a direct impact on the community. Check out some examples [here](#).
- ▶ **FAMILY** – In Empower's spin on advisory, students spend all four years of high school with the same family group and trusted advisor. They meet two or three times each month to engage in healing, community building, goal setting and reflection, and social-emotional learning and development.

Additional School Examples to Explore

[City Garden Montessori](#) – City Garden Montessori School in St. Louis, Missouri strives to create a nurturing, intimate atmosphere and implements an interactive learning approach that honors each child individually and fosters a sense of respect for oneself and for others. City Garden weaves the Montessori theory of development together with additional academic special services such as a SPED and speech pathology program.

[Native American Community Academy \(NACA\)](#) – NACA is located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The school's 450 Native students represent 37 different tribes. NACA blends a college-preparatory education with Indigenous philosophies and traditions, resulting in a culturally responsive curriculum that allows students to see their experiences honored and celebrated.

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