

**BEYOND SEL** *A WestEd Audio Gallery*

CO-CREATING AN EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE WITH STUDENTS

LISTEN TO THIS AUDIOCAST // beyondsel.wested.org

**FOREST PARK
MIDDLE SCHOOL**
FOREST PARK, IL

“Just because they are middle school students, it doesn’t mean that they don’t have their own opinion. If anything, right now, they’re trying to figure themselves out more than ever.”

MADDIE PARRILLI
Social Worker

Dr. Tiffany Brunson, principal at Forest Park Middle School, embodies courageous, rebel leadership in her ongoing advocacy for equitable practices that center student voice. Dr. Brunson is deeply involved in the work of teachers and learners while also constantly striving for better outcomes across the Forest Park community.

Dr. Brunson and her team at Forest Park have initiated the process of co-creating their climate and culture alongside students, using tools such as empathy interviews to foster authentic, vulnerable relationships between teachers and students. Through the strategy of co-creation, Forest Park staff have not only bolstered the relationships between teachers and students, but they have also improved the social and emotional well-being of these individuals and begun to create an equitable, responsive climate and culture.

How to co-create learning

To assess the quality and equity of their learning conditions, Forest Park staff use Copilot-Elevate surveys, an applied tool from the [Project for Education Research that Scales \(PERTS\)](#). The surveys [measure](#) the extent to which Forest Park is affirming cultural identity, developing classroom belonging, offering feedback for growth, demonstrating teacher caring, and more.

A “circle team” — including Dr. Brunson, the district’s assistant superintendent, two teachers, and several students — meets regularly to apply this data in co-creating learning spaces. During these meetings, students share their perspectives on and lived experiences with school practices so that they are a part of the decision-making process.

“We are complicit in creating traumatic experiences for our students in our buildings. We are all responsible for that, [from] how we discipline our students to even how we speak of them.”

DR. TIFFANY BRUNSON
Principal

Empathy in action

The Forest Park circle team also reviews other data alongside the survey data, including behavior data. When they examined data from across the last five years, they were surprised to find that Black boys were disproportionately suspended and disciplined at far higher rates than their peers. Though this disproportionate pattern reflects trends in schools across the nation,¹ Dr. Brunson didn’t expect to find it in Forest Park’s tight-knit, multiracial community.

To build their understanding of this trend, the circle team conducted empathy interviews with students, who shared their experience of the disciplinary processes at the school. These interviews helped illustrate how power and bias play into everyday interactions between teachers and students and increased empathy for student experiences among the circle team and other staff. Research has found that teachers who adopt empathic mindsets can engage in perspective-taking, which helps them recognize students’ internal states and respond to student disruption with caring and concern rather than with punitive discipline.²

These qualitative interviews have helped Forest Park teachers become more self-reflective of their own biases and blind spots while also increasing their awareness of student suggestions and perspectives. Together, these actions have helped the Forest Park community co-create an authentic, responsive climate.

Forest Park Middle School BY THE NUMBERS

Number of Students	206	Student Demographics	15% Latinx*
Geographic Setting	Suburban		59% Black
Grades Served	6–8		16% White
School Model	Traditional public school		2% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
Conditions for Equitable Learning & Development	Personal & Learning Environment		2% Native American*/Alaska Native
		7% Multiracial	
		23% Students with disabilities	
		6% English language learners	
		68% Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	

*Student Demographic data sourced from illinoisreportcard.com and nces.ed.gov. NCES lists Latinx as “Hispanic” and Native American as “American Indian.”

LISTEN TO THIS AUDIOCAST // beyondsel.wested.org

CO-CREATING AN EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE WITH STUDENTS

Consider while you listen . . .

ADOLESCENCE

Social worker Maddie Parrilli reflected on the importance of student's voices and opinions. Why might agency and relationship-building be especially important to middle school students? Do you remember how you felt as a student during this time in your life?

DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES

Dr. Brunson was surprised when her team found that Black boys at Forest Park were being suspended at higher rates than other students. Has your team looked at disciplinary trends at your school? What would you expect to find? Do your colleagues agree?

EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

The Forest Park staff uses empathy interviews to develop a better understanding of the perspectives and needs of students and identify potential changes that would further advance the district's vision for equity. Does your school currently have a tool to collect student perspectives on policy and practice? What do you think your team might uncover by conducting empathy interviews with students? How might using such a tool help promote co-leadership with your young people?

Related Resources



Forest Park used applied tools from the [Project for Education Research that Scales \(PERTS\)](#) to assess the learning conditions in place at their school. This [Practice Guide](#) from PERTS is a helpful overview of how to understand and assess learning conditions at your school.



Forest Park team staff used this [interview protocol](#) for empathy interviews with students to surface their perspectives and needs.



As a part of the [COVID Education Equity Response Collaborative](#), WestEd held a [professional learning session](#) featuring two student leaders on stakeholder voice, agency, and co-creation, and also created this accompanying [blog post](#).

Conditions for Learning and Development

In their work, school leaders and educators must attend to a range of conditions that can promote — or inhibit — learning and development.³ These include Personal Conditions, Learning Environment Conditions, and System Conditions.

PERSONAL CONDITIONS

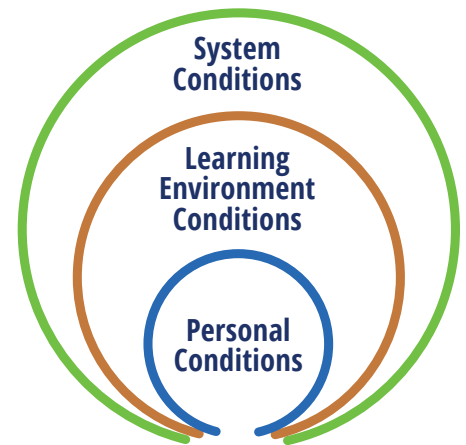
Conditions that bolster and ensure health and well-being within individuals in school communities, including social and emotional health and well-being as well as the physical, mental, and behavioral health of students and the adults who care for them.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT CONDITIONS

Conditions that foster safe, supportive environments and responsive, reliable relationships. These conditions include school climate and trauma-informed and restorative practices, as well as the policies, structures, and systems in place at the district, school, and classroom levels. Together, these can promote resilience, provide protective factors, and ensure that every person — regardless of background, circumstance, or identity — can learn, grow, and thrive.

SYSTEM CONDITIONS

Conditions stemming from the complex community and social factors that can influence health and well-being. Here, cross-sector collaboration between schools and other sectors — such as health, mental health, justice, child welfare, housing, and anti-poverty efforts — can accelerate schools' positive impacts on the development and well-being of students and families.



¹A., & Weinstein, R. S. (2008). The discipline gap and African Americans: Defiance or cooperation in the high school classroom. *Journal of school psychology, 46*(4), 455–475.

²Okonofua, J. A., Paunesku, D., & Walton, G. M. (2016). Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 113*(19), 5221–5226.

³Garcia Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development, 67*(5), 1891–1914. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131600>



BEYOND SEL
WestEd

The **BEYOND SEL** Audio Gallery

is a series of stories that capture promising practices shaping the landscape of social and emotional learning and support in schools across the country.

LEARN MORE ONLINE
beyondsel.wested.org