

The
elephant in the
(class)
room

New Teacher Center

Acknowledgements



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Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.”

Attributed to W. Edwards Deming, American engineer and statistician

We need only take a broad glance at the history of education¹ in America to see the truth of this statement. Even the past two school years, given an unprecedented opportunity by a nationwide pandemic to rethink school, saw a gravitational pull to return to the educational system as it was before. Instead of helping us root out inequities, the effects of the pandemic reinforced and exacerbated them. And it's no wonder: **American education systems and structures are *designed* to produce inequitable outcomes.**

It's the elephant in the (class) room — the problem we don't want to discuss because the truth is uncomfortable and challenging to change.

We aren't the first to name the elephant. However, it is not a commonly-enough held belief among educators at every level of the system. Nor is this truth widely understood by the American public. **If we start with a shared willingness to acknowledge the elephant and engage in building a collective understanding of our history of systemic inequity, together we can successfully articulate a new purpose and design for American education that centers humanity, justice, and self-actualization for everyone and communities as a whole.** We can create a sustainable, high-quality educational space that attracts and retains diverse educators and improves experiences and outcomes for all students.

¹ For further details of how American education has been designed for the benefits of a few, please see this timeline: <http://www.theequitycollaborative.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Education-Timeline-Handout.pdf>



THE PROCESS

How did we get here?

To support NTC in “walking our talk” to fulfill our [mission](#), in 2021, we launched a 23-member National [Equity Commission](#) and Student Advisory. The Commission membership was curated to include a broad range of backgrounds and expertise: systems leaders, teachers, students, and experts whose work supports students with learning differences, BIPOC students, multilingual learners, students experiencing poverty, and immigrant students, as well as representatives from the social work and behavioral science sectors.

The Commission’s hypothesis is that by **centering teaching in the humanity² of educators, students, their families, and communities, we can begin to dismantle the long-standing inequitable systems and design new ones that support teachers and students of diverse backgrounds to thrive.**

With the support of the Commission, we’ve examined this hypothesis through the lens of NTC’s mission: to disrupt the predictability of educational inequities for systemically underserved students by accelerating educator effectiveness.

- Who are we as educators, as people, and how do our experiences shape us and show up in our practice? How do we stay curious, do deep introspection, and support others? How do we grow from where we are to where we aspire to be?

- Who are we teaching? Do we know the full richness of our students’ stories?
- How can we honor the humanity of our students, their families, and their communities in instructional design and the culture of schools?
- What supports do educators need to balance the art and science of teaching with the goals of students and their families?
- What are we ultimately trying to achieve as educators, working in partnership with students, families, and communities? How can we protect and prioritize these goals in the structures and systems of schools?

This document represents a proposed path forward to address these questions in a way that will design new systems based on a foundation of equity³ and humanity.

² When we reference **humanity** in this context, we are drawing on the work of education scholar Carla Shalaby and others when they reference all learners as human beings, with human beings’ unalienable rights to be seen and treated as a full human being, free from threats to identity and harm of any kind, and retaining the right to self-determination.

³ We define **equity** as the absence of disparities in the long-term academic and social trajectories (and in its key social determinants) systemically associated with social advantage/disadvantage. It’s worth distinguishing between equity and equality in education. Equality in education would mean that all students and educators would have the same access and amount of resources (e.g., per-pupil spending, access to advanced coursework, professional development opportunities) regardless of their needs or assets. While we don’t intend to diminish the impact of inequality in education, equity in this context addresses the root of the problem because it attends to the needs and strengths of both students and educators.



The development of the Equity Commission felt and looked different. The process was incredibly inclusive — we thought not only about who the research and/or policy experts in our field are but also challenged ourselves to expand our definition of the word expert. With the expansion of that definition, we recognized that teachers, students, and school leaders should be seated at the table because they are the experts ‘on the ground.’”

Keisha Rattray, Former NTC Director of Program Strategy and Delivery

Finally, acknowledging the elephant in the (class)room is profoundly liberating — because it allows us to envision the room without it. Then

we can begin to imagine a new era for the design of American schools, one that centers equity, humanity, justice, and self-actualization, for everyone, in the context of their communities.

And we must do so knowing schools are in a race for resources and talent, navigating a highly charged climate that distracts educators away from addressing root causes.

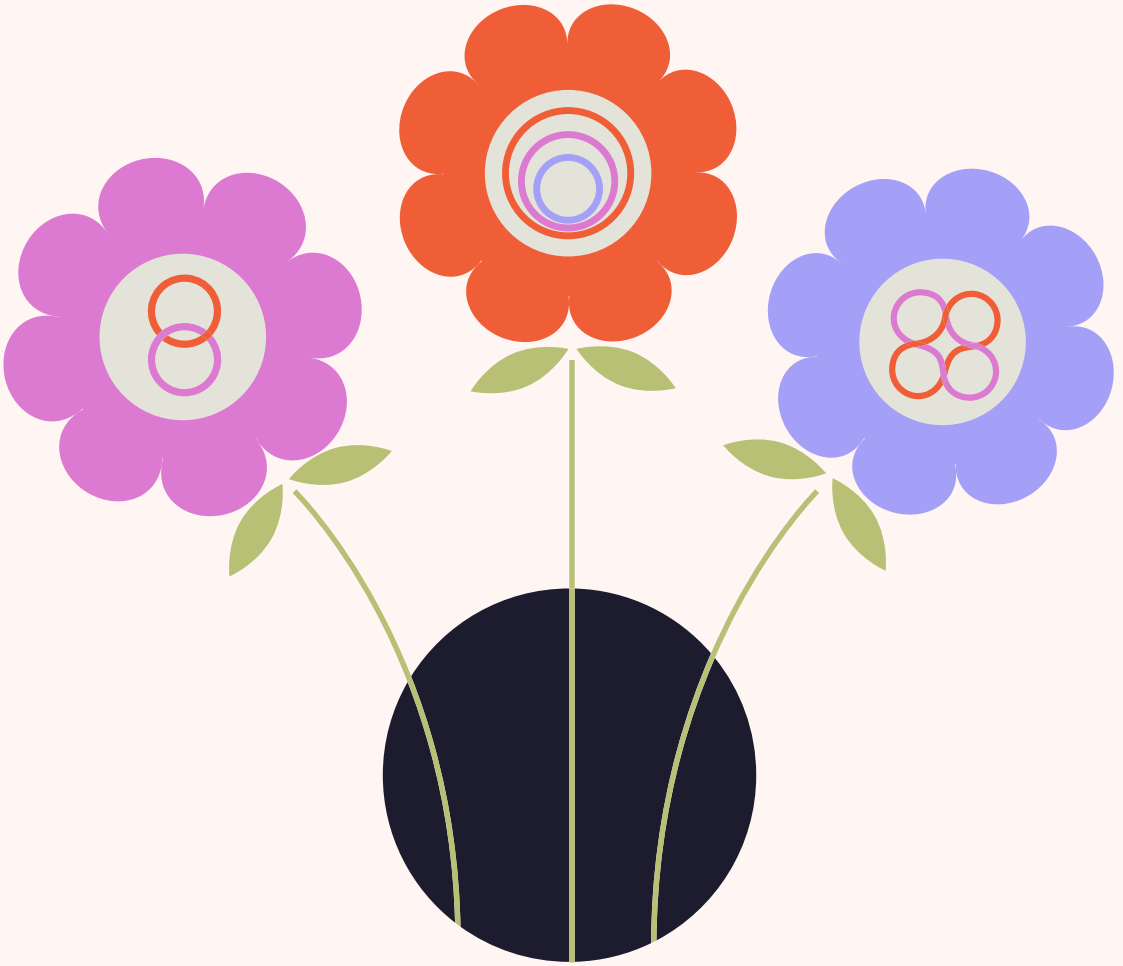
We are not looking for cure-all products and solutions or initiatives that elevate equity in name only. Rather, we seek to address questions such as:

- How do we invest in approaches that prioritize the humanity of educators and students and ensure this investment is as well-resourced as efforts to promote learning standards, curriculum and assessment, and research?
- How can our notion of accountability go beyond measures and systems to be inclusive of our individual and collective responsibility to each other?
- How do we provide public education that is unequivocally focused on equity, where equity

is viewed as a practice, not a destination; a generative dynamic of the learning community, not a planning document buzzword?

It is no longer tenable to treat teaching and learning as a transactional exchange of content knowledge and skills. We must embrace the notion that educators are facilitators of learning experiences in which students develop personal and intellectual autonomy and agency. **Teaching and learning are dynamic interactions among humans.** This mindset involves taking a radically different orientation from how we've been trained to think of school, and creating a fundamentally different dynamic of control and power to center a learning community.

What we are proposing goes well beyond the technocratic solutions of the Education Reform movement. We've seen that playing on the edges does not lead to sustained impact, better quality, or changed experiences. We need a clear vision to bring about the underlying promise of education to every student, specifically those currently underserved. And we believe that the change we need to see will come from within and be sustained when school communities transform and reinvent themselves — not by reactive necessity, but by conscious design.



A NEW VISION FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Anchors for Equity

If we begin by acknowledging and addressing the elephant, change is within our grasp. A new vision for teaching and learning is anchored in three powerful and highly integrated shifts that can help reshape the culture of schools and systems. For each shift, we've included some related commitments and implications to operationalize these shifts into practice. Note that these commitments and implications are not a final list — as we learn more from the field and from each other, we will update these.

We recognize that many of us have been exposed previously to frameworks and approaches geared towards improving outcomes for students. We intend to describe these design anchors at a high level and offer concrete narratives to make the design anchors and the accompanying shifts in hearts and mindsets come to life. In the interest of the latter, we have included an appendix of diverse profiles in practice (to come) that exemplify specific aspects of these anchors, how they integrate and build on each other, and where there is still room for growth.

Embrace teaching and learning as a dynamic relational human exchange



Embrace teaching and learning as a dynamic relational human exchange

Let's say it again: Equitable education can never result from a transactional exchange of content knowledge and skills. Powerful student- and equity-centered teaching and learning involves a reciprocating interplay of heart and mind. When educators seek to understand and honor their students' stories, they maximize their assets — the strengths of who they are. They invest in authentic relational and trust-building practices. They examine their approaches to content, instructional practice, and assessment. They commit to a human-centered, holistic, and dynamic approach that engages the whole teacher and the whole learner.

We also need to shift our priority focus from academic content and skills to an understanding of the integrated, interwoven social, emotional, and academic aspects of learning. We must create classrooms that champion multiple ways of learning and balance the quantitative with the qualitative. Likewise, we must balance knowing where students are in terms of meeting academic expectations with the “art” of prioritizing a holistic perspective of who our students are as full human beings.





EMBRACE

COMMITMENTS &
IMPLICATIONS

1

Commit to knowing yourself, your students, and your content

1

Every adult needs to consider how their own culture and identity influence the power dynamics in their interactions and the richness of what they have to offer.

Similarly, when educators come to deeply know their students, and create learning experiences that tap into their students' strengths, interests, contexts, and cultures, instruction focused on rich academic content takes root at the intersection of knowing self and knowing others.

2

Discover and leverage learners' unique and diverse assets and ways of learning

2

Everyone in the system is enriched when we leverage every student’s community, cultural, and linguistic capital, when we commit to understanding their experiences and stories, validate their competencies, and recognize and name their challenges.

Learner-centered, assets-based instruction creates a growth mindset in students by connecting to their existing skills and knowledge, making learners feel seen for what they know and known for who they are, and building confidence and a sense of agency. This educational vision sees that there is no such thing as an “average learner” and aims to understand and meet the needs of students who learn and think differently — because in this vision, every student learns and thinks differently.



An additional implication and subsequent commitment for this anchor relates to professional learning for educators.

If we expect teachers to create classrooms that champion multiple ways of learning, then our professional learning should also honor that adults represent all kinds of different learners, too (different cultures, identities, ways of learning and thinking). Our professional learning should model what we want teachers to provide for students — accommodating, motivating spaces in which the diverse needs of every learner are honored and understood.



Changing the way we think of ‘educator’ can also change the knowledge that is valued or what counts as ‘education’. For instance, welcoming Indigenous knowledge into classrooms, curriculum, and learning materials.”

**Veronica Lane, NTC Equity Commissioner / Chief Data Officer,
Office of the Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs**

Expand the concept of educator and community in schools



Expand the concept of educator and community in schools

All the adults in the building know and interact with students in some important way on a daily basis. Their investment, knowledge, and assets can contribute to a dynamic school community working together toward shared goals. We need also to think of deep partnerships with students, families, caregivers, guardians, community leaders, Native nations, and other stakeholders as key to achieving our aims. This means investing in family and community engagement, nurturing a much broader notion of the school community and communities of learners, and situating education systems in service to their surrounding neighborhoods in meaningful ways.





EXPAND

COMMITMENTS &
IMPLICATIONS

1

**Learn from your
students about
how and where
they learn —
and from whom**

1

One way to operationalize this design anchor is to talk to students about learning — and who and where they learn from.

We tend to think of learning as being something limited to the four walls of the classroom, but students also learn important content and skills from extracurricular activities such as sports and band. They learn from others in the community, from their families and peers, and from online communities. Learning happens in many environments, and the path to discovering the full landscape of rich learning environments is through connecting with students.



EXPAND

**COMMITMENTS &
IMPLICATIONS**

2

**Reexamine your
ideas of who the
stakeholders are
in your ecosystem**



2

The flip side of the preceding implication involves thinking about the school and the adults in the school building as part of a larger ecosystem that is serving the students and the community.

As we begin to understand the full scope of where our students are learning, we must re-examine the roles of those adults who work in the education system but may not be traditionally thought of as educators. They can include non-teaching staff such as school aides, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, coaches, nurses, and school psychologists. We must also expand our thinking about stakeholders outside the school to include small business owners, local elected officials, local advocacy/ social service groups, and other systems that serve the community.

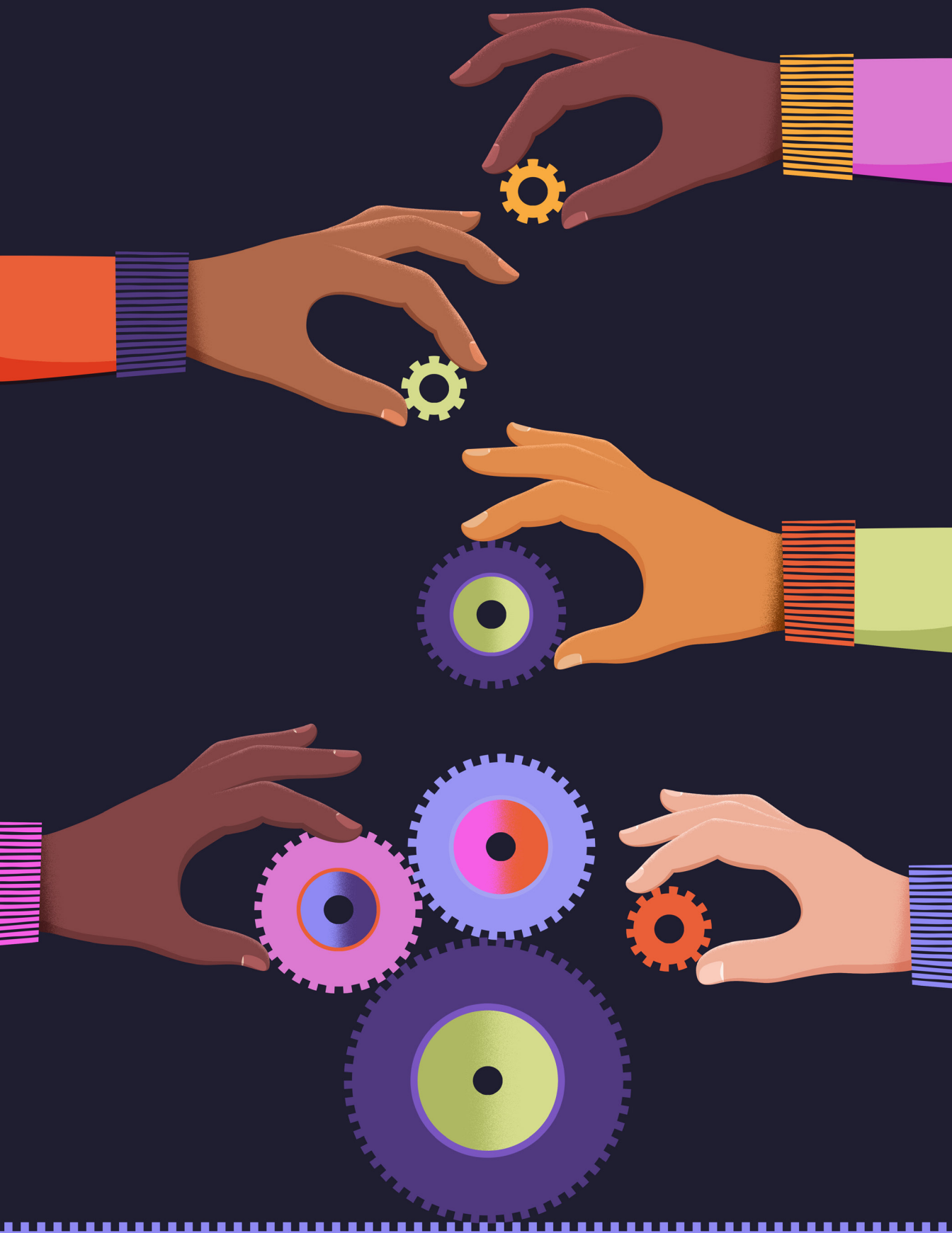




Broadening the definition of who an educator is and where student learning takes place pushes the profession to ... change the deficit assumptions, beliefs, and narratives that many people hold about young people, and about the different types of educators that exist inside and outside of the school ecosystem; challenge what knowledge is valued.”

**Lisa Quay, NTC Equity Commissioner / Executive Director,
Student Experience Research Network**

Co-design systems to sustain equity



Co-design systems to sustain equity

Given the current design of systems and our collective tendencies to gravitate towards what we know, this anchor is perhaps one of the most important. If we are starting from acknowledging the elephant in the (class)room — that the current system is flawed and doing what it is designed to do — then the current system must be re-designed in collaboration with those most impacted by the system. Stated explicitly, this anchor requires a shift in focus from prioritizing how things have always been done to prioritizing the outcomes the stakeholders in your system want and need. Equity means everyone gets what they need to thrive. Building thriving schools requires a deep knowledge of the communities in which they are situated and including students and families in the design process.

It may also be necessary that we rethink what we mean by a system. A system need not be an entire school or a district or a state agency. A system is a grade-level team, an individual classroom, or even small-group instruction. These smaller systems can integrate our deep knowledge of the communities in which they are situated, and include students and families in the design process. When we ensure that everyone is involved in co-designing systems, everyone gets what they need to thrive. And that's true equity.

To be clear, we are advocating for a level of understanding and sharing of power that is rarely observed. It requires elevating opportunities to tap the power of learning, knowing, and caring about one another in order to create a rich and vibrant ecosystem for impactful student- and equity-centered teaching and learning.



1

Create the time and space for building an equity practice

1

Operationalizing impactful student– and equity-centered teaching and learning is only possible with deep introspection.

It's a process, not a product. It is ongoing and iterative. It can be messy, uncomfortable, difficult, and inconclusive. To achieve it, we need to let the work dictate the schedule, not the other way around. From professional development to policy to classroom practice, we must build new habits of mind, create places and spaces for collaboration, and internalize continuous reflection to guide and honor the learning journey of educators and the young people they serve.



2

Identify ways and places to sustain and grow change

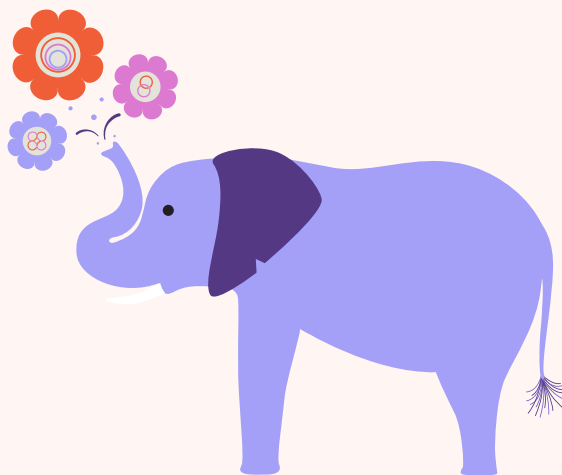
2

Another adaptive implication of this design anchor involves approaching your system with the same asset orientation you are using in your approach to your learners.

As you begin to engage in building an equity practice, you may uncover current practices and bright spots that you want to expand and elevate. You will want to learn from those already working towards change, their mindsets, the concrete steps they've taken. In some cases, you may need sustain the work at a lab site; in others, the work will already be well situated for expansion.

NEXT STEPS

Learn More and Take Action



Educating human beings is incredibly complex work, and centering humanity in our education systems begins with us.

Transformative work happens in and by community. We are excited to invite and team up with stakeholders and changemakers invested in co-crafting a new vision and approach for public education. If “every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets,” we can design education systems that are equitable and high-quality and that center human experience. Together, we can support the development of young minds and hearts to be the next generation of leadership this country needs and deserves.

Acknowledging the elephant in the (class)room and addressing it in a

meaningful and sustainable way takes a lot of work. To be sustainable and not episodic, we need to share best practices and learn from each other. We may discover that addressing the elephant in the (class)room is not only necessary but deeply rewarding. Let’s shine a light on the people and places where equity design anchors are in place, enabling students, educators, and systems to thrive.

Please visit our website at newteachercenter.org/elephant for resources and to follow our journey.



We assume education was about young people learning stuff, but we have to name the fact that it was not designed for that, it was designed for stratified preparation for society. The ideological underpinnings are crucial. We have to be willing to name it. We have to get people to name what they believe.”

**Dr. Tanji Reed Marshall, NTC Equity Commissioner /
Director of P-12 Practice, The Education Trust**

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