National
Urban League

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR EQUITY, JUSTICE, AND EMPOWERMENT

Throughout the nation's history, African American, Black and Brown educators, families, faith-based and civic institutions, researchers and others who care for and serve our young people have designed instructional and youth-development systems grounded in our cultural traditions and collective aspirations for our young people and our communities. The National Urban League (NUL) and Urban League Movement firmly believe that all people, explicitly inclusive of those of African descent, deserve to be affirmed and supported in all of the full and diverse expressions of our humanity and across all learning and developmental settings.

With that understanding and from the foundations of equity and justice, of opportunity and excellence, upon which our work is built, the National Urban League has outlined a set of core beliefs and key principles regarding the educational development of children and youth from across the African Diaspora.

The National Urban League believes that education is best defined as teaching, learning and development wherever they take place. For the Urban League, education must include all settings, inclusive of, but not limited to, buildings that we call schools. Generations have benefited from education in other spaces and with other approaches—in parks, via the arts or sports and in activism in the streets, in ways that have promoted culturally relevant definitions of development, success and community.

NUL refuses to limit a discussion of a full, equitable and excellent education to the hours of 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., or to spaces staffed only by certified school-day teachers and administrators. If education is to be truly equitable and excellent, it must attend to dimensions of teaching, learning and development more deeply grounded in community aspiration and cultural meaning each of which have held learning and development as central to achieving freedom, justice and equity.

The National Urban League's vision centers and celebrates histories, cultures, and identities across the Diaspora—in their full and diverse representations, including, but not limited to, intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, faith, sexuality, ability, identity, history, power, and culture. History, culture, and identity are essential ingredients for the development of healthy and successful individuals, deeply grounded in and committed to achieving equity, justice, and liberation across our communities, and for all people.

For young people to thrive—to achieve a high level of well-being and growth, to be deeply and truly educated as intellectuals connected to family and community, to experience continuous reflective development, and to achieve both individual and collective success—we must ensure that educational and developmental approaches are rooted in a series of beliefs, principles and commitments.

1. **PROMOTE COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING, GROWTH, AND SUCCESS**

2. **ENSURE THE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF DEVELOPMENTAL RESOURCES AND OF HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

3. **CENTERING CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND RESONANCE**

4. **ASSET & STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES**

5. **POSITIVE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: AUTHENTICITY, EQUITY, AND JUSTICE**

6. **MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP: FROM CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION**

7. **MAKE IT PLAIN: ACCESS AND INCLUSION**

Our vision incorporates elements of the "Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning and Development" concept paper that we published with our partners in the Readiness Project in 2020 and is deeply informed by the findings of the science of learning and development (SoLD).

This document presents both our organizational beliefs and our expectations for the fields of education, social services and human development.[1] It is informed by a strengths-based view of our communities and institutions and by research from multiple fields and perspectives, including our analysis of structured conversations with young people and other key stakeholders who participated in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and COVID-19 Listening Sessions that we designed and facilitated in 2019 and 2020, along with working groups in 2021.

These sessions were designed to help NUL and the larger civil-rights, child-serving and youth-serving fields, understand how concepts such as social and emotional learning (SEL), the science of learning and development (SoLD), Whole Child Equity amongst others were understood, or not, by members of the African American community. We were particularly interested in the ways that some of these concepts and frames represented deeply cultural models and practices under different names and the manner by which they could be viewed as extensions of community-work rather than as a set of 'new' practices. The Urban League Movement was also interested in the ways that these frames, narratives, and practices could be viewed as dangerous and detrimental if used uncritically or with a limited understanding of the communities that we serve. NUL has found that competing interests and complex histories of race, language and culture deeply impact success and positive impact, as too often tools, strategies and narratives intentionally ignore the legacy of systemic racism, disfranchisement and underinvestment and instead center deficit-based narratives of 'broken' children, families, and communities to pathologize and 'other' our community. These concepts, frames, and narratives are inherently dangerous as they use incomplete understandings of race, gender, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, language or ability in ways that erase the lived experience and current conditions of students, families and communities in pursuit of a color-blind or universalist approach.

Many approaches, tools and resources have been developed to accomplish our aims of equity, excellence, and justice, but they have been used to limited impact for a variety of other reasons including- overly technical tools, failure to authentically engage stakeholders over time, disinterest fomented when reform happens to communities, rather than with them, flawed implementation strategies, delayed timing, etc.

NUL works with local and national partners to overcome these limitations, advance our vision, and refine our work and perspective through ongoing dialogue, honest critique, and shared risk-talking. In addition, NUL works continuously to identify additional partners, content and 'trusted voices' who can help drive advocacy, engagement and awareness amongst underserved populations and communities of color.

1. PROMOTE COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING, GROWTH, AND SUCCESS.

Educational systems and human-development programs for Black and Brown young people must (1) be designed and implemented to serve and support the positive, whole-person development of each individual child and adolescent within communities and (2) advance the broader, shared goals of entire communities.

It is important for learning programs to help young people identify and participate in opportunities for community wellness. The work of teaching, learning and development should happen embedded within the community and with both individual and collective growth across multiple dimensions (intellectual, social, academic, historical, etc.) as primary goals. Young people need opportunities to understand and support each other and their neighbors to interrogate and positively impact the conditions in which they find themselves, rather than the message that they must somehow escape their community or "out-compete" their peers in order to be 'successful'.[2]

Racism is systemic and has both particular historic and current-day collective and individual impacts on Black and Brown people. Therefore, youth development work requires specific collective solutions developed by and with those most directly affected, those who have the greatest direct stake in addressing those problems. For example, Black communities that have been, and are currently, systemically harmed and disfranchised require young people who can collaborate intergenerationally to critically analyze an issue and build the awareness, competencies, confidence, and skills to take effective action to hold our systems and the broader society accountable for eliminating poverty and the oppression and harm that it causes.

To address issues of poverty, injustice, and equity in, and across, our communities, we need to broaden our focus beyond the desired outcomes for any individual child to also include dimensions of communal impact and vision. NUL believes in empowering communities as a means to uplifting individuals. Explicitly connecting a communal dimension to a clear commitment to sustaining and deepening the individualized, personalized support that each child requires and deserves is foundational to our vision for an equitable and excellent education.

2. ENSURE THE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF DEVELOPMENTAL RESOURCES AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Though often unspoken, the equitable and effective implementation of in and out of school time approaches depends on the availability of adequate staffing, sufficient materials and supplies for learning, appropriate facilities, etc., resources that the predominantly Black and Brown schools and communities are routinely and systematically denied. We must acknowledge the essential contributions of—and ensure students' equitable access to a range of educators and youth development workers in the lives of young people. For us this includes school psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors, other school staff (think: art teachers, athletic coaches, custodial staff, office staff, etc.) and caring adults in the community (mayors of the block, older youth who serve as mentors, etc.) in recognizing and building upon the assets of students and families.

In each community, NUL advocates for the development and provision of a portfolio of developmental learning opportunities that help students develop positive, affirming relationships and healthy identities; eliminate or deal effectively with stressors and acquire the skills and aptitudes needed to achieve their goals and contribute to the larger community and culture.

Young people require a holistic set of supports to ensure equitable opportunities to thrive. Instead, many of our youth continue to be underserved and over criminalized by our various institutions. For example, where police are present in schools, the likelihood of a student being arrested is near three times higher than in schools without a police presence, traumatizing students and worsening the 'school-to-prison pipeline'. The fact that millions of our children attend schools staffed with police officers but not a single school psychologist, counselor, social worker or nurse, speaks to the need for reprioritizing how we allocate public resources if we are truly committed to the wellness of and justice for learners.[3] The lack of holistic supports for students represents a significant barrier to the healthy development of children and youth. For example, social workers and psychologists help students and families cope with stressors and challenges, through direct intervention and in connecting them to the broader networks of supports they might need to ensure they have the opportunity thrive. In some states, those staff positions are required by law, making the related investments not only moral but legal as well.

3. CENTERING CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND RESONANCE

Questions such as, "What is SEL for our children and our community?" and "What is SEL equity?" require that Black and Brown people not only be meaningfully involved in the conversation but structure and lead the conversation from inception throughout the process. In community, Black and Brown people have developed a wealth of values, norms, research, and practices that lift up and define community, equity, and justice, and should guide how interventions, services, strategies are developed and implemented.

Though the phrase "social-emotional learning" has been in use for a relatively short period of time, over many decades Black and Brown cultural leaders, researchers, educators, and communities have, under many names, developed and refined effective, culturally affirming instructional and human-development approaches. For generations, many communities have been doing the work and leading the charge, oftentimes absent official recognition, or acknowledgement. These frameworks center cultural relevance and represent effective approaches to the positive development of children and youth. Examples include the Comer School Development Program developed by Yale psychologist James Comer in the late 60s, Gloria Ladson-Billings' groundbreaking research on culturally relevant education in the early 90s, and the present collaboration of professors Detra Price-Dennis and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz on advancing racial literacies and justice in digital spaces in teacher education programs by centering young peoples' lived experiences in the programming.

Take, for example, The Brotherhood-Sister Sol, a Black- and Brown-led, Harlem-based organization with a 25-year track record of both intensive, hands-on youth development and promoting school-based and systems change by helping others learn from and adapt their model. Affectionally knowns as "Bro/Sis," the institution guides young people in a nurturing, supportive journey of self-exploration, racial and gender identities, relationship-building, rites

of passage, academic support, and social activism to develop healthy, well-rounded community members who understand their purpose and power. Such environments are critical for what the science of learning teaches us about creating safety for meaning-making and identity-formation, which are foundational to healthy development.

The ethnic-studies movement provides many additional models that inform the development of additional, culturally centered instructional and human-development practices, such as researching and teaching others about the important contributions and cultural strategies of one's racial or ethnic group.[4] Science of learning and development research, including evidence mobilized more recently by the SoLD Alliance, underscores the value of this approach for all children.[5] Simply put, children and youth learn best when they are supported in connecting new information to their present and past cultural experiences and interests. We expand that to include meaningfully connecting the historical and cultural experiences of race, gender, language and other aspects of identity and community. This also includes exploring, understanding, and connecting the role that activism, service, leadership and protest for justice, and civic participation have played over time in community problem-solving, and service learning.[6]

The recent anti-Critical Race Theory movement spawned by conservative media personalities and politicians, has succeeded in the passing of anti-equity education laws in many cities and states across our country. This legislation harms efforts to incorporate Black and brown youths' cultures and histories into education and prevents teachers from providing a more complete accounting of history and lived experiences of Black and brown students in schools and other sites of learning. These stand in stark contrast to the research evidence on the benefits to youth by having inclusive, culturally relevant educational experiences.[7] The National Urban League rejects, in their entirety, any efforts to slow progress towards equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all our nation's youth.

4. ASSET & STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES

Consistent with the tradition of centering culture and lived experience, the design and implementation of all educational and human-development strategies must be strength-based and focused on the assets of young people and communities. An assets-based approach builds on what is good, as opposed to trying to fix what is wrong, recognizing that all youth have assets that are beneficial, and can be utilized to enhance their development. Approaches to youth development must recognize, uplift, and further develop assets to achieve the more fulsome, multi-dimensional, constructive, and comprehensive education offered to others. This includes the active and ongoing rejection of problematic frames that present Black and Brown children (and often their families) as so socially and emotionally deficient as to need constant remediation in the form of harsh discipline, suspensions, silencing, and public shaming. Black youth report similar levels of developmental assets compared to youth of other races/ethnicities. However, the assets that Black children, youth, and families have – including high achievement orientation, strong kinship bonds, and ties to religious institutions[8] – are often not recognized nor centered in their learning and development. We must be guarded against SEL strategies that pathologize our youth and label them as missing or lacking in any way. SEL approaches should be grounded in an asset-based perspective to create and sustain more equitable learning experiences for underserved children and youth. Asset

based approaches for example, can support the development of strong racial identities in Black and brown youth, which may buffer them from the negative psychological effects of everyday racial microaggressions and overt racism.[9]

Asset-based approaches may also look to the broader community to support the healthy development of their youth. Because important learning occurs in family settings, at home and in the community, learners' families must be fully respected and meaningfully involved in the education and development of learners. Unfortunately, it is common practice to marginalize or completely exclude the voices of families in school-based, out-of-school, and public decision-making about learning.[10] In some cases, our families are even viewed and treated as *barriers* to children's learning and development and ultimately to their success despite the benefits of promoting coherence and collaboration across school-based and out-of-school settings.[11] The insights and skills of the parents and other community members involved in young people's lives challenge the dominant expectations of limited parent involvement that position families and communities as passive recipients of information from schools, not possessors of legitimate knowledge and perspective on their child's thriving, learning and development.[12]

Black and Brown educators, school-support staff, and youth-development staff—whose lived racial and cultural experiences present unique opportunities to connect with, deepen and enhance the learning experience for our children in powerful ways[13]—are also essential, yet underutilized, assets. One method to center community assets in the youth development field is to implement or further support community members who aspire to teaching and youth development roles. For example, "Grow Your Own" (GYO) models of teacher recruitment and development, now operating in some major cities across the United States, provide a powerful community-centered pathway to diversifying careers in education and approaches in youth-development.[14] GYO programs facilitate collaboration among colleges, school districts, and nonprofits to guide people from specific neighborhoods or cities to become teachers in their own communities. Critically, these are parents and paraprofessionals, coaches and mentors who are already engaged in and committed to the communities in which they are embedded. This helps ensure not only an alignment based on values but also the cultural and contextual knowledge that facilitates learning, as established in the research mobilized by the Science of Learning and Development Alliance. Similarly, we believe that educators from other backgrounds are very capable of helping young people learn and develop across difference if they are willing to develop the perspectives, abilities, supports, and relationships that make student success and thriving more possible.

## 5. POSITIVE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: AUTHENTICITY, EQUITY, AND JUSTICE

Approaches serving youth with aspects of identity that are singularly under attack or are working through the intersection of their identities must cultivate pride in those identities and nurture the practice of joy to continue the challenging work of liberation (Cross, 1991; Love, 2019).[15,16] Environments in which students are supported in embracing, exploring, and expanding their own identities—for healthy personal development and in collective relation to our current and historical social and political systems—set the bar for all developmental strategies and programs.

Child and youth learners must be encouraged and supported to create their own and expand existing educational space(s) in our society as they seek to transform the world[17], rather than fitting into some limiting and dehumanizing notion of who learners 'are' or 'need to be.' Supporting the development of healthy individual and collective racial identities in children and youth requires adults to be reflective and thoughtful educators who possess a high level of cultural knowledge, thoughtfulness, consciousness, literacy, and specific strategies to help learners utilize and further develop the assets they already possess, but also to process, heal, and buffer themselves from racial traumas and injustices that can have a negative impact on their development.[18]

Black and Brown children and youth are born into systemic racism and disfranchisement that, if left unchecked, can lead to internalized racism, the questioning/undervaluing of their own worth and/or the value of other Black and Brown people across their communities.[19] Learning-and-development approaches layered on top of inequitable, unjust and oppressive systems do great harm by further justifying and rationalizing those systems rather than seeking to interrogate and change them. Current and historic framings of schooling routinely require that Black and Brown learners adapt to hostile environments—sometimes using the language of SEL as justification—rather than supporting students in interrogating and transforming those environments.[20]

Human development approaches must also support our young people in developing concepts and strategies to actively identify and combat racism and other forms of oppression experienced by those who are Black and identify with other characteristics that are routinely under attack, including gender, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. Human-development approaches serving Black and Brown learners must explicitly acknowledge and support those specific types of development, beyond building the broader set of assets shared by all children. While fighting against oppression in individual and collective contexts, it is necessary for students to be well-grounded and supported to make meaning of how oppression and hierarchy work, rejecting those systems and actively working to transform them.[21] To do so, they must have opportunities to situate themselves in the long historical struggle of this work, and to recognize the victories achieved towards equity and justice. A key facet of positive identity development for oppressed people is countering the lie of supremacy with pride and joy in their collective efforts to thrive, not developed solely as a reaction to circumstance, but as a complicated and active demonstration of agency and efficacy.

The notion of a safe learning environment that directly works to build positive identities as a foundation for social emotional and academic learning and growth doesn't square with the reality that many learners experience. Black and Brown students are too often subjected to settings in which notions of discipline and order do not reflect what we know about how children learn and develop.[22,23] By helping Black students understand, study, and take action to combat for example, racist disciplinary practices, educators and youth-development staff will support the healthy development of young people's awareness of injustices, and their confidence in their ability to contribute to the creation of more respectful and effective learning spaces, and a more just world.
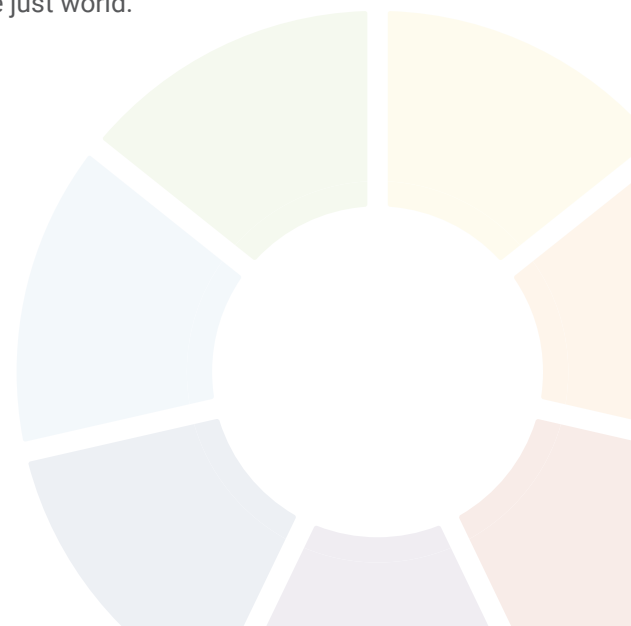
6. MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP: FROM CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT TO IMPLEMENT

In place of 'fully baked' curricula and pedagogical approaches that are imposed on a learning community, NUL believes that we need "living" processes that adapt to and evolve with ever changing environments, contexts, and settings. Equity is a practice that looks to continually investigate, dismantle, and rebuild structures and practices to provide to each youth with the resources they need to thrive. Too often, organizations develop instructional and human-development approaches that, while referencing race, racism, and equity as concepts, largely exclude our community from meaningful participation in design, strategy, and implementation. In that way, the concepts are made inert as they fail to change anything about how services and content are delivered or how strategies are designed and implemented. Actions are taken on Black and Brown communities rather than with them, resulting in incomplete truths and misguided initiatives. Black and Brown groups and leaders are often invited in at the end of the process and asked to review, provide feedback on, and spread the word about the approach, all from a "Black perspective," even though that perspective was clearly not valued or desired in the prior planning or decision-making. Involvement in this way is symbolic, not substantive, with little demonstrated intent to shift power dynamics or upend inequities. In doing so, these systems and practices reproduce rather than dismantle systemic racism and inequity in the youth development field.

That kind of box-checking and surface-level involvement is no substitute for meaningful co-leadership and ownership of a process that authentically informs and engages educators, children and youth, families, and local community stakeholders in developing and implementing equity and justice-seeking frameworks and programs from the very beginning. Authentic, timely and sustained engagement must include fully resourced support for a range of the most impacted community members to develop, process, critique, implement and refine the approach. Such work is messy, often complicated with jagged timelines, but is necessary to generate truly meaningful change over time. The evolution of [research-practice partnerships](#), and the related work conducted by [Chicago Beyond](#), provide examples of frameworks and strategies for effectively involving communities in change efforts. These and others that seek to meaningfully engage youth, families, and other stakeholders, are equity-based approaches designed to root out unintended bias and shift power dynamics, empowering communities to realize lasting improvements.

7. MAKE IT PLAIN: ACCESS AND INCLUSION

Language and information are power. The use of language that is dense and academic—language easily understood only by those with great educational privilege—excludes far too many of the people most directly affected by a program. This is especially true of those in our community, who across generations, have been systematically denied transparent and consistent access to information and to high-quality educational opportunities.

Advanced degrees should not be required in order for youth, families and community stakeholders to understand how a particular approach will support youth development, or could constrain their access to opportunity or to a high-quality education, or introduce confusion into an already complicated set of relationships. As Malcolm X often advised his audiences, "make it plain"—intentionally say what you mean and communicate clearly so that everyone can understand your message, intentions and desired outcomes.

When creating concepts, publications, program plans, frameworks, and narratives, use consistently accessible language that maximize access, comprehension, and use. Those with the privileged ability to "code switch" between the language commonly used by academics, policymakers, and elites and the non-expert language typically used by those with less formal education can help solve this problem by translating the language and/or working with families to hold officials accountable for doing that translational work on an ongoing basis. This is also a bi-directional process as community members carry the language and other culturally relevant expertise needed to communicate effectively to and for the affected community, requiring they be centered in planning and executing access and inclusion efforts.

The primary goal of communication is to be understood. If language use, or phrasing doesn't allow for common understanding, people will not understand what is being shared, and will not be able to effectively engage in the change effort. If only the most formally educated, or those "in the know" can penetrate the jargon or understand the ideas fully, no matter how 'progressive' or important, they are not just, equitable, or actionable. All instructional and human-development systems must intentionally invite and integrate the expertise and input of marginalized communities, young people, their families, and educators responsible for connecting the approach to larger cultural imperatives, visions and the pursuit of equity and excellence.

CONCLUSION

The National Urban League believes that all adolescents, especially those of African descent, have a right to high-quality learning environments and experiences that are aligned to the science of learning and development. Importantly, developmental settings must be inclusive of the identities and cultures found both within and across individuals and communities. Despite more recent movements towards realizing more equitable and inclusive youth development policies and practices, many in the youth-serving field still ignore the systemic issues racism causes and the ways in which the erasure of people's experiences harm their development. To ensure opportunities to thrive, our vision for education centers people and their cultures, histories, and identities as assets and critical components for any learning experience.

The principles described in this document describe our organizational beliefs and our expectations for youth serving organizations and individuals. The National Urban League recognizes that the role of advocacy is crucial to this effort. Advocacy, activism, and policy reform—co-led by the National Urban League and our affiliates, other organizations with deep and strong ties to our communities, and young people and parents themselves—are essential to drive and sustain necessary investments in these principles. Advocacy should be encouraged and nurtured across environments as a critical set of developmental skills and practices that will empower people who are oppressed to thrive under a range of circumstances and to transform those circumstances as needed.

Working together with our young people, their families, and the community of adults who support and care for them, we will make these principles a vibrant, supportive, and inspiring reality in every neighborhood across our nation, extending the legacy of our ancestors. Seize the moment and join the movement.

Endnotes

1. Human-development programs, for the purposes of this document, are those focused on furthering the education and development of (1) children and youth, (2) the adults responsible for supporting young people, and (3) both groups, together, to facilitate positive, meaningful intergenerational learning.

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