



Moving from Irrelevance to →

Relevance

Too often today, learning is disconnected from young people’s interests and goals, as well as from the real professional, personal, and societal challenges and endeavors they will encounter in life. This one-size-fits all approach is typically highly standardized, reflects a singular way of thinking and living in society, and separates learners from real-world problems and contexts. Relevance is often more acutely lacking for young people who don’t see themselves in the content, examples, people, and practices elevated in most schools’ curriculum. If school is going to support *all* learners in achieving their goals and shaping the future, it’s critical that it explores young people’s interests and goals, is connected to their communities, and enables them to understand and tackle real problems in authentic contexts.

When learning is truly relevant, it takes into account students’ unique life experiences, who they are as individuals, and who they want to become. Relevance supports learning and development by increasing student motivation; learners see more value in learning about topics connected to their interests and goals and, as a result, will be more engaged and invested. In addition, relevance makes what is learned more memorable because young people can connect new ideas to prior knowledge and experiences. Relevance also helps learners feel a sense of belonging and connection, which promotes mindsets that are conducive to learning. When school is relevant to all learners, and leverages high-value, balanced curriculum, then every young person has a greater opportunity to thrive.

This Leaps Means...

- ▶ Learners tackling activities and content that feel compelling and connect to their unique backgrounds, interests, and goals.
- ▶ Learners referencing their prior knowledge when engaging in activities.
- ▶ Learners engaging in learning experiences that relate to their life outside of the classroom and integrate their home cultures and communities.
- ▶ Learners grappling with problems that have authentic, real-world applications and purpose.



Inequitable, Industrial-Era Learning

Irrelevance

Learners have experiences that are disconnected from their interests, their goals, and the real professional and personal challenges and endeavors they encounter in life.

Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

Relevance

Learners engage in activities and explore topics relevant to their interests and goals, are connected to their community, enable them to understand and tackle real world problems, and build their ability to see and dismantle injustice.



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](#).



Relevance at

The Science and Math Institute (SAMi)

The Science and Math Institute (SAMi) is one of three innovative zone schools within Tacoma Public Schools. It serves more than 500 high school students and is located in Point Defiance Park and within the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, Washington. SAMi's location in a real-world setting is designed to bring learning to life, with a focus on math as well as the natural and physical sciences. As students encounter and apply their learning in engaging, realistic contexts, they accelerate academic, social-emotional, and identity development. [Read more](#) in the school profile compiled by CZI.

- ▶ **Place-Based Learning** – Classrooms are integrated throughout the park, and students spend their days in a lush park among zoo staff, visitors, and thousands of different species, creating rich real-world learning opportunities. Students also receive a “whole-child access pass,” which enables them to use the larger Tacoma area as a learning environment as well.
- ▶ **Student Voice and Choice** – Students select their classes, as well as a “major,” and are free to enroll in courses offered at any of their sister schools, in areas such as music, theater, or engineering. If students still feel their interests are not met, they are free to propose new courses, create new community traditions, or redesign the physical environment of the school.
- ▶ **Next Move Internship Program** – Students participate in internships with one of the Tacoma area's 200 partner organizations during the school day, accumulating 90 hours of internship experience and school credit. Students are matched with an internship that aligns to their interests and personal goals. In addition to work experience gained on the job, students also take an internship prep course to learn how to write a CV, practice interviewing skills, and set specific goals for their internship experience.
- ▶ **Mentor Peer Groups** – These multigrade cohorts meet with a mentor for four hours each Friday. The purpose is to ensure each student is deeply known by an adult and peers, and groups are created to reflect the diversity of the Tacoma area. MPG activities are student-planned and student-run, which ensures that relationship-building activities reflect the real experiences and needs of the students who comprise each group.
- ▶ **Mini- or Micro-terms** – At the end of each semester, students partake in what is referred to as a “miniterm” or “microterm.” These are month-long opportunities that offer students the chance to engage in an intensive study via a unique course. For example, SAMi students chose to run a podcast course, hosting deep dives on subjects students deemed relevant.

Additional School Examples to Explore

Latitude High School – Located in Oakland, California, Latitude High engages students in authentic, real-world, project-based learning. Each year, students visit over ten different workplaces to explore career interests and to collaborate with professionals. All students also engage in additional extended learning opportunities such as internships and the creation of their own businesses.

Gibson Ek – Gibson Ek is a Big Picture Learning school located in Issaquah, Washington. At Gibson, young people engage in a learner-centered model where they craft their own projects, learning paths, schedules, and more. The school has an explicit focus on design and STEM learning in real-world settings. As a result, students spend two days a week off campus engaged in internships, culminating in a year-long capstone experience during their final year at the school.

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