CO-DESIGNING *WITH* STUDENTS

Learnings from the
On Track to Career Success Project

November 2024

EVERYONE
GRADUATES CENTER

JOHNS HOPKINS
SCHOOL of EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The On Track to Career Success (OTCS) project began in 2020 and is four years into its journey of collaborating with partner schools and communities to ensure all students forge a path to high school graduation, post-secondary schooling and/or training, and a career with a family-supporting wage. The project was launched in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and New Orleans, Louisiana, where partner schools serve primarily Black, indigenous, and other students of color in historically underrepresented communities. OTCS uses a framework, processes, and set of actions designed to work for all students.

This paper highlights:

- The three elements of the OTCS framework that have guided collaborations with school partners:

    1. **Milestones**: evidence-based academic, social-emotional, college and career milestones for students in grades 9-12

    2. **Student Success Systems**: to monitor and respond to keep all students on the path to career success.

    3. **Pathways to Career Success**: providing all students with a series of college and career explorations, experiences, applications, and engagements.

- Case studies that illustrate collaborations with school partners and describe lessons and challenges faced by their school communities.

- The processes and methodologies that guided each school's individual co-created implementation efforts.

- The resources that are at the heart of the project's efforts to co-design with students and the educators, families, and communities who support them.

This paper will be of value to educators, funders interested in systemic educational reform, workforce providers, researchers, higher education leaders, and other community-based partners.

The OTCS project involves systems change work that usually starts with policy makers, business leaders, and school district administrators. The OTCS is upending this practice by uplifting and valuing the voices of students, families, community members, and school-based educators as co-designers and co-creators of future pathways.

> **Why start this way? As Dr. Robert Balfanz from the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University asserts, "The best system is the one you create."**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE ON TRACK TO CAREER SUCCESS (OTCS) FRAMEWORK

The OTCS Framework is an evidence-based model that helps develop connections between secondary schools, colleges and other post-secondary training entities, and employers. Those connections are used to give all high school students, including those facing the toughest challenges, the opportunity to have educational and workplace experiences, buttressed by social-emotional support, that build skills and open pathways to jobs and careers with family-supporting wages.
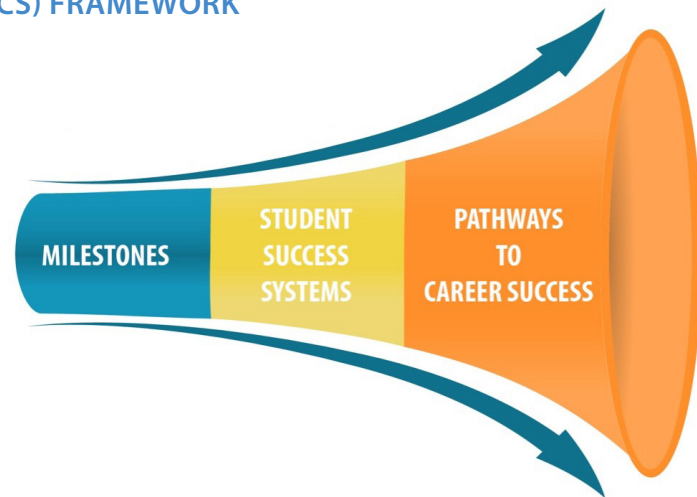
THE ON TRACK TO CAREER SUCCESS FRAMEWORK HAS THREE KEY ELEMENTS:

1. **Milestones:** Evidence-based academic, social-emotional, college and career milestones for students in grades 9-12 that were developed by the Everyone Graduates Center (EGC) at Johns Hopkins University (along with a cohort of high schools, including OTCS schools) during the 2020-2021 school year. Students who achieve these milestones have high odds of being on-track to career success. The milestones underscore the journey of a young person in high school to their post-secondary life, which includes social-emotional and academic development, supportive and guiding relationships with caring adults, and post-secondary preparations. Each school community works together to create localized versions of the milestones.

2. **Student Success Systems**: A key tool is an "early warning system" in grades 9-12. In this system, student success teams monitor all students' progress on three well-established predictive indicators of high school graduation and college attainment: attendance, behavior and engagement, and course performance. The goal is to promote higher order ABC's of student success — which are grounded in research and experience: Agency, Belonging, and Connectedness. These are deeply connected to the academic, social-emotional, and college and career milestones OTCS schools have customized to their own situations. This leads to the most critical actions the student success teams take: developing, monitoring, and improving individual, grade-level, and school-wide actions and responses to keep all students on the path to career success.

3. **Pathways to Career Success:** Work with school and community partners to move toward providing all students with a series of college and career explorations, experiences, applications, and engagements, such as college visits, job-shadowing, dual credit courses, work-based learning, and industry certifications. These are provided in grades 9-12 and tracked as part of the Student Success System. A key factor is working with local nonprofit, higher education, community, and employer partners to establish sufficient pathways to career success so that all students have one, and student/family/community goals can be aligned with local opportunities.

Local Adaptation is Crucial

Local customization is essential for the OTCS Framework to meet the needs of the students and adults in their community. All schools follow different paths in implementing the OTCS Framework as the process, partners, and specific approaches are dependent on who and what is available in each community.

As each community team, students, teachers, and system begin to interact with the OTCS Framework, it is important to include the context and wisdom of each local school system. The OTCS Framework is designed to support agency, belonging, and connectedness for all students through a culture of dignity with a focus on individualized support to ensure the well-being and success of the students served as they follow their individualized paths to career success.

The OTCS Framework was developed with deep involvement of teachers, students, and local partners and they play a key role in implementing and tracking the Framework at each school. Research supports the idea that if this does not occur, the work will not be sustained. Having input from teachers, counselors, and administrators, as well as students, families, and community members, brings more diverse perspectives to program design. Teachers, administrators, and students are responsible for the grade-level milestones as opposed to a guidance counselor, for example, being tasked with tracking everything. This leads to shared accountability and ownership.

OTCS PARTNERS

The On Track to Career Success Project relies on a range of key partners that work to imagine, implement, and sustain the project:

- **Schools that take part in the project** are the co-designers and implementers of the OTCS framework, help create the project's infrastructure, and provide support to students in and out of school.

- **Youth at the OTCS schools** help shape the project, provide feedback, and engage in all elements of the model.

- **Local community partners** serve as co-designers and help determine how to adapt the framework to meet local needs and opportunities.

- **The Everyone Graduates Center** at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education serves as the project manager, organizer, co-designer, and technical assistance provider.

- **Implementation partners** provide support for the overall project. Talent Development Secondary serves as a partner with the Everyone Graduates Center, providing technical assistance to the OTCS partner schools in New Orleans and supporting expansion of OTCS in the New Orleans region.

- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation** is the key funder and serves as a convener and co-designer of the OTCS model.

- **The National Advisory Panel** includes experts in education and workforce development and funders that provide feedback on tools, processes, and strategy.

OTCS SCHOOLS

NEW MEXICO

Robert F. Kennedy Charter School is located in the South Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Its vision is to be a school where every student can engage in their chosen path toward secondary education or career in an environment that prepares, motivates, and supports them and their families. *Student demographics*: Hispanic: 95%; other races/unknown: 5%


Mark Armijo Academy, in the South Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico, has a mission to provide a quality and relevant education in a community that promotes caring and belonging for all students, especially those who seek a more personal and innovative educational setting. *Student demographics*: Hispanic: 99%, African American: <1%

The Grants Cibola County Schools district is located in Grants, New Mexico, encompassing several communities in the surrounding areas, and is the only school district in Cibola County. The district collaborates closely with three area pueblos/tribes: Baca/Prewitt Chapter, the Pueblo of Laguna, and the Pueblo of Acoma and in conjunction with the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education, the tribal government of Acoma and Laguna, the Pueblo of Acoma Department of Education. *Student demographics*: Hispanic: 40.6%, Native American: 44.8%, White: 14.6%

LOUISIANA
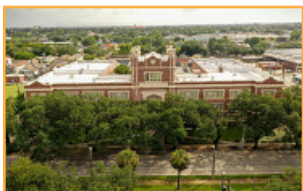
Warren Easton Charter High School, located in the heart of New Orleans, is the oldest public high school in Louisiana. WECHS is an independent, open-enrollment charter that serves students from more than 50 middle schools. Easton's mission is "to provide rigorous and relevant instruction for all students at all academic levels to ensure each has the opportunity to achieve maximum potential." *Student demographics*: African American: 97.5%; Hispanic: 2.1%; White: 0.2%

International High School of New Orleans (IHSNO) is an open admissions public charter school founded in 2009, with an enrollment of about 400 students. IHSNO's mission is to educate and nurture a diverse learning community through the International Baccalaureate programme, foreign language instruction, and intercultural appreciation that prepare students to succeed in a global economy. *Student demographics*: African American: 58%; Hispanic: 33%; White: 5%. 25% of students are English Language Learners and 85.2% are economically disadvantaged.

L.B Landry High School is an open admissions public school located on the West Bank of New Orleans in the historic neighborhood of Algiers. L.B. Landry High School was the first school to enroll African American students in Algiers. Landry's mission is to provide students with the academic and life skills necessary for success in local and global communities. *Student demographics*: African American: 99%

OTCS IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The OTCS project has generated several key considerations to guide implementation efforts:

1. Value and acknowledge the individual differences of each school's unique context.

2. Build face to face relationships that honor and appreciate the dignity and human worth of each educator, student, and family member.

3. Lift up the voices of students and give them a meaningful role in planning and implementation.

4. Co-design the path forward using the principles of a process known as "design thinking" with student and educational partners.

The next sections provide more detail about each of these considerations.

1. Accounting for the School's Context

In many cases, students at OTCS schools live in communities with immense trauma, have had high rates of chronic absenteeism, and come from families who themselves did not experience positive interactions during their time in school. Yet these schools are so much more than the circumstances that surround them, and the OTCS team has worked to understand the assets of each partner community and appreciate the students' rich cultures and heritages. The OTCS team strives to demonstrate its deep care about each of the school communities and create true collaborations.

Building Relationships

Distance affects relationships. When the OTCS collaborations began during the pandemic, meetings were virtual, and partners spent many hours on video calls until it was possible to meet in person. Teammates who live in New Mexico and New Orleans have been able to go regularly to the schools and have developed a strong understanding about each of the partner schools and their communities. These teammates are now trusted family members for each of the schools served, as they attend community, school board, and teacher association meetings. This in-person attendance occurs during the week, before and after school, and on weekends. Project collaborations and experiences happen naturally in large measure because team members are at the schools regularly.

The project's strength lies in these on-the-ground efforts and the team's relationships within the schools and with all stakeholders, which keep the work moving forward. With support for OTCS embedded throughout the school community, the program will keep momentum when a school loses a key teacher, parent, or administrator.

The team's relationships with the adults and educators in the greater school community are as important as those with the students because the adults are essential in supporting the co-designing work that includes explorations in neighboring communities as well as the project's co-designing time with students. A great degree of vulnerability and flexibility is required from those engaging in this collaborative work, so building relationships built on trust is essential.

> **In building authentic relationships:**
>
> - **Staff personally know, understand, and support individual students.**
>
> - **Students are engaged and feel a sense of belonging in the learning environment.**
>
> - **Students have an adult and peers to engage with about school and life.**
>
> - **Staff-student relationships are respectful and mutually responsive.**
>
> - **Families are engaged in supporting their student's social, emotional and academic development.**

Bottom line: Students who feel they belong and are valued by their teachers and peers are able to engage more fully in learning. Learn more here.

3. Lifting up Students' Voices and Giving Them Agency

Dr. Jyothi Bathina, California State University's researcher, writes "When students are allowed to speak and to write their truth, they begin the process of introspection, inquiry, and critical thinking."

OTCS agrees and believes it is essential to give students agency and the opportunity to be heard and take part in decision making. This includes identifying goals and outcomes and having the chance to work toward those goals and outcomes effectively. In short, this gives students a sense of their own power to make a difference, and they can act rather than be acted upon. OTCS' goal is to ensure that students are fully participating as equal members of the community who share a common goal and purpose.

Listening to students and fostering their agency are essential to the OTCS framework's goal of having Black and Indigenous Youth of Color (BIYOC) develop and thrive. This happens by, for example, offering safe spaces for students to share personal narratives, ideas, and opinions. Speaking and writing from their own experience brings legitimacy to students' lives and honors their culture. This work also strengthens their skills and leadership abilities and helps them build strong relationships with adults and the confidence to effect change.

4. Co-designing with Students

Co-designing with students is the core of the OTCS program. That means ensuring students are at the center of all collaborations to bring the OTCS Framework to life. In that process, students share their views about their school experiences and use the OTCS Framework as the foundation for co-designing new pathways to adult success.

During OTCS's co-designing time with students and educators, the methodology known as "design thinking" guides the work and helps solve problems. The Stanford University school outlines the value of design thinking: "We build on methods from across the field of design to create learning experiences that help people unlock their creative potential and apply it to the world. Design can be applied to all kinds of problems. But, just like humans, problems are often messy and complex — and need to be tackled with some serious creative thinking. That's where the Design Thinking approach comes in. Using Design Thinking tools and methods often results in a striking transformation. Newfound creative confidence changes how people think about themselves and their ability to have impact in the world."

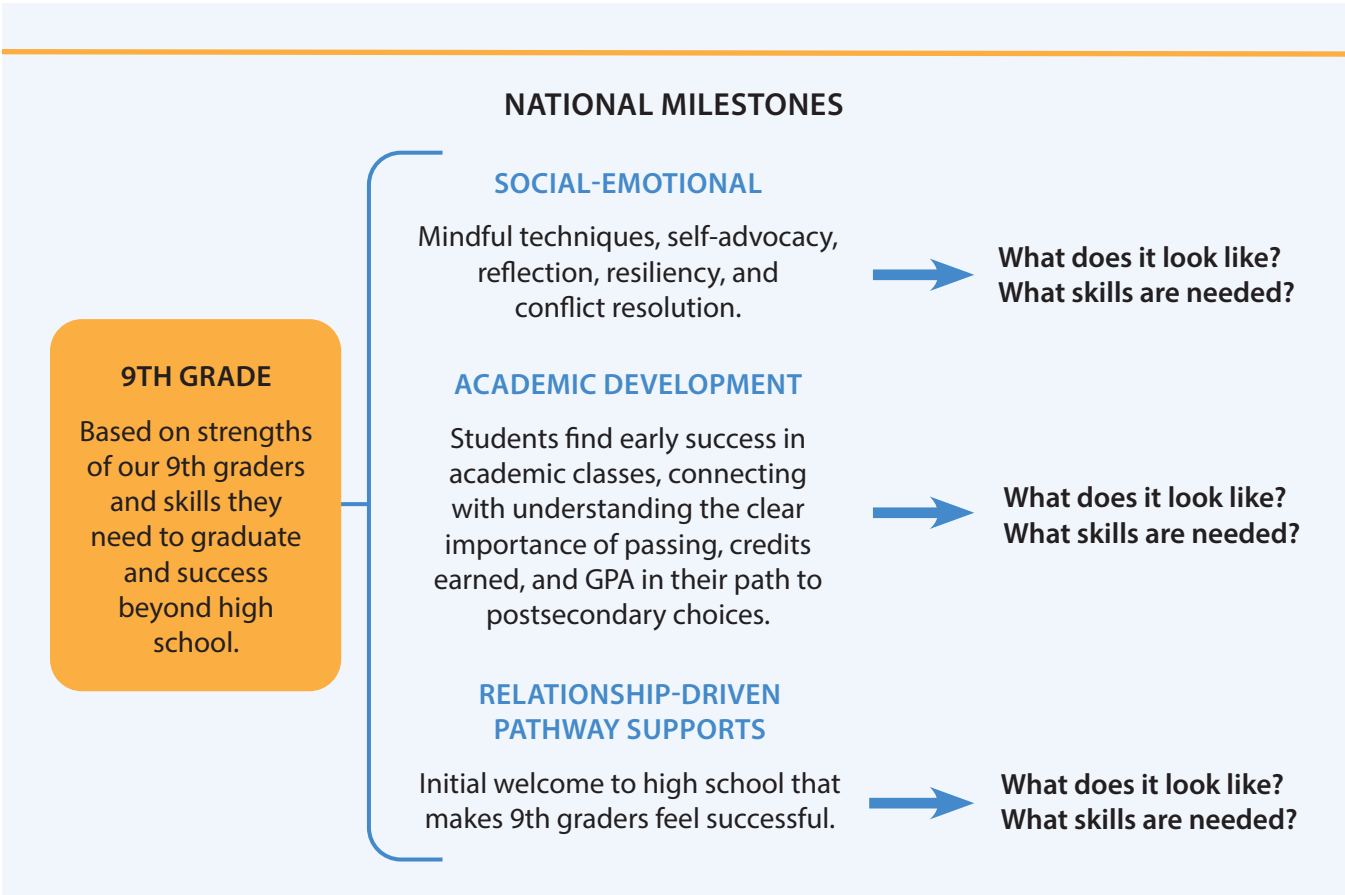The project also uses Liberatory Design with educator and student teams as it is focused on equity where student and educator designers notice and reflect on who they are as designers and who they are designing for. Co-designing and co-creating is essential to the OTCS initiative and exemplify the project's way of being WITH others.

OUR PROCESS IN CO-CREATING

Empathy Interviews → Brainstorming → Imagining → Prototyping → Try
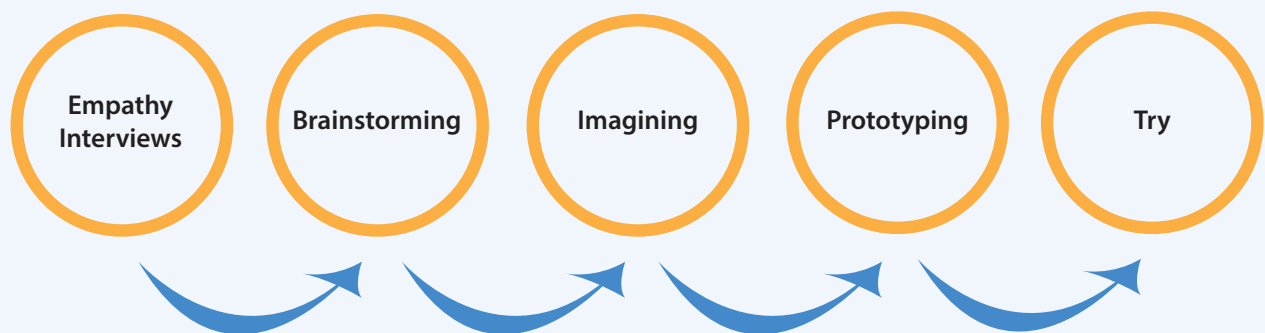
OTCS EXAMPLES AND LESSONS

The following sections include examples of how students and educators are dynamically and authentically co-creating new pathways to adult success in New Mexico and Louisiana — and offer lessons about the work.

NATIONAL MILESTONES

9TH GRADE

Based on strengths of our 9th graders and skills they need to graduate and success beyond high school.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

Mindful techniques, self-advocacy, reflection, resiliency, and conflict resolution.

→ **What does it look like? What skills are needed?**

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Students find early success in academic classes, connecting with understanding the clear importance of passing, credits earned, and GPA in their path to postsecondary choices.

→ **What does it look like? What skills are needed?**

RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN PATHWAY SUPPORTS

Initial welcome to high school that makes 9th graders feel successful.

→ **What does it look like? What skills are needed?**

At the height of the pandemic, during the 2020-21 school year, the Everyone Graduates Center, along with a cohort of high school teachers, co-developed evidence-based grade level 9-12, academic, social-emotional, and college and career readiness milestones, which when reached, increase the odds that students can both make informed choice about what is the best post-secondary pathway for them and be prepared to succeed in that pathway.

As collaborations began with individual schools, it quickly became clear they needed to co-create customized milestones that took into consideration the context of the school and its community. The language of the milestones would need to be tweaked to match that of the school and at times even the grade level placement of the milestones would need adjustments depending on the availability of college and career experiences. Co-creating the milestones is giving agency to the students and educators as they agree on the descriptions and placement of the milestones.

RFK High School and Grants-Cibola County Schools are now creating localized, grade-level versions of the milestones. The schools have identified the key academic, social-emotional, and college and career readiness outcomes every student needs to graduate with a pathway to adult success. Participating students and educators adjusted the milestones to match the context of the district, and the schools defined what college and career programs would be provided to all students. Students made posters of the milestones and even acted out the milestones using puppets. Students then presented the milestones to teachers and other adults on campus, including parents and community members. Creating the milestones locally ensures that students, educators, and the community will embrace the milestones.

Teachers and students can access the milestones through information systems such as Canvas or Power School or a college and career readiness program like Naviance. And the milestones were introduced during advisory or orientation sessions. Larger comprehensive high schools have counselors or student success teams guiding the milestone work. At Grants Cibola, the Career and Technical educators were the entry point for the milestones. The entry point is always different as it is based on the school's context.

Now, each school team is working to determine who will monitor student progress toward achieving the milestones. RFK, for example, collects evidence or demonstration of milestones through an online portfolio that are tracked by counselors and student success coordinators.

RFK also brought together focus groups with parents, teachers, and community members and gathered input from a student design team to develop a Profile of a Graduate. The student design team continues to define expectations for demonstrating the profile elements.

The collaborations at RFK and Grants Cibola underscore several key insights about co-creating, implementing, and tracking milestones.

- If milestones are generalized, they will likely not be measured. It is important to be specific.

- Students and teachers must have a clear understanding of the milestones.

- Teacher teams need time to process the milestones in partnership with the students. The determination of when this occurs becomes paramount for the overall success of milestone introduction.

- Each school will need to determine the grade level sequencing of the milestones and figure out how they will become part of a student's high school experience as well as determining how many milestones meet requirements. It is easy to add too many milestones and then the process becomes overwhelming to implement and track.

- It's important to promote students' agency and give students the ability to track their own milestones. The tracking of the milestones can become part of a school's student success system.
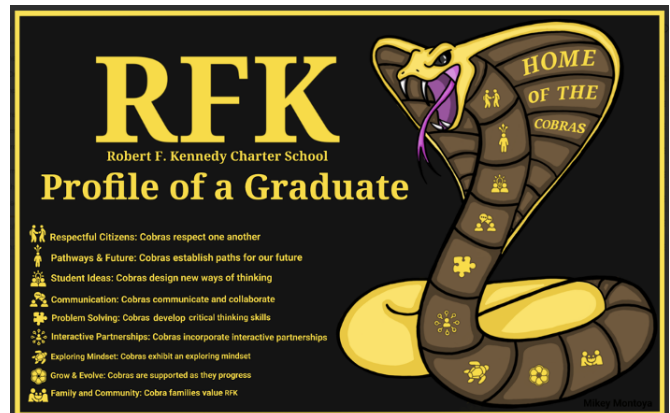
STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS

Student Success Systems: Building Relationships

Strong relationships are part of what makes school a place everyone wants to be. **As such, relationships are the foundation for co-creating with students and student design teams**. Relationships are both the glue that holds communities together and the fuel that gives individuals the energy to collaborate and support themselves and others. Relationships with adults and peers are what connects students to school and helps them navigate the impacts of challenges outside of school. Strong relationships between teachers, administrators, family members, and the community enable the adults in students' lives to gain a deep understanding of their strengths and challenges. Cultivating strong relationships is a powerful school improvement strategy.

School redesign work requires trust-filled relationships to be at the center of every decision schools make through co-creation between students, teachers, families, and community members. These relationships depend on having a school community culture of belonging where each member is seen, heard, and valued. According to the work of Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple in their book, *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity,* there are four capacities each of us can intentionally develop to support such a culture: openness, listening, empathy and patience. (Presentations about their work can be found here and here.)

For each student to have a pathway that leads to adult success, it's essential to ensure all students and adults in the school community experience a sense of agency, belonging, and connectedness. When students and adults in a school believe they can shape learning experiences and school climate, when they are welcomed and wanted for who they are, and when they feel strongly connected to school, then they are able to fully and deeply engage with each other and collectively create a school where everyone wants to be. This in turn leads to improved academic attainment. The following case studies illustrate examples of relationship building.

Case Study 1: Robert F. Kennedy Charter School, South Valley, NM — Using a Community Café to Build Relationships

Case Study 2: Mark Armijo Academy, South Valley, NM — Relationships-Alumni Focus Group

Student Success Systems: Using Connection Circles to Build Relationships

Many educators may know connection circles as a restorative practice used to help repair harm. **OTCS has used connection circles to help build relationships and trust among those gathered**. Every session at OTCS schools with students and adults starts with a connection circle as a place for centering relationships, building trust, and authentically listening to each other for context and understanding.

Knowing the stories of others helps to build a sense of belonging, community, and connectedness, which is a basic human need. Connection circles have given the OTCS participants an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in a safe space of respect and open dialogue. Those that have gathered in OTCS circles have been able to share their feelings, thoughts, and stories in an environment that is free from judgment and is confidential. The connection circles are free from hierarchy and ensure equality, which opens a place for participants to be vulnerable with one another. These connection circles build relationships, set a tone of collaboration, and help the group focus on a unified goal. Read a teacher's guide to restorative practice **here**. The following case studies highlight how connection circles have been used effectively in OTCS schools:

**Case Study 3: International High School of New Orleans — Connection Circle: Setting the Tone and Addressing Mindset**

Case Study 4: L.B Landry High School, New Orleans, LA — Connection Circles with Diverse Learners

STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS AS CO-DESIGNERS

The OTCS team understands that wisdom always comes from the people in the room, and it's essential to co-design experiences that are relevant to them. That means listening and engaging in what are known as empathy interviews. The OTCS method prioritizes the listening and co-designing process and promoting true student agency. OTCS has chosen to co-design with the Liberatory Design Thinking process as it centers on equity and equitable outcomes for the designers.

CO-DESIGNING

How: Teams of students working with adults from their school or partners organization employ design methods to address a relevant local design problem related to connecting all high students with postsecondary pathways.
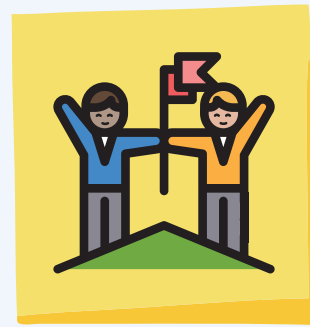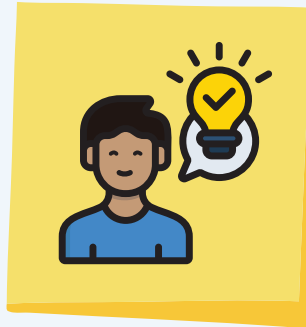
Liberatory Design for Equity Process
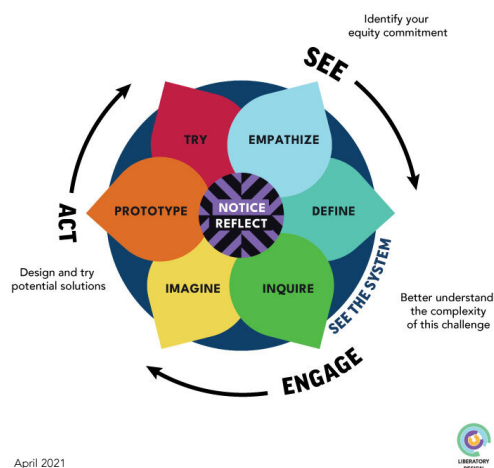
April 2021

The goal is to create design time that allows participants to brainstorm and imagine "what if" — to unleash creative thinking that leads to innovative approaches and solutions. The OTCS team co-created prototypes that better connect students with post-secondary pathways, using a team approach with dedicated staff to guide the process. At RFK High School, the team developed a checklist to identify and track skills to be learned during the co-designing process.

Developing Skills as a Student Design Team Member at RFK Charter High School

Skills you will develop:

☑ Problem Solving

☑ Setting Goals

☑ Effective Communication

☑ Time Management

☑ Building Relationships

☑ Delegation

☑ Civic Engagement

☑ Community Outreach

Building Pathways to College and Careers

This element requires school and community partners to expand opportunities for all students to receive support as they explore college and career options and take part in meaningful workplace experiences. A range of support is vital, including help with applications, college visits, job-shadowing, dual-credit coursework to help students get early college credits, work-based learning, and instruction leading to industry certifications. Such support is offered in grades 9 through 12 and tracked as part of the Student Success System. Critical to this element are partnerships with local nonprofits, higher education institutions, community members, and employers, all needed to establish pathways to career success for all students.

The following case studies provide examples of how OTCS schools are establishing student pathways.

[Case Study 5: Robert F. Kennedy Charter School, South Valley, NM — College and Career Day, New Pathway Development and Higher Education Connections](#)

[Case Study 6: Mark Armijo Academy, South Valley, NM — Co-designing the Foundation for Student Agency](#)

[Case Study 7: Be Loud Studios, New Orleans, LA — Radio Production as a Vehicle to Amplify Student Voice](#)

SHARING OTCS' SUCCESS

Students at OTCS schools have been inspirational influencers who have shared the success of their collaborations with local, state, and national audiences.

The OTCS started quietly and steadily with students at the center and adults supporting students' efforts to build agency in an unprecedented way in each of the schools. Something special unfolded, and it could be felt within and across the OTCS' small but mighty network.

Students for the first time were being listened to and able to influence the way they experienced school. And people began to take notice not only in the OTCS schools, but at the state and national levels. Some examples:

- Partner schools have been invited to share their journey at a national level. For example, the student design team at Mark Armijo Academy examined chronic absenteeism at their school and were shocked to determine that adults and students did not have a sense of agency. While utilizing the **Harvard Liberatory Design Method**, students shifted their focus to finding a collective definition of agency. They were invited to attend the National High School Redesign Showcase in Washington, D.C., presenting to policy makers, nonprofit agencies, educators, and U.S. Department of Education personnel.

- The OTCS partners at TDS were tapped by larger districts to build cohesive student success systems.

- The state of New Mexico is looking at a push for Profile of a Graduate work across the state and has been engaging the OTCS team for guidance on how to start the process with the voices of students and families.

- RFK High School has begun expanding its efforts to RFK Middle School to develop a pipeline for adult career success beginning in the middle years. The students and adults at the Middle School co-designed a project to explore careers, giving students the tools to investigate careers of interest. The work resulted in a mini-career fair at the middle school level designed and hosted by the students for the adults and other students in the building.

Innovation in New Mexico

The Aurora Institute, a national nonprofit focused on education innovations, took interest in RFK's student design team when they heard that the students had created their Profile of a Graduate. Aurora representatives toured the school and interviewed the student design team members, who described their process of creating the profile of a graduate. The students shared their pride in being heard by the adults in the building and feeling valued by their peers. The students also described how being on the design team gave them confidence, purpose, and a sense of belonging. The Aurora Institute shared what they had learned with other entities, such as Future Focused Education, a New Mexico education-focused nonprofit. Students from the design team were asked to sit on a panel to answer questions from educators about creating their profile of a graduate as well as broader efforts to lift students' voices. Read more about Aurora's work in this area here.

Lifting Students' Voices

This report concludes with a few parting thoughts from students as they expressed what skills they were walking away with, what they enjoyed most, and how they felt as co-designers.

"
I have enjoyed the hands-on activities because of how they tie back to learning.

"
I've gained many skills like being able to reflect on myself and work better within a team
"

"
Being on this team means a lot to me. When I reflect on our meetings, (the focus was) the joining of two schools. These sessions unified us in a way I don't think anything else could.
"

"
It makes me happy to join with people to talk about subjects not discussed in school, like community.
"

"
I've learned how to listen to other people's ideas without turning them down.
"

"
Being a part of this team shows respect can be given and returned.

"
Being on this team means I have the opportunity to work with others to accomplish something good.
"

"
Being on this team means a lot to me because it gets me thinking about skills that will be helpful to me now, and in the future.
"

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Milestones: National Milestones Prototype

Appendix B: Liberatory Design Thinking

Appendix C: RFK Student Design Team Overview

Appendix D: Pathways to Career Success

- RFK Middle School: Building the Career/College pipeline

Appendix E: Relationships

- Community Cafe resources

Appendix F: Student Agency/Voice

- Be Loud

Appendix G: Connection Circles