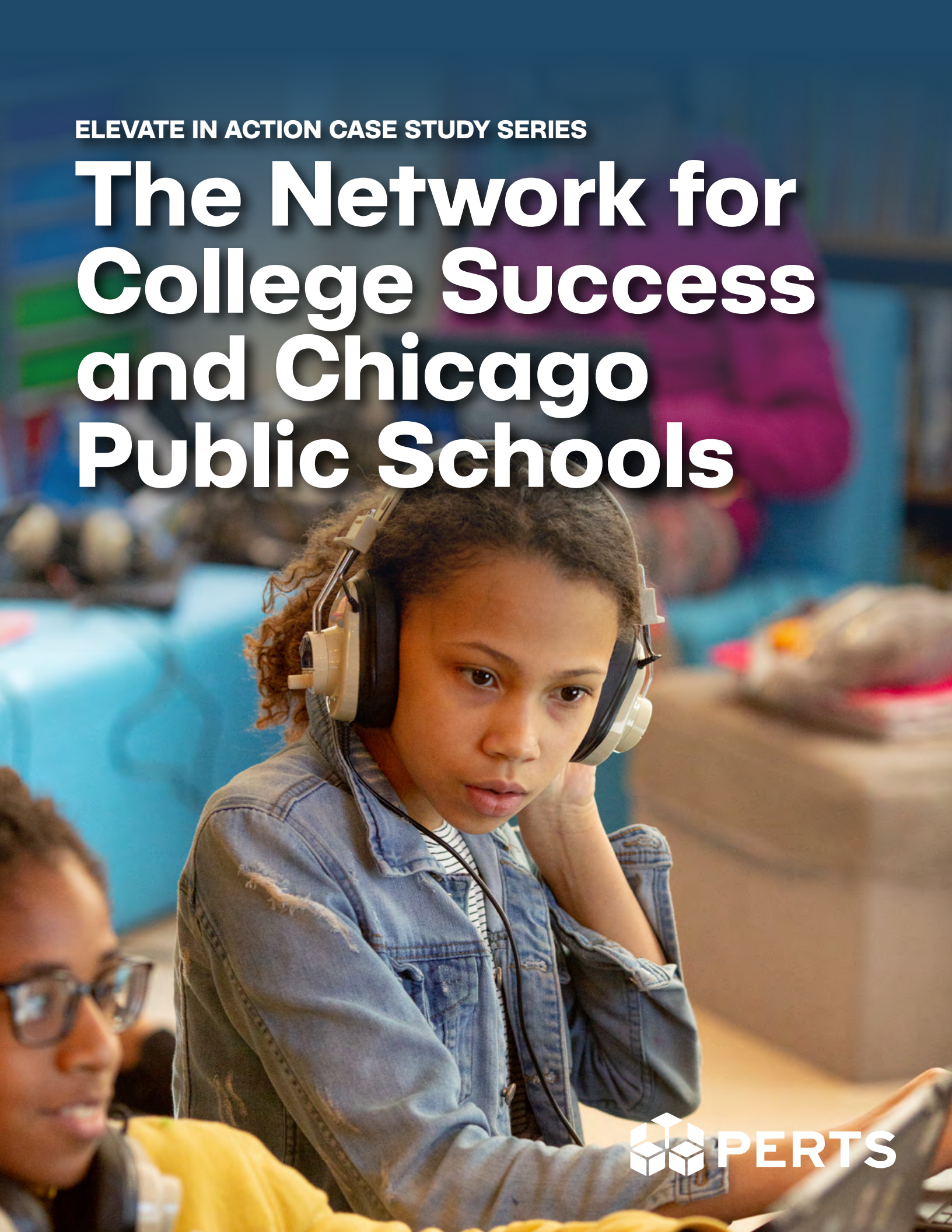
ELEVATE IN ACTION CASE STUDY SERIES

The Network for College Success and Chicago Public Schools



PERTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Elevate in Action Case Study Series documents insights from schools that use Elevate to systematically create **classroom conditions** that increase student engagement and lead to strong academic outcomes. The case studies draw from interviews with teachers and staff, as well as quantitative, longitudinal student experience data collected from students using measures that have been **validated** as early indicators of academic engagement, excellence, and equity.

ABOUT ELEVATE

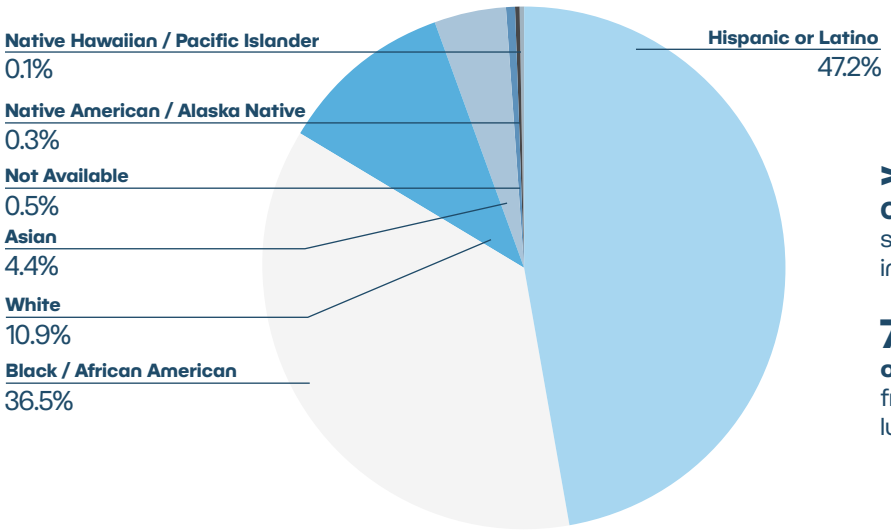
Elevate is a continuous improvement platform that enables educators to use high-quality measures and analytics to regularly assess, disaggregate, and track classroom conditions over time, as they partner with their students to create a more engaging and equitable learning environment. Educators use Elevate surveys over multiple cycles of inquiry and action to test the impact of new practices. For example, an educator can use Elevate's **meaningful work** measure to learn that only 40% of their students find assignments to be meaningful and then reassess meaningful work to test the impact of a new practice that was intended to make work more meaningful. Elevate is designed to help educators and their learning partners make data-driven decisions about what practices to adopt, adapt, or abandon — and to identify "bright spots" where exceptionally positive learning conditions portend high impact practices that deserve more detailed study and replication.

COMPLEMENTING FRESHMAN SUCCESS WITH DATA ON **STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES**

The University of Chicago Network for College Success (NCS) is a nonprofit organization that works with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and high schools nationally to improve Freshman Success — meaning attaining a grade point average of 3.0 or higher in the 9th-grade year. Achieving this milestone in 9th grade lays the foundation for obtaining a grade point average of at least 3.0 throughout high school — which is a key determining factor in predicting college persistence.[1-3] Their work takes a systems approach, using professional learning communities, capacity-building, coaching, and formative assessment data to work towards sustainable, system-wide improvement.[4] This approach has led to substantial improvements in high school graduation rates in CPS, and college enrollment rates (**ncs.uchicago.edu**).

Building on this success, NCS and CPS wanted to take the work further by attending to the specific experiences that young people are having in school and aimed to create liberatory classrooms. With this focus, it became clear that while markers of academic progress like GPA are valuable, they do not ensure that young people are having positive learning experiences. "We know at NCS that GPA is super important," says Jessica Bunzol, NCS coach. "It's a predictor of postsecondary success, but we cannot create spaces that deny the personhood and identity of young people on the way to get that GPA. In doing so, we create harm and do not engage young people in the experiences that sustain their engagement with learning. We have seen huge increases in GPA, but not in young people persisting [in college], which is attributable, in part, to having little access to instruction that helps them see themselves for the brilliant people and academics that they are."

ABOUT CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS



>600
Chicago Public Schools serve >330,000 students in Chicago, IL.

76%
of students qualify for free and reduced price lunch across grades 6-12.

> Having the [Elevate] data is beautiful because it is young people's truth right there on screen or paper for you to say that our intentions- as wonderful as they might be- if they're not landing, they don't really matter that much.
>
> **Jessica Bunzol**, NCS Coach

With this perspective in mind, NCS embarked upon a holistic effort to support schools and teachers to center students in their practice and to lift up student voice data. They decided to augment their work with Freshman Success indicators by asking young people to report on the quality of their experiences in school. The Elevate program allowed them to do this systematically while obtaining disaggregated breakdowns of results, so that they could strengthen the work to ensure equitable experiences for all students. Young people's Elevate response data go right into the hands of teachers, and teachers control permission for who sees their classes' data. This setup was a good match for the coaching NCS offers because it allows teachers to build trust and rapport with coaches and teacher teams before revealing their results.

At the same time, NCS coaches realized that a compassionate approach was needed to work with teachers using Elevate. Teacher burnout has been at an all-time high since the start of the pandemic,[5] especially in large districts like CPS. Adding another thing to teachers' plates would have been a non-starter, had NCS coaches not done the work of creating and protecting sacred space for teachers to engage in the work. Their approach was effective. In the year of remote learning (AY 2020-21), NCS coaches began working with a small cohort of four teachers using Elevate, to support their learning. Then, in 2021-22 — which many researchers have called the **worst year of teacher burnout** on record — they scaled this effort to include dozens of teachers and over 1,400 students at 13 CPS schools. This case study summarizes the strategies that supported such effective scaling.



CREATING SACRED SPACE FOR TEACHERS TO CENTER STUDENT EXPERIENCES

> What I think has been the most challenging but most important part of the work is that you're setting aside the sacred time and attention to the adaptive work that this requires.
>
> **Jessica Bunzol**, NCS Coach

With many schools returning to in-person learning, 2021-22 was a challenging school year. Teacher burnout hit record highs that year.[6] Like many school districts around the country, Chicago Public Schools weathered significant challenges, including school closures due to high illness rates among staff, as well as the usual difficulties, including snow days, etc. In addition to these challenges, students were readjusting to in-person learning and a school culture where they experienced more control from adults compared to the autonomy they had gotten used to during at-home learning. While to some, the 2021-22 school year may not seem like the ideal time to scale a challenging new initiative, for NCS coaches and CPS teachers, it was imperative at this particular junction to shift the teacher/student dynamic away from control and towards co-creation.

Yet the work of Elevate, and anti-racist pedagogy more broadly, is inherently demanding. Collecting student feedback alone can be intimidating, and adding onto that the task of deeply reflecting on young people's feedback, thinking critically about one's pedagogical practice, and implementing changes to one's practice requires a high level of time commitment and emotional vulnerability. Even in a typical year, it would neither be fair nor effective to ask teachers for this effort without providing adequate support. In the second year of a global pandemic, NCS coaches knew they would have to take a flexible and supportive approach to doing this work with teachers. NCS did this by creating and defending sacred space for teachers to engage in the work. This sacred space included both the **physical time and space** to engage with young people's survey response data and **take action** based on what they learned, as well as the **emotional space** to sit with vulnerability, question one's own beliefs and biases, and interrogate one's practice.



PROTECTING PHYSICAL TIME AND SPACE

NCS coaches worked with CPS teachers to create physical time and space for the work in many ways:

CULTIVATING CHAMPIONS THROUGH VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION.

While it can sometimes be a good idea to make teacher participation in a program like Elevate required professional development, this is only true when school leadership is able to consistently and seamlessly integrate Elevate into other school and district priorities and when there is already a strong culture of using data for improvement. But Elevate was a new program to most CPS schools in 2021-22, and teachers were spread especially thin that year. CPS schools also had differing levels of alignment between Elevate and their other priorities. NCS made the strategic decision to make participation in Elevate strictly voluntary, while intentionally cultivating teachers who could champion and lead the work at their schools. The four teachers who began the work in 2020-21 were each able to lead teams of volunteer teachers in 2021-22. This decision allowed buy-in for the work to grow organically among teachers.

> Having the option to opt in has created some buzz around the work, and teachers are asking, can we do it now? That's what we wanted as opposed to it coming off as some new initiative from the top. Some schools are eager to do it with the whole school. Ideally by year three or four all schools will be partaking.
>
> **Jillian Carew**, Lead Instructional Coach, NCS

Similarly, NCS supports a network of CPS principals working together towards equity and improvement. In Summer 2021, NCS shared some of the early successes from their work with Elevate with this network. Hearing about the strength of that work from a few principals raised the interest of others. In this way, NCS could build authentic demand for Elevate among principals. While student voice data can be a helpful ingredient to creating liberatory spaces, asking students to answer surveys about their experiences and then not taking action on their feedback may be harmful. NCS's careful and thoughtful roll-out built capacity for adults to respond appropriately to the survey data, thus reducing the risk of doing harm while trying to improve.



CLEAR ALIGNMENT WITH SCHOOL AND DISTRICT PRIORITIES.

In a large district like Chicago Public Schools, different schools will naturally have their own mission and priorities in any given year, and making clear alignment with those priorities is crucial for teachers to use Elevate effectively. NCS and CPS principals and teachers used a variety of strategies to achieve precise alignment with the priorities in each participating school.

For example, some schools used Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in 2021-22.[7-8] Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a family of approaches designed to center the knowledge of traditionally marginalized communities in classroom instruction[9] and elicit deep engagement with challenging academic material by providing instruction that is both warm and demanding.[7] Elevate learning conditions generally map well onto ideas from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy — for example, Teacher Caring and Classroom Community emphasize strong relationships that support young people's learning. Feedback for Growth places focus on giving young people the critical, supportive feedback they need to revise old concepts and learn new ones. Affirming Identities calls on educators to value all students' identities and ensure that young people see people similar to themselves represented in classroom instruction and curriculum. Therefore, teachers using this framework could understand Elevate as a way of figuring out how well their culturally responsive teaching practices were landing with young people.

PROTECTED TIME TO DO THE WORK.

"Anytime you're bringing something new to a space, you have to be willing to take something off the plate," says lead instructional coach Jillian Carew. Surveying students, reviewing their answers, and taking action based on what is learned from the data, requires both class time and planning time from teachers. So when schools and teachers opted to use Elevate, NCS coaches and CPS principals worked together to make time available for teachers to do this work. Many principals allowed and encouraged teachers to set aside prep times to work with NCS coaches. School leaders also helped teachers set aside time to meet in teams and review Elevate data. In some cases, it was also possible for principals to remove certain responsibilities from teachers' schedules so that they would have more time to learn from their Elevate data.

STREAMLINED PROCESSES AND RESOURCES.

Taking on new practices is challenging work, and one way to make it easier for people to "do the right thing" is to give them a starting point for the change. That's why lead coach Jillian Carew did a lot of work on the front-end, so NCS coaches and teachers could go into meetings together and get the most out of their time. For example, Carew put together a one-page change menu filled with bite-sized change ideas relevant to the specific work teachers were doing, adapted from the broader **Elevate practice guides**, to spare teachers the work of sifting through many ideas that may not be relevant to them. She also engaged the other NCS coaches in pre-analyses of Elevate data prior to entering their coaching sessions, so that they were prepared to guide the conversation effectively and gain the most insight from the data.

These strategies for creating and protecting time and space for teachers to engage in the work of Elevate have allowed buy-in for Elevate to grow organically in NCS partner schools, driven by real interest on the part of teachers. In a large district like CPS, genuine interest and buy-in from teachers for a program like Elevate is critical to its success.

CREATING EMOTIONAL SPACE TO SIT WITH VULNERABILITY AND QUESTION BELIEFS AND BIASES

Creating physical time and space for a program like Elevate is critical to its success. But what made the space feel sacred, and allowed for genuine shifts in how teachers relate to their students, was how NCS coaches and CPS teachers created the emotional space to sit with vulnerability and start to question biases and interrogate their practice.

CENTER TEACHERS, IN ORDER TO CENTER STUDENTS.

Like students, teachers are human beings who need belonging, trusting relationships, and support to do their work well. For NCS coaches, building trusting relationships with teachers is the foundation of their work. So in their one-on-one coaching sessions, NCS coaches were careful to center and prioritize teachers' needs. Because teachers voluntarily chose to use Elevate, they were generally eager to talk about and learn from their data. But sometimes, they had more immediate concerns, such as work stoppages related to the pandemic, staffing shortages, etc. NCS coaches did not force the conversation to center around Elevate when those issues surfaced. Instead, they followed whatever teachers needed to talk about. While this sometimes allowed Elevate to fall away from being top-of-mind, it preserved trust in teacher/coach relationships and let the coaching sessions be a refuge rather than another source of stress. Coaches then skilfully redirected the conversation back the data.

> Yes, I love Elevate. And I want to center young peoples' voices. But first, are *you* okay, as a teacher? Because you all just had work stoppage, you didn't get paid for X amount of days, how are YOU feeling?
>
> **Jillian Carew**, Lead Instructional Coach, NCS

DEVELOP COMMON LANGUAGE AND SHARED VALUES.

While it is likely that teachers who volunteer to use Elevate are generally on board with centering young people, there are many ways to approach a mission as broad as this. NCS, therefore, works with teachers to develop common language around the specific values and beliefs that inform their work together. This work is done as part of the NCS Equity-Based Leadership Workshop that occurs over the summer. A subset of the teachers who attended this workshop in Summer of 2021 used Elevate in AY 2021-22.



SEVEN WORKING BELIEFS.

Teachers and coaches developed a set of seven Working Beliefs to structure how they relate to one another and to the young people they serve. These working beliefs inform many aspects of the NCS approach covered in this report. For example, because NCS coaches believe that their growth as coaches will drive the growth of their team (Working Belief #1), they complete learning activities themselves before asking teachers to do so (see Figure 1). Because they believe that adults and young people are perfect, whole and complete as-is (Working Belief #3), they focus coaching sessions on teachers as whole people (center teachers in order to center students).

These foundational beliefs also support NCS coaches and teachers to probe difficult topics without placing blame on teachers or young people in the system. Instead of asking questions like, "Why are students acting this way?" which invites blame to be placed on students, they ask questions like, "What are these young people communicating through their behavior?" which invites curiosity about young people's experiences. This problem-solving approach is a guiding principle of NCS's work.

Figure 1

SEVEN WORKING BELIEFS

1. Our growth as coaches will drive the growth of our coachees and/or team.
2. Actions are rooted in beliefs about ourselves or others.
3. People (adults and young people) are perfect, whole and complete AS IS.
4. When planning is intentional and learning conditions are set, young people will stretch their intellectual capacity and gain academic independence.
5. Student outcomes (or lack thereof) are a reflection of the adult inputs.
6. Behavior is a form of communication.
7. 100% of young people deserve to have access to a high quality education that is equitable and culturally responsive.

NAME THE IDENTITIES THAT INFORM PRACTICE.

Driven in part by Working Belief #2 ("Actions are rooted in beliefs about ourselves or others"), NCS teachers and coaches map the multiple identities that inform their practice. In the Identity Marker Activity (Figure 1), teachers consider which aspects of their identity feel most important to them personally and are most likely to inform their work. This activity is then used to create Gingerbread Figures (Figure 2), which provide an easy-to-read map of personally important identities that teachers bring to bear on their relationships with young people.

Identity Marker Activity from Elena Auguilar *(to help folks think about how their identity shows up and impacts their practice)*

	Which of these were you aware of as a child?	Which ones feel important to you now?	Which 3 are the most important to you?	Which ones do you prioritize sharing about yourself?	Which ones do you think others typically notice about you?	Which ones do you tend not to think about?
Age						
Education						
Ethnicity						
Family Status						
Gender						
Geographical Location						
Immigrant Status						

Figure 2. Partial image of the Identity Marker Activity developed by Elena Aguilar, author of Coaching for Equity, and adapted by NCS for use with CPS teachers.

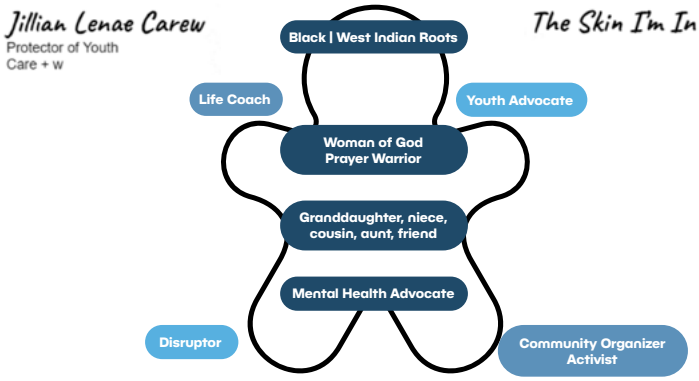


Figure 3. Gingerbread Figure used to map personally important identities that inform practice. This practice was originally developed by the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (**sfcess.org**).

DEVELOP AN EQUITY STANCE.

The Identity Marker Activities and Gingerbread Figures, and other similar activities (collectively called mirror work), help teachers write their Equity Stance statements, in which they articulate personal motivations for creating more equitable learning environments based on their unique identities and experiences. This creates a powerful well of motivation and commitment for teachers and helps coaches understand what matters most to the teachers they work with. Additionally, developing the Equity Stance statements further increases trust between teachers and coaches because they are highly personal. The statements are also aspirational — that is, they articulate the writer's vision for who they aspire to be in their work, rather than anchoring on who they have been or how they may have done things in the past. In this way, the statements serve to ground everyone in their own positive vision for the role they want to play in creating equity going forward.

- **WALK THE WALK.**
  Finally, NCS coaches do not simply ask teachers to engage in this deep mirror work, without doing so themselves. Coaches complete all of the self-reflection activities described above before they work with teachers. (Note that the Gingerbread Figure depicted in Figure 2 is the one made by lead instructional coach Jillian Carew.) In this way, coaches understand exactly what they are asking teachers to do and develop intuitive empathy about the vulnerability this entails.

USING SACRED SPACE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

With the sacred time, trust, and shared language that NCS coaches and CPS teachers created together, it was possible for teachers to change deeply ingrained practices. For example, in a conversation with her coach about grading policies in her math department, one teacher wondered, "Who am I to tell my team what I think about grading policy?" Because of the trust they had built working together and their work to understand the various identities and backgrounds that inform their work now, they could unpack this question. They reflected on the Gingerbread Figures, and realized that one of the identities important to this teacher was a cultural background in which following the rules was important, and "pushing back" was seen negatively. It led her to be conflict avoidant, even in situations where she really wanted to take a more assertive stance. Knowing this, the teacher was able to take a more intentional approach to guide her Elevate team and push their thinking about learning conditions.

> The work with conflict avoidance tends to come into play [with the Elevate work] because I've been more forceful … on some of the [Elevate] team members to give more opinions, participate a little bit more, or to take initiative themselves … So, that goes with everything, and not just the Elevate work.
>
> **Teacher,** Chicago Public Schools

Another coach described how mirror work changed how one school approached their work with the Elevate learning condition **Feedback for Growth** — setting high expectations, recognizing progress, and offering respectful, critical feedback to help students improve. This school was employing a practice of holding one-on-one conferences with young people to provide feedback about their learning — but they were not yet seeing shifts in their data around Feedback for Growth. Through the identity work they had done throughout the year, they realized they had not yet challenged their beliefs about what young people are capable of. They were using these conferences with students to provide low-level feedback or just telling them, "here's the answer you should have gotten," without engaging them in a deeper learning process. As a result of these conversations, the teachers have aligned on a more expansive view of young people's abilities, which has led to a richer definition of what constitutes meaningful constructive feedback that respects young people's inherent potential. They are now working towards providing deeper and more meaningful feedback going forward. Without student voice data, teachers would not have had the opportunity to take this crucial second step.

CONCLUSIONS

The Network for College Success takes an intentional approach to creating a sacred space for teachers to understand how their beliefs and identities shape their teaching practice and their relationships with the young people they serve. This sacred space, and the trusting relationships between teachers and coaches, have allowed their work with Elevate in CPS to flourish sustainably, even during one of the more challenging academic years in recent memory. The Elevate data give a perspective on the quality of key learning experiences that students have in school, which isn't captured by their grades and attendance. In this way, the Elevate data complement the Freshman Success and On-Track data that NCS and CPS already use to ensure that all CPS students are moving towards on-time graduation and success in college and beyond. Because of their careful approach to providing teachers with the material and emotional support they need, NCS and CPS are growing their work with Elevate sustainably. They are now able to expand their work with Elevate to include more schools and teachers in the next academic year.



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