



Student-Powered **INNOVATION**

**How Embark uses kids' voice
to tell the story of its rigorous,
community-centered model**

When Olive was a sixth-grader at Embark, she and a peer developed the second highest-selling seasonal drink at North Denver's Pinwheel Coffee. The lemon lavender latte placed behind only the pumpkin spiced latte and is now a constant fixture in the spring menu.

Inventing seasonal drinks is one of the six-week learning experiences offered during the year at [Embark](#), a micro middle school in Denver, Colorado. In it, students research the market, generate cost analyses, discover the perfect ratios of ingredients, and develop [marketing materials](#), among other things.



Authentic, relevant experiences are the launch pad for Embark’s curriculum. Students’ learning is rooted in the community and the two businesses they operate out of: [Pinwheel Coffee](#) and [Framework Cycles](#).

Because Embark doesn’t fit the traditional industrial model, it’s always looking for ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of its relevant, learner-centered approach. Head of School Brian Hyosaka found that while he could share ample stories about how Embark was fulfilling learners’ needs and providing them with a rigorous education, he needed more data that captured the experiences of the learners.

Hyosaka learned about the Leaps Student Voice Survey through Embark’s partnership with [Transcend](#), a national nonprofit that supports communities to



LEAPS FOR EQUITABLE 21ST CENTURY LEARNING

Transcend’s Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning describe the key ways we believe the student experience must change so that schools can prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. [Learn more here.](#)

INEQUITABLE, INDUSTRIAL-ERA LEARNING

EQUITABLE, 21ST-CENTURY LEARNING

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|--------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------------------|
| Unequal Expectations & Opportunities | → | High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities |
| Narrow Focus | → | Whole-Child Focus |
| Rote Activities | → | Rigorous Learning |
| Irrelevance | → | Relevance |
| Assimilation & Marginalization | → | Affirmation of Self & Others |
| Reinforcement of the Status Quo | → | Social Consciousness & Action |
| Isolation | → | Connection & Community |
| Inflexible Systems | → | Customization |
| Passive Compliance | → | Active Self-Direction |
| Siloed Schooling | → | Anytime, Anywhere Learning |

create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning. The Leaps Survey measures a school's ability to make the **10 Leaps for Equitable, 21st-Century Learning**, which describe the shift from an industrial-era, inequitable education to 21st-century, equitable learning experiences. The survey was designed specifically to measure the quality of student experiences by relying on an often under-utilized resource: the voices of students themselves.

Hyosaka jumped at the chance to gain quantitative data that could help concretely share Embark's story and improve the school.

"We're in recognition that we can't just say we do great things at Embark if we're trying to impact other schools and other pieces of the education system. It was important to have something that felt like it would be normed, but also something that felt like it measured the things we were actually working toward," Hyosaka says. "It was kind of a rare thing for us when the Transcend Student Voice Leap Survey came around. It was like, 'Well, these are actually largely exactly the things that we value,' so it felt aligned. If an assessment is not aligned, you're always going to question the validity of that measure. That didn't come into play for us."

Embark's unique approach to learning was affirmed by the data, with students reporting especially strong experiences on the **Rigorous Learning, Active Self-Direction, Connection & Community, and Relevance** Leaps. The survey provided externally validated, nationally benchmarked data that the school is now using to tell their story.



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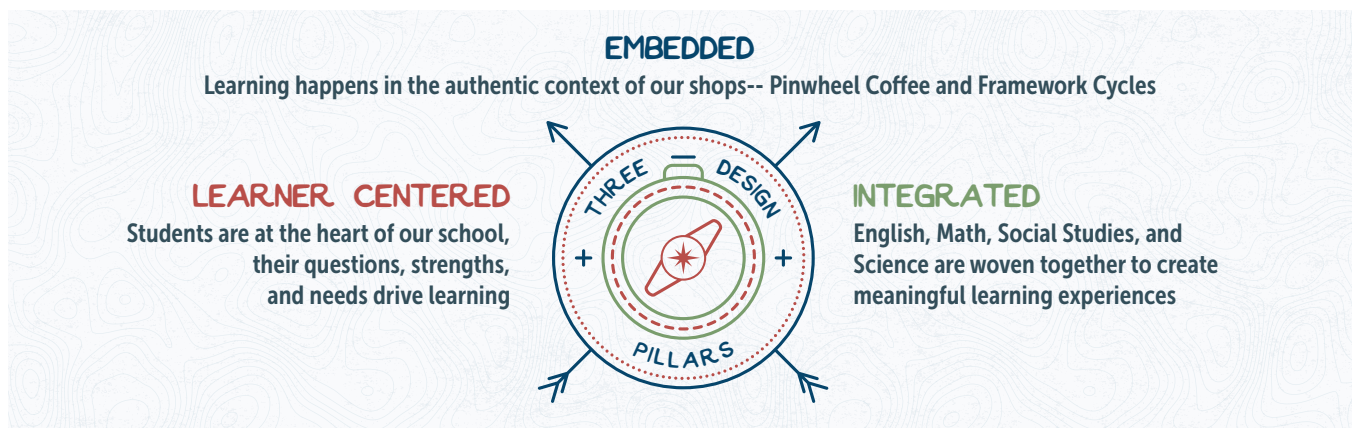
BRIAN HYOSAKA, (HE/HIM) HEAD OF SCHOOL

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EMBARK'S THREE PILLARS

Embark's roots began four years ago when students from Denver high schools were invited to engage in career-embedded learning experiences at Pinwheel Coffee. Administrators found that students and educators weren't spending enough time in the shops to meaningfully engage in the business needs and decisions. So they were forced to make a decision: fold up the program or double down. They chose to double down, and Embark was born, serving students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Embark's pedagogy is grounded in three pillars: embedded, integrated, and learner-centered.



The school is **embedded** in the community. Hyosaka knows community-centered schooling certainly isn't a new idea, but he says schools have gotten further away from serving the community and more often only exist in it. When crafting Embark, they looked at what services showed the most unmet demand in Denver; coffee and bike shops were at the top of the list. By working out of Pinwheel Coffee and Framework Cycles, student learning is grounded in the real-world context of the broader North Denver community.

"We're constantly doing work within the greater community. It helps students to find out who they are and how they fit into the world," Hyosaka says. "For adolescents, that's exactly what they need in school. They need a place that supports their self-discovery, their curiosity, and allows them to apply their identity in ways that are authentic."

Student learning also extends beyond the two shops; every Wednesday, students head off campus on "Discovery Days" to engage with the broader community. They may have identified a need in North Denver, or perhaps they're working on an assignment that prompts students to venture out. Maddie, a sixth-grader at Embark, enjoys the time off-campus. In one of her favorite Discovery Days last year, students were invited to pick a dream career and then research its salary. (Maddie

wants to be a fashion designer.) From there, they ventured to their local grocery store, where they had to buy groceries based on that salary and determine the nutritional value of their choices. They then had to do the same exercise again, but this time for people living at or below the poverty line.

Starting from authentic, real-world tasks enables an **integrated** curriculum in which math, English, science, and history are artfully woven together so that no content or skill is learned in isolation.

“It’s not that we start from a place of saying, ‘Hey, we really want to think about how we can integrate writing.’ It’s rather we start from the authentic task and then see what academic skills we believe we need for students to successfully reach that final product,” says Embark educator Carissa Solomon. “Then integration happens naturally because there’s nothing in the world that happens in isolation. When you start from real-world, authentic tasks, it’s much easier to see the integration unfold.”

Embark’s model is also **learner-centered**, meaning students make key decisions about their learning. Each day at Embark looks different. At the beginning of each week, learners receive a blank schedule with required

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Working with the kids brings a different kind of excitement to work every day. I get to see and work with them in a structured customer service setting, where they can be a little shy and apprehensive. 30 minutes later I get to see those same kids with endless energy, running around on a field or court. In both settings, I ask them to challenge themselves to step out of their comfort zones. It’s amazing to see them do that in two vastly different settings and to watch them grow in different capacities.

**KYLE CLARK, (HE/HIM) PINWHEEL SHIFT SUPERVISOR
& EMBARK MOVEMENT COORDINATOR**

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lessons, community time, and other team meetings already filled in. From there, students determine how to spend the rest of their week. They might choose time to work in the shops, personal projects, or collaboration with peers. Learners are also encouraged to pencil in time for breaks to take a walk or play a game with others.

The constant fixtures on the schedule are mandatory check-ins that kick off and conclude each day. These don't necessarily focus on the work. Instead, learners and educators take time to connect on a personal level. Students also engage in regular one-on-one time with educators to foster social-emotional well-being and growth.

"My favorite thing about Embark is definitely the student-teacher relationship," Olive says. "So like Carissa, I know her and I know her kids' names. I actually know her as a person, not just as my educator. And she also knows me. So I think that it helps me learn. I feel like she actually knows me and gets me."

With thirty-two students and a structure outside of the perceived norm, Embark faces challenges in convincing people of its effectiveness in preparing students for higher levels of education. Because it's so different from what people consider a "traditional education," the only way for parents or community members to understand was to experience it. That is, until Embark deployed Transcend's Leaps Student Voice Survey.



EMBARK MODELS EXCHANGE ENTRY

Want to implement some of Embark's model in your school? Learn more about it on [Transcend's Innovative Models Exchange](#).

HOW EMBARK USED THE LEAPS SURVEY TO TELL ITS STORY




“We know that this form of education works—that innovative education works,” Solomon says. “It’s really challenging to explain that to other people because [when] we say things like ‘every Wednesday we go off campus.’ ‘We base our curriculum up in a coffee shop and bike shop,’ there are a lot of misconceptions that can arise. So we really appreciated having Transcend’s data as a more objective, quantifiable place to point to about how students actually experience learning at Embark.”

The Leaps Survey can be administered in two ways: a high-level “pulse check” that touches on all ten Leaps, or a deep-dive survey that allows schools to focus on specific, targeted Leaps that they want to learn more about. Students are asked a series of questions related to each Leap, which they answer on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

Amber Cross, a data operations associate at Transcend, worked with Embark to implement the survey. She supported the Embark team in picking their

ABOUT THE LEAPS STUDENT VOICE SURVEY

The Leaps Student Voice Survey is designed to help communities understand the experiences of learners through the lens of the Leaps for 21st Century, Equitable Learning. The Leaps Student Voice Survey builds upon and extends beyond currently available surveys in several important ways:

-  Focuses on specifically on the quality of experiences young people are having in school.
-  Avoids assumptions embedded in the traditional, standardized system of school, such as single-teacher classrooms, A-F grading systems, and age-grade cohorts.
-  Prioritizes customizability to the unique contexts of communities. For example, the Leaps survey allows communities to disaggregate responses by any element of students’ identities, not just federal census categories.

The survey was built in partnership with outside psychometricians, who have gathered significant evidence of its validity and reliability across diverse settings and student groups.

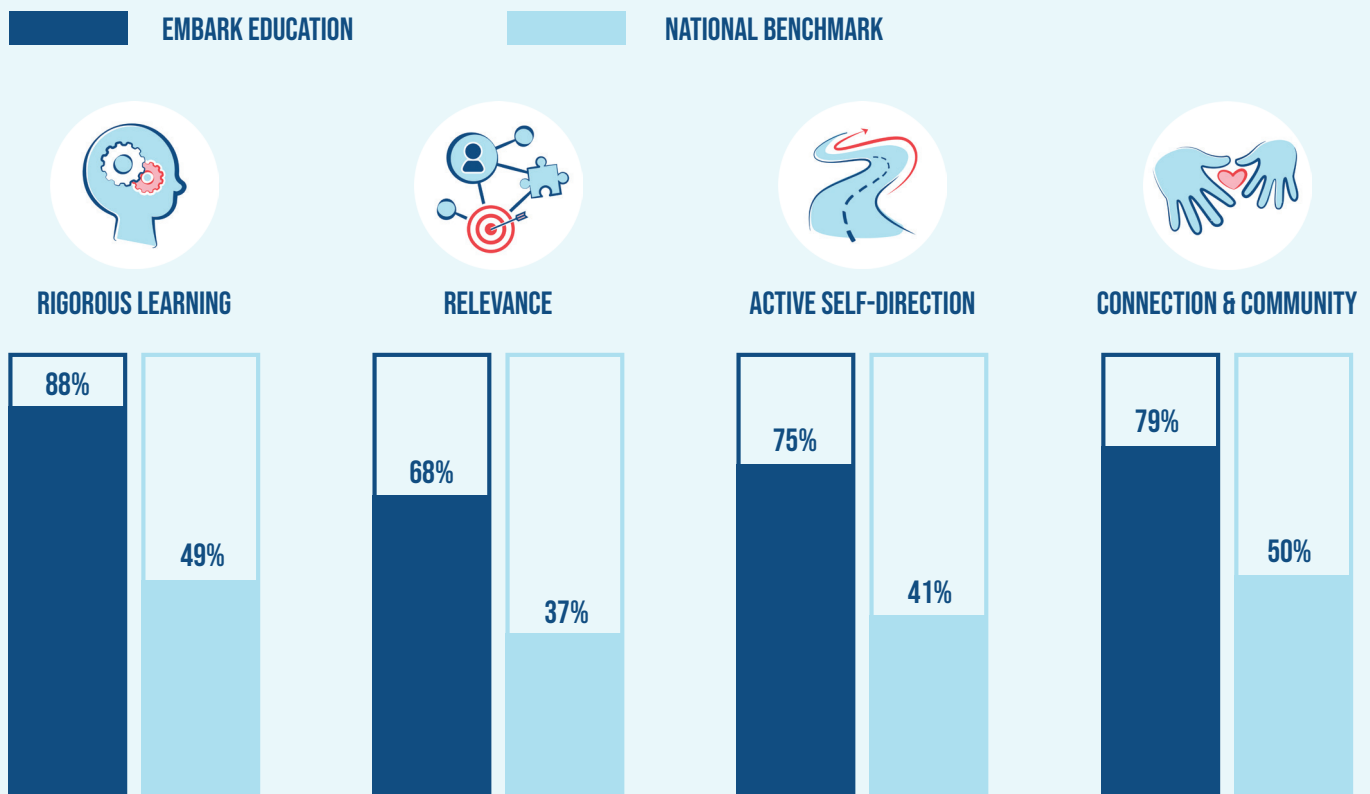
[Read the Technical Report](#) to learn more.

prioritized Leaps, as well as planning for data disaggregation, which was important to help Embark take an equity lens to see whether students' experiences differed based on any dimensions of their identities.

"They're very small and they try to be intentional about what data they're collecting and how they introduce that to their school community," Cross says. "So we had conversations about what kind of questions were in the survey and how they could use the survey. They really asked a lot [of] questions... regarding bringing students into the process of why they're taking the survey."

Hyosaka wanted the survey delivered in a low-pressure, non-standardized way through Embark's learning management system, which Transcend supported. "All I asked them to do was tell the truth and do it sometime this week," he says. "It was super minimal, but it also took all of the pressure off the survey."

PERCENTAGE OF LEARNERS THAT EXPERIENCE LEAPS FOR EQUITABLE, 21ST CENTURY LEARNING



From there, Embark used the data in two distinct ways: to reflect on the areas in which Embark can improve and to help tell its story externally.

Hyosaka saw one opportunity for strategic improvement in the fact that eighth-graders reported slightly less positive experiences than younger students. “Our eighth-graders get as many do: bored and dissatisfied,” he says. “I understand the national trends, but we also don’t want to accept it. The data is pretty clear across the board that eighth-graders are the least satisfied. But also, it just helps us to think through what would it look like for us to map out who we are over those three years with eighth-graders in mind, with the finish in mind. That definitely is stemming directly from the survey data.”

Hyosaka deemed it equally important to recognize their successes and progress. “We wanted to take time to honor our journey up to this point,” Hyosaka says. “Then there’s a space for us to say, ‘okay, this is data we have not received before, but it confirms some of the things that we know to be true that are going well.’” Now, Embark is using the data to tell its story and tackle misconceptions.

For example, Hyosaka often fields questions about the rigor of the curriculum from parents with concerns that their children wouldn’t be ready for higher levels of education. Communicating the rigor of learning has always been a hurdle, but “Rigorous Learning” was among the Leaps where Embark’s students reported the most positive experience. Hyosaka saw alignment in the way Transcend and Embark define rigorous learning, and the data affirmed what they had been saying since the beginning.

“People might think, ‘well, okay, you have a lot of fun, but when do you actually learn?’ But I like to push back and say we learn a lot when we go out on these excursions and we talk to people in Framework and Pinwheel,” Maddie says. “We actually might learn more than you’d expect compared to sitting at a desk and memorizing things. We do it in the real world.”

HOW SCHOOLS CAN USE THE LEAPS STUDENT VOICE SURVEY



REFLECTION: To celebrate successes and identify areas of improvement.

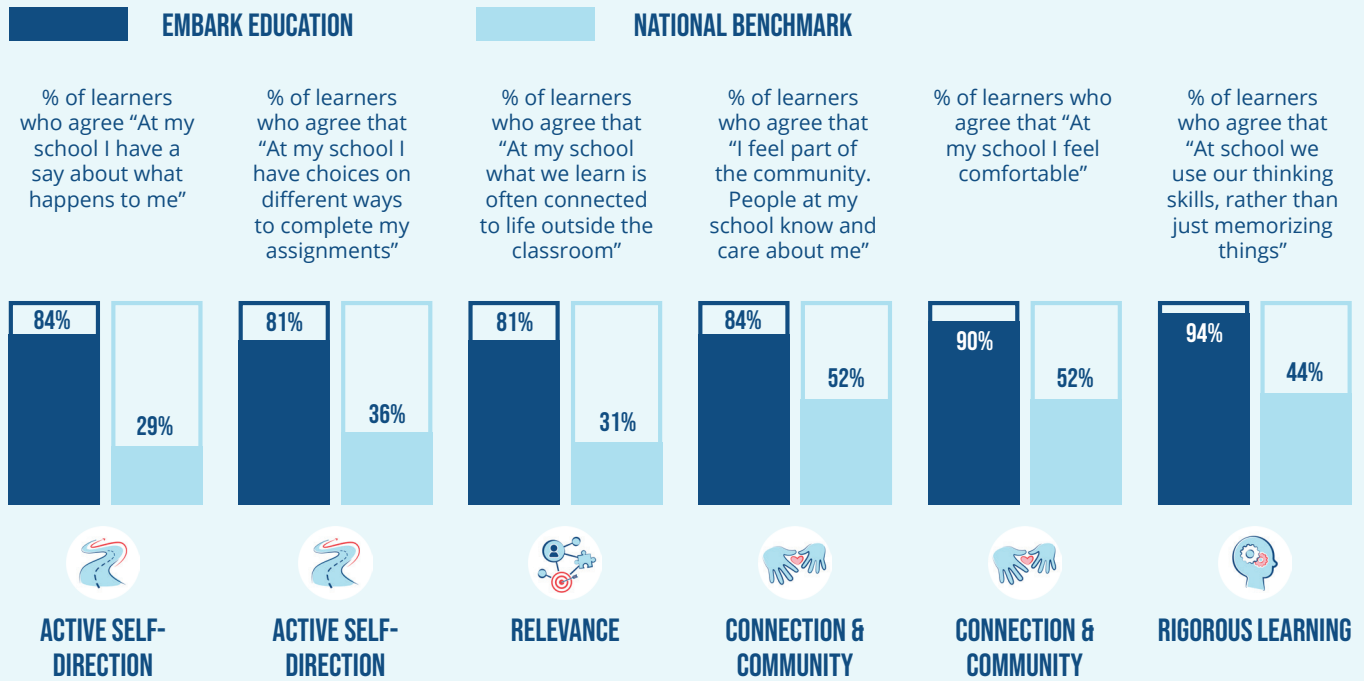


EXTERNAL STORYTELLING: To generate evidence of impact that can be shared with external stakeholders.



RAPID-CYCLE R&D: To provide quick, formative data to support rapid learning and improvement.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS



STUDENT-CENTERED DATA APPLICATION

After completing the survey, sixteen students opted into a learning experience focused on using the survey data to tell their stories. It started when Cross traveled to Embark to meet with students in person and help them analyze the data. Learners parsed through the results and connected them to their experiences. In doing so, students realized there are key differences in the way they experience Embark based on their identities. Learners also discussed what certain categories like "Relevance" means to them and how that could have contributed to their results.

After the learners talked through the data, they each picked a Leap that most resonates with them. Solomon said "Anytime, Anywhere" was a popular choice among the students. After they picked a Leap, students employed creative writing and storytelling skills to make connections between the data and their experiences.

Maddie wrote about the "Anytime, Anywhere" aspect of Embark. She likes the excursions because it suits her learning style. "The teachers and other students really let you lean into how you learn. I am a movement-based learner, so I like to be able to fidget and kind of like talk out my ideas," she says. "At my old school, that didn't really show up as much. I get to learn the best way for me."

After students told their own stories, they were tasked with speaking to an adult within the Embark community, like mechanics, baristas, educators, and parents. Students asked the

community members questions about the data and how Embark leans into those Leaps (adults tended to focus on Whole-Child Focus and Connection & Community). Learners then packaged those testimonials alongside their own stories.

In the final phase of the learning experience, students created storytelling projects with the data and their Embark story. Embark plans to use those projects as marketing material on its website, social media, and other channels. But Hyosaka hopes these stories will have a broader impact: to demonstrate how other schools can shift to more of a learner-centered education.

“Our students understand that when they come to Embark, they are a part of something bigger than just the school—they’re trying to do their part to shift education to a more learner-centered paradigm. One of the ways that we know to do that is through storytelling. It was really great to have that data because there’s a qualitative and quantitative aspect to the stories,” Hyosaka says. “Having Amber come out from Transcend to unpack the data with students, to make meaning of it, and then having students take the indicators that matter most to them are the first steps. And students are learning about creative writing and storytelling techniques in order to share the stories of Embark, based on those indicators, with the world around them in a compelling way.”

Hyosaka envisions students taking the survey again in the future—perhaps even every year—to look at it with fresh eyes. He wants to use it to continuously find areas where Embark thrives and spots for growth.

Students like Maddie and Olive also see the importance of the survey and how it reflects their experiences.

“There’s no surprise that kids are happy at our school because I know I’m happy. Even last year I didn’t have the best year, but I was still happy and I still knew that people cared about me,” Olive says. “I have no doubt that for years to come if we keep taking this survey, the results are going to be good because people are happy at Embark.”

