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# Transform Learning in Los Angeles:

## Voices from Practice, Research, and Advocacy on the Future of K12 Education in our Region

For many who focus on education in Los Angeles County, schools are organized around 4 core purposes that guide what and how students learn. These purposes include:

1. **Educational equity** – providing opportunities for social and economic uplift for the most disadvantaged students
2. **College and career readiness** – training the next generation of workers for the jobs of the future
3. **Civic engagement** – developing individuals committed to the strength of our democracy
4. **Personal actualization** – guiding young people to develop self and social awareness, as well as a personal vision for their lives

In 2019, many of our school systems find themselves struggling to realize these purposes and fulfill the promise that public education makes to youth and families. Inequitable access to great schools coupled with systemic poverty and its effects put our most vulnerable youth at an extreme disadvantage. The nature of work is changing fast, and demands a very different skillset from 21st Century workers than from generations past. Trust in our democratic institutions has wavered and social divisions mar the political landscape. A rapidly evolving world makes navigating college, career, and life an increasingly complex task for young adults.

These challenges have been offset by remarkable pockets of imaginative educators and communities. Los Angeles is home to a growing number of schools that are preparing youth to excel by blending the social, emotional, and intellectual elements of learning. Students at these sites take part in interdisciplinary projects, inquiry-based exploration, real-world application, and socioemotional development. They work collaboratively on topics of interest to learn with and from each other. Educators in these environments are geared towards both young people’s academic achievement and personal wellness.

But frequently, this work takes place in silos. There is limited conversation about an expansive and coherent strategy to transform learning across Los Angeles schools and systems.

So how do we spark a broader movement to rethink schools, one that spreads across our region and that unites stakeholders from across the education landscape? A movement that centers equity while preparing youth to thrive in the decades to come?

The voices that follow begin to answer these questions by sharing, in their own ways, why it is imperative to transform educational opportunity for young people in LA—and how we might begin to do so.

This paper is a call to action to reimagine education with the core purposes in mind and equity at heart.



# Pedro Noguera

## on Educational Equity

Distinguished Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at UCLA

Educational Equity

### What are the key issues related to Educational Equity in LA County?

*"I think to prepare young people for a workplace that requires not simply technical skill but a higher level of social skills you have to start to give them that through instruction and through experience."*

**Pedro Noguera**  
Distinguished Professor of Education, UCLA

Some of the equity issues are structural, like overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding for teacher salaries, and inadequate facilities. These issues disproportionately affect poor children throughout California and the country. But aside from the structural issues there are fundamental equity issues related to teaching and learning that pertain to how kids are engaged in the classroom (or not) and how they are prepared for life beyond school. In too many schools, there are strained relations between students of color and their teachers, and too often, the expectations they encounter are very low. I often visit schools in LA where I see kids roaming the halls and it's kind of accepted as being simply the way it is. There's been a big push in LA to reduce suspensions and that's a good thing. But there hasn't been a concerted effort to improve school culture. If you just reduce suspensions but you don't improve school culture you end up with schools that are not orderly or safe.

### How should teaching & learning change to better meet the needs of 21st century

It starts by knowing the students and understanding how they learn, what interests them, what challenges they face, and what gaps in past learning may influence their ability to perform in the classroom. Too often, a lot of that basic information is not known by educators. Too often, the opinions we hold about kids are based on stereotypes. For kids of color this often produces deficit thinking about what they can do. Such assumptions can be reinforced by the assumptions people make about test scores and the nature of intelligence.

Educators are finally beginning to recognize that the development of social and emotional skills must be

# Educational Equity

central to teaching and learning. These skills must be taught explicitly, such as empathy, how to defer gratification, how to handle conflict, etc.

## How is what you're describing different from traditional teaching?

I think traditional paradigms of teaching focus a lot on teacher talk. It's not very centered on student learning especially in the secondary level—and I think that places kids with greater needs at a disadvantage.

## What role should community play in reimagining schools?

On the one hand the educators need to spend a lot more time thinking about the communities that are being served and what it would take to serve those children. We need to think about building capacity in response to student needs and community needs.

At the same time you need to get input from the community. We need genuine partnerships with parents that are rooted in trust and respect. I think we don't put enough emphasis on this. We don't engage parents about their aspirations for their children, what would they like to see for their children.

## Some advocates for equity say that you have to address issues of poverty and trauma before focusing on teaching & learning. What is your reaction to that?

Well you know it's not an either or. You have to do both, because kids are coming to school and we have to think about their learning needs and social needs, which are inextricably linked. You also can't say that until we improve the neighborhood and eliminate poverty we can't do anything about education. That's not sensible and it's an excuse for doing nothing

### Six Deeper Learning Competencies:

Master Core Academic Content

Think Critically and Solve Complex Problems

Work Collaboratively

Communicate Effectively

Learn How to Learn

Develop Academic Mindsets

Source: Tom Vander Ark and Carri Schneider, "DEEPER LEARNING For Every Student Every Day."



# Maria Brenes on Civic Engagement

Executive Director, InnerCity Struggle

# Civic Engagement

## What are the key issues related to Educational Equity in LA County?

The key issues impacting educational equity in Los Angeles County are the entrenched achievement and opportunity gaps impacting students of color. For too long a problematic mindset has existed that devalues and imposes low expectations onto students of color. Institutional racism persists in education which violates the human rights of our communities. These conditions have led to disinvestment in our schools and to poor educational outcomes of our students.

## Why should schools prepare youth to engage in Civic Life?

The civic engagement of youth strengthens our democracy. At InnerCity Struggle, we develop the leadership capacity of high school students to become engaged in the democratic process. We have to involve young people in their communities to ensure they are civically engaged for life.

Civic engagement should be embedded in the school curriculum, schools should engage students in decision-making and young people should shape how their schools function to ensure a positive learning environment.

Students are in the best position to propose solutions to improving education because they have the most at stake—they can advance solutions. Young people's strength includes questioning and being optimistic and we have to support them to demand better. Historically, youth-led movements have successfully helped to change our society and have shifted power to the benefit of the most marginalized.

*"Youth organizing is catalytic to social change. Youth can strengthen democracy."*

**Maria Brenes**  
Executive Director,  
InnerCity Struggle

## What leads to Civic Engagement among young adults?

A recent study conducted by the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) project, a joint effort between UC-Riverside and UCLA, found the following experiences to have the greatest impact on young people's interest in civic engagement. The experiences are in ranked order beginning with the most impactful. As the study suggests, learning environments within schools are highly influential in shaping students' interest in civic engagement and political involvement.

1.



Classroom learning experiences based on democratic engagement

2.



Service learning

3.



Prior civic commitments

4.



Parent/student influences

5.



Neighborhood civic capital

6.



School sense of belonging



# David Rattray

## Career Readiness and Economic Opportunity

Executive Vice President, Center for Education Excellence at the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce

# Career Readiness

**How should teaching & learning change to better meet the needs of 21st century learners?**

It needs to be very student-centered, very hands on, very engaging.

I think project based learning is the best pedagogy. Lecture-based learning should fade out of our world forever and ever. I don't think it ever worked and it works even worse now because kids are already in charge of their own life given the accessibility of information and social networks. So to think that they're going to sit in the classroom and really care about some teacher barking at them for 60 minutes is just foolhardy. Student-centered learning should be the driver.

The career context is a tool to make the academic subjects come to life and be interesting. It's not an end in itself.

*"What you can predict about the future of work is that you're going to have to relearn to adjust to the next wave many, many, many times. Which means we can't just talk about lifelong learning anymore. It can't just be a slogan."*

**David Rattray**

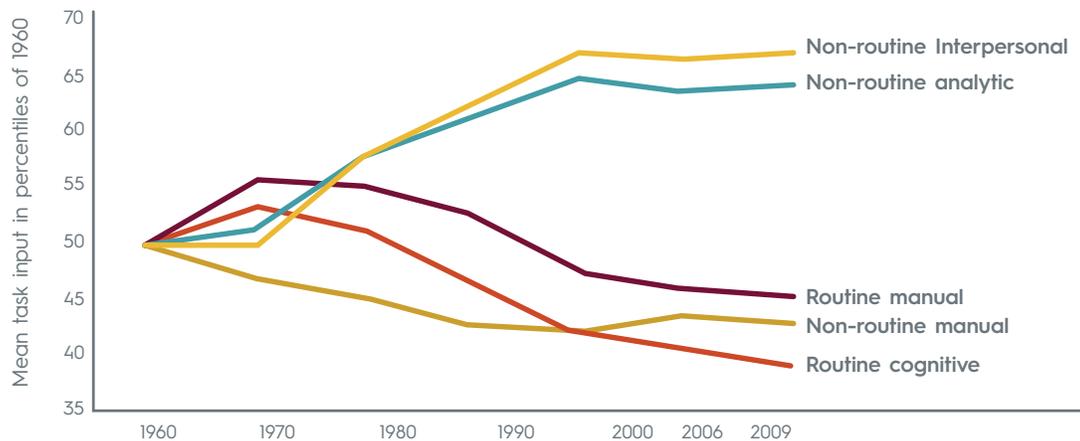
Executive Vice President, Center for Education Excellence at the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce

**How is what you're describing different from traditional teaching?**

The tendency we had over the last century was to make everything in our society based on the factory model. So that includes the way we built schools.

We should empower youth for a lifetime, so learning is much less about skills and knowledge. It is much more about your understanding that growth is the number one thing that's in your best interest—and that you should embrace it. And you just keep learning over your whole lifetime. So that to me is the most important skill for career development.

**Figure 1** Non-routine Tasks on the Rise in the U.S. Labor Market



Source: David H. Autor and Brendan M. Price. "The Changing Task Composition of the US Labor Market: an Update of Autor, Levy and Murnane (2003)". MIT Mimeograph, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013.

## 2022 Skills Outlook

### Growing

1. Analytical thinking and innovation
2. Active learning and learning strategies
3. Creativity, originality and initiative
4. Technology design and programming
5. Critical thinking and analysis
6. Complex problem-solving
7. Leadership and social influence
8. Emotional intelligence
9. Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation
10. Systems analysis and evaluation

### Declining

1. Manual dexterity, endurance and precision
2. Memory, verbal, auditory, and spatial abilities
3. Management of financial, material resources
4. Technology installation and maintenance
5. Reading, writing, math and active listening
6. Management of personnel
7. Quality control and safety awareness
8. Coordination and time management
9. Visual, auditory and speech abilities
10. Technology use, monitoring and control

Source: World Economic Forum, 2018.



# Jose Navarro on Personal Development & Self Actualization

Founder of Social Justice Humanitas, Los Angeles  
Unified School District

## What are the key issues related to Educational Equity in LA County?

The number one barrier is—I think talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not.

And the reality is there are kids who are homeless, who are poor—but they are not broken. Their needs aren't being met. So if we can meet their needs within the four walls of our classroom, within the four walls of a school, within the walls of our community, then they can achieve self-actualization.

It's very tempting to just turn compassionate teaching into a transaction—follow step one and you can be compassionate, follow step two and you can be empathetic. But these challenges of teaching are adaptive, not prescriptive.

## How should teaching & learning change to better meet the needs of 21st century learners?

These kids come into a class and they want relevance. They want this quadratic formula to actually equate to some kind of knowledge they can use. I think there needs to be a big focus on relevance and culturally relevant responsive pedagogy.

## What is self-actualization?

Do the best you can with what you've got. That is self-actualization, and I tell students that your best is always good enough. So when you make a mistake, learn from it. We send a message of relevance, of love, compassion, high expectations, and using Maslow's hierarchy of need as a check.

# Self Actualization

## How is what you're describing different from traditional teaching?

[We teach our students] to be the best human they can be and it is based on a very, very simple idea of just being a good person—to be the best person you can possibly be. So we have professional development for teachers to help kids be the best person they can be. And because it's hard for people to wrap their head around that, that's very hard to do because there is no book, there's no curriculum.

*"Our kids are not broken. Their needs aren't being met. How do you wrap your curriculum around the kids instead of trying to bend your kids around your curriculum?"*

Jose Navarro

Founder of Social Justice Humanitas,  
Los Angeles Unified School District

## The Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning— Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning



# Synthesis and Conclusion

## Synthesis and Conclusion:

How can we begin to transform learning environments based on the voices shared here?

The future is not predetermined—it is wide-open and rapidly changing, while learning in schools has remained largely unchanged. A new future requires our education systems to meet the needs of today's world and a set of diverse learners. Luminaries, such as those featured here, have illustrated a vision for learning, equity, and justice that can serve as a guidepost for the future of education in Los Angeles. While this vision is intended to move our stagnant achievement measures in the right direction, it also offers a more holistic view of success. Our hope is that the vision set forth by these leaders are the beginnings of a unified education community bounded by "learning" and a common set of values. The values outlined here are clearly reflected in the words of Dr. Noguera, Maria Brenes, David Ratray and Jose Navarro.

The education systems of today and tomorrow require a fundamental transformation from an industrial design to an equitable design that is informed by the community and how today's students learn best. These transformational designs engage young people with relevant learning, think about their full development, allow them to learn by doing, provide culturally responsive experiences and personally meaningful relationships—all while maintaining lofty expectations. They treat teachers with dignity and allow for their own personal growth. They focus on 21st-Century skills and community empowerment, with the goal to prepare their youth to thrive in an ever-changing professional and civic environment. They marry academic achievement, personal wellness and school culture together and refuse to see them as detached. It is this bold vision for education in Los Angeles that we see as interconnected with a long tradition of community schools, school-discipline reform and resource equity. Yet, we also believe it will take tremendous courage and a unified vision to emerge from traditional camps of opposition. We hope this paper provides the community with an idea of why this work is needed and a vision of what it could be. It is a vision that will require community-based design, capacity and innovative approaches that we are calling "Transform Learning LA."