



# Helping Teachers Succeed

## A Framework Rooted in Building School Belonging for Teachers of Students with High-Risk Factors

*By Lymari Benitez and Katie Smith Milway*



## About Pace Center for Girls

Founded in 1985, **Pace Center for Girls** provides free year-round middle and high school academics, case management, counseling, and life skills development in a safe and supportive environment that recognizes the girls' past trauma and builds upon their individual strengths. Dedicated to meeting the social, emotional, and education needs of girls, Pace has a successful and proven program model that has changed the life trajectory of more than 40,000 girls and is recognized as one of the nation's leading advocates for vulnerable girls.



## About MilwayPLUS Social Impact Advisors

**MilwayPLUS** advises philanthropy and nonprofits with a focus on research, content development, publishing and communications strategies to influence good practices and advance change. Katie Smith Milway, principal of MilwayPLUS and a former partner at The Bridgespan Group, has a background in journalism, nonprofit management, strategy consulting, and governance. Her work in sustainable development across four continents includes program design and measurement, donor development and communications, and organizational effectiveness.

**D**r. Marcia Lyles, a professor of practice in education leadership at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College, has supported a spectrum of educators working with students at risk of academic failure or school suspension throughout her career. “I’ve always worked in an environment where there were a high number of students who had high-risk indicators,” says Lyles, a former teacher and deputy chancellor in New York City and superintendent in Jersey City, New Jersey, and Wilmington, Delaware. “As a teacher I supported students; as a principal I supported teachers; and as a superintendent I supported principals.” In all cases, Lyles, an adviser to this study, found a common thread of need that could make or break an educator’s commitment: their sense of belonging in their school, which helped them build belonging for their students.

So too, is our conclusion from the wide-ranging study we conducted with a panel of advisers on effective teacher supports, rooted in practitioner experience at Pace Center for Girls, a nonprofit providing academic and counseling services in the Southeastern United States for girls with a high number of risk factors and adverse childhood experiences. We interviewed Lyles and other experts in teacher supports, reviewed the reasons teachers of higher-risk students gave for work challenges,<sup>1</sup> conducted focus groups with instructional coaches, benchmarked schools serving students with academic and behavior challenges *and* long-serving faculty, reviewed student feedback, and surveyed literature on strategies and tactics for helping teachers be successful and affirming. “At Pace we have evidence that girls’ success highly correlates with a consistent, caring adult relationship, and that a teacher’s satisfaction depends on relationships not only with our girls but with other team members, leaders, and a supportive community,” says Mary Marx, CEO of Pace Center for Girls.

In short, the much-studied outcomes that teachers want for their students are the same outcomes that they (and any human, really) want for themselves: competence, autonomy, purpose, and belonging. Our research shows that belonging is the most important of the four. Across 56 cases we reviewed, a low sense of belonging was the most frequently cited reason for discouragement and departure from a teaching position. Said Mike Thornton, president and CEO of AMIkids, a national organization across eight states that annually serves about 5,000 youth with increased risk factors: “Fostering a sense of belonging is the [most important], not only with our youth but with our team members as well.”

“Across 56 cases we reviewed, a low sense of belonging was the most frequently cited reason for discouragement and departure from a teaching position.”

---

1 At Pace, a March 2023 study by Korn Ferry found keys to teacher retention to be competitive compensation, work environment supports, greater role clarity, and belonging.



**Teacher and student bonding at Pace Center Pasco, FL.** (Photo credit: Pace Center for Girls)

But belonging doesn't come out of nowhere. In successful schools or organizations, belonging is built atop those other critical outcomes. Building teachers' competence, autonomy, and shared purpose within a school community fosters a sense of belonging. Retention fails when, in the absence of sufficient and relevant professional development, mentoring, classroom resources, and well-being and leadership support, teachers feel less competent, less trusted to make decisions in their classrooms, and less confident that they share goals and aims with school peers and leaders. School environments where teachers struggle to find a sense of belonging are the most likely to be losing teachers early.

Even before the COVID pandemic accelerated teacher departures, education researchers predicted the national gap between public school teacher supply and demand would widen to near 200,000 by next year,<sup>2</sup> with a higher share of credentialed teachers leaving high-poverty schools due to working conditions.<sup>3</sup> And by 2022 researchers had counted more than 200,000 teaching positions vacant or filled by underqualified teachers.<sup>4</sup> How can leaders in schools, school districts, and state education departments address this need? To understand optimal teacher supports, we explored the teacher capabilities that academic experts and successful practitioners affirm foster the four desired outcomes of competence, autonomy, purpose, and

---

2 Leib Sutchter, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Desiree Carver-Thomas, *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand and Shortages in the U.S.* (Washington, DC: Learning Policy Institute, 2016).

3 Emma García and Elaine Weiss, *The Teacher Shortage Is Real, Large and Growing and Worse Than We Thought* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2019).

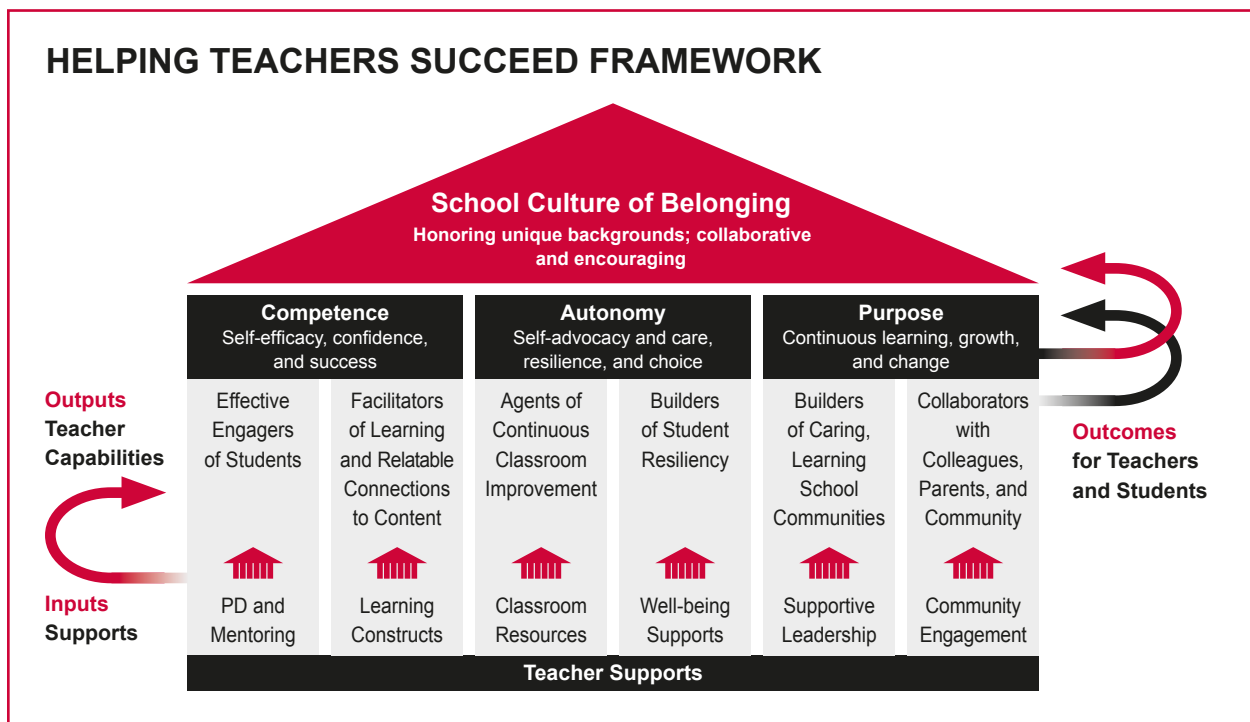
4 Tuan D. Nguyen, Chan B. Lam and Paul Bruno, *Is there a national teacher shortage? A systematic examination of reports of teacher shortages in the United States*, (Brown University: Annenberg Institute, EdWorkingPaper No. 22-631, 2022)

belonging. And we identified key investments in six pillars of support for the first three outcomes, which can be delivered in ways that build the fourth, a strong school culture of belonging.

At Pace we observe that such investments lead to a virtuous cycle of cause and effect:

- Teachers who feel competent experience less stress with change and greater enthusiasm for implementing new and improved teaching practices.
- Teachers with a sense of autonomy feel trusted and are comfortable adapting classroom lessons and routines to better meet the needs of individual students.
- Teachers with a high sense of purpose strive to create classroom environments that are engaging and conducive to learning.
- Teachers who feel they belong at their schools take the initiative to build social support networks, share best practices, learn from one another, and create a cohesive learning experience for students rooted in collaboration.

In short, supporting teachers' pedagogy and well-being is crucial for fostering healthy school cultures that shape students' experiences. The framework below and definitions that follow break down an approach to build such a school culture.



## 1. Building *competence* through professional development and helpful learning constructs

**Professional development and mentoring** builds teachers' competence, confidence, and joy that comes from growing skills. It can include formal trainings, on-the-job mentoring/coaching,

and instructional leadership. All of these elements can be thoughtfully delivered in ways that build teacher relationships through collaborative learning with one another and with school and community leaders.

School leaders can adopt **learning constructs**, too, that help teachers engage even the most challenging students, such as project-based and experiential learning, and technology that allows teachers to differentiate learning goals and approaches based on a student's strengths. To simultaneously build belonging, learning constructs can be implemented through team teaching with reflective working groups.

## 2. Fostering *autonomy* with classroom resources and support for teacher well-being

**Classroom resources** that allow teachers to use their best techniques foster teacher autonomy. These resources can be specific equipment, like smart boards for group learning; news site subscriptions for students' independent research; spaces for small-group discussions; or quiet corners where students who are feeling emotionally charged can use calming techniques. Other resources include support from aides and other specialists so that teachers can focus on classroom learning.

A second way to boost teachers' ability to independently guide their classrooms relates to their own **well-being**, including physical, emotional, and mental health. School leaders can encourage mental health check-ins, peer support groups, and work-life balance, which feels authentic when a school provides high-quality substitutes, reduces administrative tasks, and creates opportunities for teacher self-care. Investing in both classroom and personal resources makes teachers feel cared for and builds a school culture of compassion and belonging.

## 3. Growing a shared sense of *purpose* via supportive school leadership and community engagement

Growing a shared sense of purpose starts when **supportive school leaders** encourage meaningful teacher and staff collaboration to learn, grow, and help students succeed. This often takes the form of professional learning communities, where teachers can share knowledge and advance collective reflection on what's working and what's not to improve both pedagogy and students' learning environment.

Engaging parents and community leaders in teacher and student success reinforces a shared sense of purpose across school, home, and civic institutions that can support teachers in supporting students with high-risk factors. **Community engagement** broadens teachers' sense of belonging to both school and community.

“Engaging parents and community leaders in teacher and student success reinforces a shared sense of purpose across school, home, and civic institutions.”

## Addressing Four Weak Links

Of course, none of this is easy. In seeking to grow teachers' competence, autonomy, and purpose, and thus build belonging, teachers and academics consistently cited four too-often-overlooked elements.

Two weak links related to building **competence**. The first was *lesson planning and preparation* to anticipate errors, develop culturally apt examples, and intentionally create opportunities for student success.<sup>5</sup> The second was *classroom management* to focus students on learning, implement effective learning routines, and use rigor as an antidote to behavior issues. These elements are critical to helping teachers engage students; facilitate learning that feels safe, is supportive, and affirms home culture; and continuously improve the classroom experience. A third related to building **autonomy**: Our interviewees cited the need for more *mental health supports* and reflective practice to review a lesson's impact (what worked and what didn't) and evolve approaches. Finally, to grow **shared purpose**, they cited the need for more *educator learning communities* as part of collective reflective practice in school and out.

All four components equip and encourage teachers to build resilience in their students, engage in their classrooms, and contribute to a compassionate, learning school culture. They also foster collaboration among school colleagues, parents, and community leaders who can support teachers in supporting students. Taken together these elements bolster a teacher's sense of belonging. Let's look at tactics for strengthening the weaker links.

## Bolstering Competence to Build Belonging

### LESSON PLANNING AND PREPARATION

How can a school's limited resources be allocated to bolster belonging, which better retains teachers in the most demanding classrooms? The answer may lie more in *how* money is spent than how *much*. For example, to improve training and classroom tools, a teacher might better ground lessons in a student's home culture, think through experiences that will motivate students, and respond thoughtfully to common errors. But the key to enabling such professional development to foster better lesson plans *and* more tightly bond teachers lies in ensuring collaborative process. At [Miami Dade College School of Education](#), Dean Carmen Concepción, who also advised our research, says, "Purposeful placement of our student teachers is pivotal to their professional growth and sense of belonging within the educational community." The college ensures that aspiring educators are integrated into

“The key to enabling professional development to foster better lesson plans and more tightly bond teachers lies in ensuring collaborative process.”

---

5 See Chapter 2 on “Lesson Preparation” in Doug Lemov's book *Teach Like a Champion*, and “wise feedback” described in David Yeager's forthcoming book *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*.

schools where instructional leaders value and foster a culture of professional learning and where teacher leaders actively engage in mentoring and guiding them through their formative experiences.

Take another example: At Youth Villages [residential schools in Tennessee](#), which serve more than 300 students with mental, emotional, and behavioral challenges on two campuses, about half the students are in highly secured buildings. After Youth Villages schools lost more than a quarter of their 45 teachers to public schools during the COVID pandemic, program director Anne Cannon shifted the principals' jobs from supervising both teachers and aides to focusing just on teachers. Counseling staff supervised the aides, who deal with emotional and behavioral issues. With the shift, principals doubled down on cross-pollinating professional development for teachers. They now dismiss students one hour early once a week to bring academic departments from all schools together on a video call to improve pedagogy, at times inviting experts to the meetings. "If I'm the high school science teacher at Dogwood School," says Cannon, "I'm the only one. We want to create learning communities by discipline across campuses." Since the shift to collaborative professional development, combined with improvements in compensation, Cannon says Youth Villages schools have retained close to 90 percent of their teachers, which is good news for students. Says Cannon: "The teacher relationship is everything for students' progress."

**“The teacher relationship is everything for students' progress.”**

**Anne Cannon, Youth Villages residential schools**

We heard similar stories across peer education networks. For example, one school principal, now a faculty associate in education at Simon Fraser University, reapplied the budget for sending a few math teachers to a conference toward bringing a math instructional coach in-house to help all elementary math teachers and assistants. Budget retained also covered funding substitutes so that most math teachers could observe the demonstration lessons and join debriefs. We heard of team lesson planning and prep by department, where veterans welcome and help onboard new teachers and host daily teacher-team lunch meetings to reflect on how lessons went. "As a novice teacher, I faced the challenge of engaging my middle school students without a robust tool kit of strategies," says Concepción. "Team teaching and nurturing guidance from a dedicated mentor-teacher instilled in me a sense of belonging. This mentorship was more than just support; it was an invitation into a community of educators committed to my success and growth."

At Pace, a number of centers are role-modeling collaborative, reflective practice. At the end of every school day, the entire staff meets for 20 minutes to debrief on "positives, negatives, and tomorrows." They discuss what has worked to engage girls in learning, what's fallen flat, and ideas for next-day improvements. Other centers have a morning huddle to cover similar ground. This collective reflection affirms that staff are journeying together, value all voices, and want to achieve solutions, and has inspired many centers to adopt a reflective all-staff gathering.





**Pace Center Clay, FL, Growth & Change Ceremony, with hearts for each girl participant.**  
(Photo credit: Pace Center for Girls)

## **CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Classroom management, another often underemphasized skill in teacher training, can bond teachers to students and parents.

Important techniques relate to setting standards and expectations, developing routines to create a culture of attention and rigor, role-modeling and accepting student feedback, and learning from peers.<sup>6</sup> A student's progress on any of these elements creates opportunities for teachers to send a positive note to parents, who may rarely see one, and generate interest in extending a routine to home. In essence, classroom management is the behavior-discipline-planning piece of lesson planning. Dr. Erica McCray, a [professor of special education in the College of Education](#) at the University of Florida who has taught students with learning and behavioral disabilities, suggests, "It's about watching how students enter a classroom and observing differences in body language, pulling aside a student who seems troubled so they realize someone notices they are not okay and giving them quiet space to calm down so they feel seen and heard."

Educator Anna-Lisa Mackey, who specializes in training teachers to create those safe, calming spaces, concurs. Mackey runs the [PATHS \(Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies\) program](#) used in U.S. and Canadian elementary schools and elsewhere to educate students with high-risk factors. She also created and runs [Emozi](#), a similar social and emotional learning program for middle and high schoolers, now in trials. Mackey finds classroom management the gateway to all learning. "You can't teach anything in chaos. ... Teachers have to learn [classroom management] strategies, then teach them to students, then they both implement them together." She tells the story of an Emozi-trained teacher who had created a classroom space where students could

---

6 See Chapter 11 on "Setting High Expectations" in Doug Lemov's book, *Teach Like a Champion*, and "wise feedback" described in David Yeager's forthcoming book *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*.

reset and self-regulate with a big poster on the wall that said SCOPE (Stop. Consider. Options. Plan. Evaluate.). The teacher first used the approach, aloud, on herself after she had planned a great lesson but the students weren't listening. She role-modeled the SCOPE process and invited students to collaborate on solving her problem. In another instance, where Mackey observed two students in discord, an Emozi-trained teacher sent the two to the poster corner to work out a solution. They did.

Pace creates spaces within its centers that allow girls to find peace and calm. At its [Broward County Center](#), girls can take a break at a giant coloring mandala to reflect and reset. Says Pace teacher Jordan Green: "It's a de-stress tool for the girls. They know they can step away at any time to color the mural for five to 10 minutes. I have never had a student misuse this."

“You can't teach anything in chaos. ...Teachers have to learn (classroom management) strategies, then teach them to students, then they both implement them together.”

**Anna-Lisa Mackey, Emozi**

According to classroom management experts like Pedro Noguera, Charlotte Danielson, and Doug Lemov, whose seminal work *Teach Like a Champion* suggests and illustrates 63 tactics for focusing students on learning, teachers can improve their own emotional health by developing and applying classroom routines that can guide transitions and de-escalate trauma.



“Calm down” coloring mandala at Pace Center for Girls, Broward County, FL. (Photo credit: Jordan Green, teacher, Pace Center for Girls)

## Fostering Autonomy to Build Belonging

### MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Building better supports for teachers' well-being starts with helping them stay mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy themselves so they can nurture resilience in their students and a caring, collaborative classroom culture.

There are plenty of ways school leaders can role-model and support such well-being habits, including exercise and nutrition. (Pace's CEO Marx brings her running shoes to work and runs daily.) Moreover, they can free teachers to teach by reducing administrative tasks and ensuring competent substitutes. And they can build a culture that cares for teachers and students when they experience classroom trauma with check-ins and no-stigma mental health days, thanks to competent subs.

Paul Tough, author of [Helping Children Succeed](#) (and a third adviser to this study), mentions the [Chicago School Readiness Project's](#) professional development plan that assigns mental health professionals to classrooms to help both teachers and students.<sup>7</sup> Mackey, of PATHS/Emozi, points to [Hull Services](#) in Alberta, Canada, which collaborates with the Calgary Board of Education to counsel and school students who need behavioral or mental health supports beyond those in public schools, and, impressively, retains teaching and counseling staff for decades. One of their practices is debriefing both teacher and student for trauma post-incidents and giving teachers a break to reflect and regroup. "Most schools don't address the fact that these events are just as emotionally charged for teachers and fail to take time [to help them]." Denise Manderson, Hull's senior director for safe directions, training, and education services who has been at Hull for nearly 30 years, believes this is the secret to the long-term commitment of staff and teachers. "We attract teachers called to this student population," said Manderson. "We strive to give them the support they need by way of training and reflective debriefs at the end of the day and after crises. It's a parallel process: When we take care of our teachers, they can take care of our students."

**“We strive to give (teachers) the support they need by way of training and reflective debriefs at the end of the day and after crises. ...When we take care of our teachers, they can take care of our students.”**

**Denise Manderson, Hull Services**

This parallel process is alive and well at [EL Education](#). Founded in 1992 from a collaboration between Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA, EL partners on-site with 150 schools across the United States on an experiential learning model. At these schools each day starts with a meeting for students called "Crew."<sup>8</sup> It's an intensive advisory that pairs

7 Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), p. 46.

8 EL Education plans to add Crew curriculum to its open resources serving thousands of schools beyond the 150 partners where they work on-site.

10 to 15 students with a school adult for a support-group-like discussion every day of every year of middle school and high school. Adult Crew leaders can be any school staff—a teacher, principal, nurse—and essentially become mentors, learning each student’s strengths and challenges, their families’ strengths and challenges, their hopes and dreams. Crew contributes to a school culture of vulnerability, trust, and belonging, building character and confidence in students along with academic, mental, and emotional health, says Ron Berger, EL’s senior adviser for teaching and learning. He credits Crew with increasing EL school graduation and college acceptance rates to 95 percent and higher.

But the true secret sauce of Crew is that the adults who lead it also experience it. “The only way to prepare teachers to lead Crew is to have Staff Crews,” says Berger. The staff meet in their own Crews to share strengths and struggles. It’s rare to find a staff member without a history of trauma, loss, substance abuse, or other abuse in their extended family, and they learn to talk about it so they can help their students talk about it. Some teachers push back about having to act as counselors, but EL coaches remind them that they are not at school, for example, simply to teach math. Rather, teachers are there to support students in learning math and to support students’ sense of safety and belonging in class, which can shape their math identity and, in turn, their mathematical success. For many teachers, Staff Crew provides them their own support group and place to belong.

In a similar vein, all Pace girls have access to counselors whenever needed, and team members receive formal training to create a shared language and approach to assessing situations and opportunities to address girls’ emotional needs. To illustrate, a training like the “[7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)” provides a common language for assessing one’s self-efficacy and for reflecting on personal and professional situations. In addition, every team member at Pace has access to emotional support at no cost through [Modern Health](#), a platform that provides live therapy and group sessions.



Pace Center Jacksonville, FL, counselor meeting with a Pace girl. (Photo credit: Pace Center for Girls)

## Growing Shared Purpose to Build Belonging

Dr. Veronica Medina, an instructional coach at Pace, likes to say well-being starts with the “Big Why”: Why are you here, and what is your purpose? “I’ve used this with my students,” says Medina. “We would write our ‘why’ on a card on the first day of school, and I would write mine, too, so when times got tough, I would remember it.” Purpose, it turns out, breeds resilience. And building collaborative learning communities builds *shared purpose*.

### LEARNING COMMUNITIES WITHIN SCHOOL AND WITHOUT

Approaches from collaborative professional development to Staff Crew effectively create learning communities for teachers, which across all our research emerged as the most powerful means to jointly build competence and belonging. Yet learning communities were not systematically embedded at all the schools for students with high-risk factors we studied. For convenience, learning took place, in some cases, via self-serve online modules, which can convey concepts with sophistication but don’t help build relationships.

Education thought leaders also pointed to the value of extending learning communities beyond school walls to foster community connections, such as field trips, speakers and internships, and school space to host community meetings.

Noguera, a prolific author on [closing the U.S. student achievement gap](#) and the dean of University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education, advocates celebrating teacher successes on a regular basis to build faculty esprit de corps and inviting the corps to work on school initiatives together. He also advocates extending learning communities outside the school, involving students and teachers in community research. The latter is something Pace Center for Girls has embraced by setting up Girls Coordinating Councils where community stakeholders, including Pace team members and girls, come together to influence favorable conditions for girls’ and young women’s development.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Danielson, author of *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*, discusses the “teacher leader” who energizes and leads innovation among other teachers in their department, be it designing field trips or multipronged ways to teach math. Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, suggests bringing the community into the classroom to lead hands-on learning that honors home culture, for example, quilting. She also suggests schools open up space for community

The “teacher leader” energizes and leads innovation among other teachers in their department, be it designing field trips or multipronged ways to teach math.

Drawn from Charlotte Danielson’s *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*

<sup>9</sup> Lymari Benitez, Yessica Cancel, Mary Marx, and Katie Smith Milway, *Building Equitable Evidence of Social Impact*, Pace Center for Girls White Paper (Creative Commons, 2021), pp. 15-16. In 2018, Pace’s Girls Coordinating Council in Broward County created multilingual resource cards with info on legal aid and court appearances for girls to carry in event of arrest. The next year, arrests declined 16% and failures to appear in court, 27%.

classes. And Adeyemi Stenbridge, author of *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy*, suggests that a teacher's ideal persona is builder of caring learning communities.

How to go about creating them? For starters, create a shared space to learn and a shared time to do it. At [City Year Greater Boston](#), which supplies a corps of 250 student success coaches to K-12 classrooms in underserved schools, the coaches train together in a summer academy, including learning how to build successful relationships with the teachers they are destined to help and to be culturally proficient and competent coaching students. Says Executive Director Monica Roberts, "I visit schools, our coaches visit, our managers visit, and we put all the data together and measure against student performance." City Year asks teachers to share their lesson plans with corps members so they can align with goals. And Corps members have a shared space to learn from and share with one another throughout the day. If Roberts had a magic wand, she says she would go a step further and conjure up a simulated classroom for coaches to test their skills, together, as part of learning.

City Year coaches work with students off track for public school promotion. At Youth Villages, teachers work with students off the grid of mainstream schooling. They bring teachers together in a shared virtual space for a 10-week new-hire training with each of the four principals teaching a segment. Everyone is online at the same time and can comment in the chat. Among other things, they learn about Youth Villages' knowledge management system where they can access past lesson plans and ideas and reach out for advice to teachers who created them.

Meanwhile, West London Zone, a nonprofit that supports K-12 students in a 4-mile square area of London with extreme income disparity, brings student support staff, called Link Workers, together in person every Wednesday morning for collaborative professional learning. A recent training built staff skills in experiential learning, belonging *and* mindfulness. For a whole semester, Link Workers came together weekly to immerse themselves in experiential learning activities to learn how to lead them with students, including playing a card game that focuses on fostering conversations around developing good self esteem. "We got great feedback on that style of training...describing a technique while workers experienced it," said Link Worker Manager Mia O'Connell. "It made Link Workers more mindful themselves, by helping them to think holistically about timing experiential learning so that youth would be receptive."

## **How School Leaders Can Advance Inclusive Culture**

School leaders set the tone, priorities, and artifacts of school culture. Lyles, the former superintendent in New Jersey and Delaware, landed on the theme of creating a culture of belonging for students and staff through her learning community of about a dozen New Jersey superintendents. Lyles's dissertation was on house structure—how to create a sense of belonging for a particular place. This gave her a blueprint for what she eventually called "discovery houses": groups of teachers working and planning together and listening to students and one another in mixed learning communities.



**Pace Center Pinellas, FL, experiential learning session.** (Photo credit: Pace Center for Girls)

Where can other leaders begin? The first question to answer is whether your school system has enough informed leadership capacity, like Lyles's, to devote to culture building or could benefit from inviting a culture-building ally like EL Education or Communities in Schools to work alongside. The second question is whether you have access to content and delivery mechanisms to promote culture-building ideas to influence the way adults and students interact. In other words, are you best off building or borrowing expertise?

If the answer is to borrow, start with finding the right partner. Communities In Schools, for example, is a network of 105 independent nonprofit organizations that work with more than 500 local school districts to deliver classroom, school, and community supports to students and teachers to create positive conditions for learning. CIS works both directly in schools and through connecting services to schools and students via more than 8,000 community partners. In communities without a local CIS affiliate, the network has begun to license the CIS model directly to state departments of education, local school districts and other nonprofits. CIS evolved its approach during the pandemic beyond focusing on outcomes for students to include outcomes for teachers. "We are trying to provide [teachers] with the professional development tools and skills to create a culture and environment where they can work collaboratively with their peers," says Dr. Heather Clawson, CIS chief program and innovation officer.

Working with school leadership to tailor a plan to their school's needs and goals, CIS offers professional development and support to teachers and staff that focuses on five essential areas for building a positive school climate for learning. The first discipline is *trauma-informed teaching* to catch signs of distress in students and create safe spaces to reset emotions. The second is *restorative practice*, which, for example, preempts and addresses classroom conflict via small-group discussions and agreed classroom norms. Third, *developmental relationships training*

shows teachers how to share power with students, inviting them to facilitate exercises or lead assignments, which can help build autonomy. Fourth, they train teachers in *social and emotional learning techniques*—to build students’ and teachers’ self-regulation and resilience. And, finally, CIS focuses on *well-being*, including mindfulness and peer support groups, a linchpin during the pandemic. “We are moving toward every one of our affiliates having credentialed expertise in those five areas ... to make sure all adults [at a school] are supported,” says Clawson. “And we will be measuring perceived benefits of these supports on teachers, including retention, through a forthcoming teacher survey.”

School systems home-growing their culture will need to start with structure and staffing. Lyles started building her school leaders’ competence in inclusion by exposing them to concrete strategies captured in children’s books. She started every principals’ meeting with reading a book that illustrated a theme of belonging, such as Gabi Garcia’s *We Are All Connected*. She supported self-designed principal study groups and created professional learning communities, recommending trainers like [Yvette Jackson](#). Important for building relationships, she had principals learning alongside their teachers. “Creating a community of learners is a structural activity,” says Lyles. “It means teachers share classrooms and resources and come together as a collective force.”

“Creating a community of learners is a structural activity. It means teachers share classrooms and resources and come together as a collective force.”

**Dr. Marcia Lyles, Columbia University Teachers College**

[KIPP Schools](#), a network of 275 tuition-free public charter schools serving 120,000 students in disadvantaged communities across the U.S., took the do-it-yourself route. In 2017 they hired John Widmer into the KIPP Foundation as the network’s inaugural director of school culture. Widmer, a former teacher, dean, and assistant principal at Mastery charter schools in Philadelphia, began growing a team around him with regional deans to support schools in living out KIPP values from how breakfast is served to relationship-building games and parent communications. In 2020, recounts Widmer, “with COVID and the murder of George Floyd, KIPP began thinking about equity for the adults in its schools as well as students.” Historically each KIPP school leader owned and understood the community he or she served, but this meant students at one school experienced KIPP one way, and at a different school, another way. Now KIPP is working to design a more consistent experience across schools anchored in guiding principles and offerings. Says Widmer, “It’s about academic achievement and positive identity ... crafting a culture of learning and compassion.”

For the students, KIPP is working to standardize best instructional practices for literacy and math and to create a schoolwide foundation of safe environments, predictable routines, and responses from adults in the classroom, all of which Widmer characterizes as Tier 1 of a Maslow-like hierarchy of culture needs. Tier 2 builds intellectual and emotional culture with differentiated learning and caring adult relationships. For example, in some KIPP schools, weekly traditions



like shout-outs to teachers and staff foster well-being. Professional development equips teachers to hold these spaces and routines and employ the learning structures. And teachers can share what works with one another on KIPP Share, a media platform for lesson plans and other content where teachers can chat and connect with one another. For Tier 3, KIPP emphasizes the importance of community engagement—schools work to build a sense of family beyond the classroom via practices like hosting neighborhood festivals, giving parents a role in deciding on uniforms, creating electronics policies, and inviting community members onto the board. Observes Widmer (who recently returned to a charter school role in Philadelphia): “Across our entire network, we understand that belonging is a prerequisite to growing in autonomy and competence, and it builds every time [two people] talk.”

This range of investments in growing teacher competence, autonomy, purpose, and belonging at school systems like Youth Villages, EL Learning, and KIPP may be our best means to increase retention of teachers in America’s most demanding classrooms. And, as success breeds success, it stands to reason this could increase not only teacher commitment but also the flow of new teachers to help students with high-risk factors succeed in school and life. That’s our informed hope, but change will start when each leader at each relevant school takes action. To that end, we’ll look at how Pace is appropriating these learnings, and their early returns.

## Getting Started: How Pace Is Applying These Learnings

Since our study began, Pace has been applying our incremental findings to strengthen its own **multitiered professional development approach for teachers to build their competence, autonomy, and shared purpose**. The approach strengthens teacher supports and strongly commits to fulsome professional development opportunities, prioritizing employee well-being, and providing highly competitive compensation packages. It seems to be working: In tandem, Pace teacher retention has risen to 77% in the second half of 2023 from 53% for the 12 preceding months.

In the spirit of inviting other educators of youth with high-risk factors to learn alongside Pace, we’ll detail the Pace approach, which uses formal learning opportunities, technical assistance, and instructional coaching to build teacher competence. It creates context for greater teacher autonomy by well-defining their roles and responsibilities and providing clear guidelines for accountability. And it encourages shared purpose via teacher leadership. Pace delivers training through its lens of gender-responsive, trauma-informed, and strength-based teaching and learning. Ultimately, this approach provides a blueprint for continuous classroom improvement to help evolve the practice of teaching to one that consistently empowers teachers to empower healthy and academically successful girls.

“The Pace approach...creates context for greater teacher autonomy by well-defining their roles and responsibilities and providing clear guidelines for accountability..”

# The Pace Approach

## TIER 1: Organization-Wide Resources

**Building competence:** Teacher supports to build competence include workshops, webinars, and access to online platforms, which cover general teaching practices, classroom management, and technology integration. Pace designed these strategies to help teachers implement and sustain its academic model by aligning their classroom instruction to Pace's goals and values. Specific training that teachers receive on the essentials of learning management systems, assessment platforms, and data analysis include:

- Introduction to [Danielson's Framework](#) for Effective Teaching
- [Early Warning System](#) (EWS) workshop and support on how to use girls' data and progress monitoring to inform academic instruction and interventions
- Consistent planning time
- Training in project-based learning
- Training in classroom technologies: [Nearpod](#) to support classroom content delivery and [IXL](#) for girls' individualized learning
- Access to technology for all girls
- Adoption and development of standards (aligned curriculum, pacing guides)

**Fostering autonomy:** Pace seeks to address all girls' behavioral, social-emotional, and academic needs by ensuring meaningful and sustained relationships with adults. These relationships improve girls' capacity to engage in academic learning and prepare them to meet post-secondary and career-readiness standards and make choices about their future. To build teachers' skills and independence in guiding girls' choices, Pace provides workshops to support teachers in the creation of safe, supportive, and student-affirming classroom environments and to advance a psychology of delivering all services by responding to student trauma, building on student strengths, and accounting for the unique needs of girls. Specific tactics include:

- System-level coaching on healthy communications, roles and responsibilities, student engagement, a common classroom vision, and clear expectations
- Training and practice in behavior modification strategies for girls
- [Mandt de-escalation training](#), which teaches practical techniques and concepts to stabilize and calm student behavior. This training identifies girls' triggers and cultivates healthy teacher-student team dynamics.

## TIER 2: Targeted Group Resources

For clusters of teachers who share a department, geography, or other affinity, Pace's main focus is to provide opportunities for them to collaborate, share best practices, receive feedback from peers, and explore innovative teaching methods. To this end, Pace employs the following strategies.

**Building competence:** Pace includes advanced training on subject-specific tools and software to ensure effective implementation. Teachers delve deeper into content-specific strategies, curriculum alignment, and best practices through group coaching, a teacher manual, and model classrooms that allow newer teachers to observe experienced teachers on the job.

To execute this approach with excellence, Pace recently hired instructional coaches by subject area in English/language arts, math, science, social studies, and exceptional student education. An instructional coach provides teachers' subject-matter expertise and instructional guidance through classroom observations and individual coaching.

**Growing shared purpose:** The coaches also seek to foster collaboration among center leaders on effective instruction and intervention by facilitating professional learning communities, where teachers from a specific subject area meet once a month to share their experiences and expertise and grow in shared purpose.

Strategies to grow shared purpose focus on peer mentoring and cross-disciplinary discussions to enhance collaboration. Beyond their professional learning communities, teachers learn from colleagues with similar contexts and student populations via peer coaching and shared resources on a SharePoint knowledge management site. At Pace's Manatee Center, for example, the life skills teacher began to incorporate artistic expression in her classes, leading to a schoolwide art exhibit that created beauty for the school and recognition for the artists. She shared the experience across her professional learning community and now other life skills teachers are following suit.

### TIER 3: Individualized Support

**Building competence:** Instructional coaches' analysis of each teacher's classroom performance identifies their areas for growth. With that, teachers receive one-on-one tailored support, which typically includes a coach observing classroom practice, providing feedback, and cocreating an improvement plan.

**Fostering autonomy:** Instructional coaches survey teachers to understand personal pain points. To create space for sharing personal concerns, coaches meet with new teachers 30 minutes a week on video and with longer-tenured teachers, twice a month.

**Growing shared purpose:** The plan includes elements such as heightened participation in professional learning communities or learning strategies for managing the classroom and affirming positive student behavior.

The graphic is a meeting agenda for an SG! PLC Meeting. It features a title 'SG! PLC Meeting Agenda' with a calendar icon. Below the title, it specifies the date 'THURSDAY 1/4', the time '2:00PM - 3:00PM', and the location 'AT'. The agenda is presented in a table with four topics: 'WELCOME', 'INQUIRY PAIR SHARE: TEACHING AT PACE', 'TEACHER HIGHLIGHTS: TIFFANY DAVID', and 'OPEN FLOOR'. At the bottom, there is a contact information box with the text 'For more information:' followed by an email address 'shelby.schackne@pacecenter.org' and a downward arrow icon.

SG! PLC Meeting Agenda	
THURSDAY 1/4	AT 2:00PM - 3:00PM
TOPIC 01	WELCOME
TOPIC 02	INQUIRY PAIR SHARE: TEACHING AT PACE
TOPIC 03	TEACHER HIGHLIGHTS: TIFFANY DAVID
TOPIC 04	OPEN FLOOR
For more information: <a href="mailto:shelby.schackne@pacecenter.org">shelby.schackne@pacecenter.org</a>	

Pace professional learning community meeting agenda, including peer sharing and coaching

Early returns indicate that investing in teacher supports and cultivating their growth has helped Pace better attract, develop, and retain the highly valued educators who invest in its girls. Yet, as Pace and other school systems build their cultures of belonging, the best arbiters of success will be the students that schools, and their teachers and staff, exist to serve. A strong litmus test lies in providing these students regular opportunities for feedback. In a recent Pace survey of 392 girls, 55% reported they expect their classes to be engaging and 63% said that teachers effectively helped them with understanding content. Meanwhile 88% felt they needed help: There is opportunity to improve. By way of response Pace has invited students to participate in recruiting teachers<sup>10</sup> who, with the right professional development, mentoring, learning structures, classroom resources, well-being and leadership supports, and community engagement, can help build a culture where students and teachers alike grow in autonomy, competence, purpose, and, above all, belonging.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boyken, A. Wade, and Pedro Noguera. *Creating the Opportunity to Learn*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011.

Danielson, Charlotte. *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006.

Danielson, Charlotte. *Enhancing Professional Practice*, 2nd edition. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2007.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022.

Lemov, Doug. *Teach Like a Champion 3.0*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2021.

Lemov, Doug, Jennifer Kim, and Joaquin Fernandez. *Teach Like a Champion Field Guild 2.0*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2016.

Mackey, Anna-Lisa. Emози Middle School & High School Curricula. <https://pathsprogram.com/>.

Stembridge, Adeyemi. *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Tough, Paul, *Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Yeager, David. *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024.

---

<sup>10</sup> Some Pace centers have formed Girls Leadership Councils, which help interview prospective hires; others nominate girls to participate in recruitment interviews as hiring needs present.

## RESEARCH APPROACH & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From October 2023 through March 2024 we, Lymari Benitez, Ph.D., senior director of program



**Lymari Benitez, Ph.D.**



**Katie Smith Milway**

information and impact at Pace Center for Girls, and Katie Smith Milway, founder and principal of MilwayPLUS social impact advisors, investigated means to increase commitment and lengthen tenures of teachers of students with high-risk factors. We hope the study findings will help both Pace and other school, district, and state education leaders to help more teachers in demanding classrooms succeed.

To get at the “how,” we studied and catalogued good practices cited by renowned education author-researchers Charlotte Danielson, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Doug Lemov, Pedro Noguera, Adeyemi Stembidge, Paul Tough, and David Yeager. We compared a synthesis of good practices to breakthroughs in equipping teachers for success and retention cited by leaders at Pace peer organizations: [AMI Kids](#), [City Year Boston](#), [Communities in Schools](#), [EL Education](#), [Hull Services/William Roper Hull School](#), [KIPP Schools](#), [West London Zone](#), and [Youth Villages residential schools](#). The learnings led to a framework for building school cultures of support and belonging, tested and evolved in ongoing practitioner interviews, Pace instructional coach focus groups, and feedback from Pace girls.<sup>11</sup> We appreciate the wisdom of the authors we studied and the generosity of Pace peers in sharing their experience. Moreover, throughout the research we received apt and candid input from our study advisers: Dean Carmen Concepción of Miami Dade College School of Education, Professor Marcia Lyles of Columbia University Teachers College, and education author Paul Tough, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude.



**Carmen Concepcion**  
Dean, School of  
Education; PD expert  
**Miami-Dade College**



**Dr Marcia Lyles**  
Professor of Practice  
in Education  
Leadership  
**Teachers College,  
Columbia University**



**Paul Tough**  
Education Author,  
Speaker, Journalist  
**“Helping Children  
Succeed: What  
Works and Why”**

---

<sup>11</sup> As part of annual program evaluation, Pace conducts a survey of its girls. The 2023 survey, which polled 392 girls, was used in this work as a secondary data source.



6745 PHILIPS INDUSTRIAL BLVD.  
JACKSONVILLE, FL 32256  
PACECENTER.ORG

**MILWAYPLUS**

SOCIAL IMPACT STRATEGIES, RESEARCH & COMMUNICATIONS

*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons  
BY-NC-SA 4.0 license. To view its terms visit  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>*

[katiesmith.milway@gmail.com](mailto:katiesmith.milway@gmail.com)  
[www.milwayplus.com](http://www.milwayplus.com)  
781-244-5005