



# COMMUNITY-LED STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE



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## THE URBAN ASSEMBLY MAKER ACADEMY MANHATTAN, NY

“I’ve learned and developed so much as a person through this collective group; which means that when I interact with other people in our community, I’m bringing these lenses with me. And I’d like to believe that I’m spreading equity and social-emotional learning through every conversation I have with anyone at our school. And I think it starts with us.”

**ALEX SOSA**  
Instructional Coach

One strategy that schools use to develop positive teacher-student relationships and promote an equitable school climate is to offer an advisory program. These programs place a cohort of students with one or more teachers meeting regularly over one or more school years. In addition to improving adult-student and peer-to-peer relationships and fostering a more supportive school climate, advisories can also directly address academic and social-emotional needs.<sup>1</sup>

The Urban Assembly Maker Academy (UA Maker) was founded in Manhattan, New York, in 2014. From the beginning, UA Maker included advisories as one strategy to ensure that students and families in their school community had a reliable connection with at least one adult at school. At UA Maker, advisors carry out many roles — from delivering social-emotional lessons and holding student-led meetings to readying students for post-secondary opportunities. The advisory team is led by a multigrade-level group of educators who also craft and facilitate professional development sessions for their fellow educators that incorporate equity into social-emotional learning. Each team member brings valuable content and community knowledge to the advisory program as they work across humanities, science, mathematics, and instructional coaching.

### Using stories to build community and connection

The lead advisory team codeveloped a scope and sequence for adult and student learning centered on ideas such as equity and mastery. One of the practices developed by the advisory team to support the equity component was a storytelling professional development session in which teachers



“We started to shift our focus to thinking about how can we use community-based practices and storytelling to help adults shift their perspective on what it means to build relationships with students, what the impact of that is, how that’s connected to the work of equity, how that’s connected to the work of mastery, and also how that all supports students with building those social-emotional skills [like] self-management and mindfulness.”

**SHARI PLUMMER**

10th Grade Advisory Lead

shared personal stories. As a part of the session, teachers shared others’ stories with other groups of staff.

Research shows that telling stories can help practitioners develop empathy through the attempt to imaginatively inhabit the world of others, which ultimately allows us to care for others more effectively.<sup>2</sup> The UA Maker storytelling session is a compelling example, as several inspired teachers replicated this activity with their students as a relationship-building strategy. By drawing upon the lived experiences of educators and students, the advisory team has developed an equitable, connected school climate for the entire school community.

**The Urban Assembly Maker Academy BY THE NUMBERS**

<b>Number of Students</b>	435
<b>Geographic Setting</b>	Urban
<b>Grades Served</b>	9–12
<b>School Model</b>	Traditional public school
<b>Conditions for Equitable Learning &amp; Development</b>	Personal & Learning Environment

<b>Student Demographics</b>	<b>47%</b> Latinx*
	<b>29%</b> Black
	<b>10%</b> White
	<b>10%</b> Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
	<b>1%</b> Native American*/Alaska Native
	<b>3%</b> Multiracial
	<b>20%</b> Students with disabilities
	<b>5%</b> English language learners
<b>75%</b> Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	

\*Student Demographic data sourced from [tools.nycenet.edu](https://tools.nycenet.edu) and [nces.ed.gov](https://nces.ed.gov). NCES lists Latinx as “Hispanic” and Native American as “American Indian.”

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## COMMUNITY-LED STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE

*Consider while you listen . . .*

### TEACHER-STUDENT AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The Urban Assembly Maker Academy prioritizes advisory as a tool for relationship building. How does your school promote the development of positive, supportive relationships between teachers and students and among students? Are there any existing approaches or structures your school can use to further develop these bonds?

### STORYTELLING TO BUILD COMMUNITY

Advisory leads Shari Plummer and Ridwan Olatilewa shared the positive impacts of a storytelling professional development session — for students and educators. When was the last time someone’s personal story moved you — including a film, TV show, novel, or direct conversation — and how did it impact you? How might your school incorporate storytelling to empower teachers and students to share their personal history or identity with the school community?

## Related Resources



The UA Maker advisory team facilitated an activity centered around [George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From”](#) poem that eventually developed into a schoolwide practice. After reading Lyon’s poem, students wrote about their own experiences using her poem as a template. Staff also participated in this activity during a professional development session, reflecting on strategies to build community in their classrooms. Eventually, teachers and students shared poems together.



This [resource](#) from Learning for Justice suggests 20 advisory activities that expose students to diverse perspectives, guiding them to understand and critically analyze ideas from various cultures through engaging guided peer-to-peer activities.



This [guide](#) from NYU’s Teaching and Learning Resources provides a research-based overview of the purpose and steps to using storytelling in lesson plans.



At UA Maker, School Leadership Teams (SLTs) play an important part in making school cultures more collaborative. This [page](#) from the New York City Department of Education is a useful overview of SLTs.

## 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.<sup>3</sup> These include Personal Conditions, Learning Environment Conditions, and System Conditions.

### PERSONAL CONDITIONS

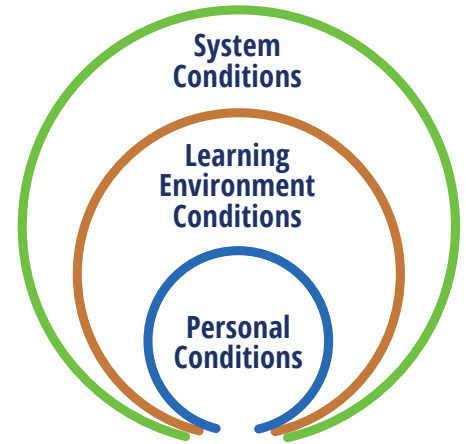
Conditions that bolster and ensure health and well-being within individuals in school communities, including social and emotional health and well-being as well as the physical, mental, and behavioral health of students and the adults who care for them.

### 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.



<sup>1</sup> McClure, L., Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M. (2010). “Can School Structures Improve Teacher-Student Relationships? *The Relationship between Advisory Programs, Personalization, and Students’ Academic Achievement.*” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 18(17), n17.

<sup>2</sup> Fairbairn, G. J. (2002). Ethics, empathy, and storytelling in professional development. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, 1(1), 22–32.

<sup>3</sup> Garcia 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>



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