

A Plan From the Heart: How Genesee Community Charter School Brings a Systematic Approach to Whole Child Education

Genesee Community Charter School, located on the campus of the Rochester Museum & Science Center in Rochester, New York, exists to help a diverse student body to develop intellectual rigor, respect for diversity, and a sense of responsibility to the community – but it doesn’t just happen. To nurture all students to be reflective questioners, articulate communicators, critical thinkers, and skilled problem solvers, the school takes a systematic approach that marries the science of learning and development with the staff’s heartfelt dedication to its students. That approach includes fulfilling a commitment to diversity and full inclusion for students with disabilities; teaching a curriculum designed to build social-emotional skills and a commitment to others; regularly assessing students for academic and social-emotional development; providing for comprehensive tiered interventions tailored to individual student needs; and staffing and organizing the school to support the curriculum, the interventions, and, most importantly, the students.

This brief tells the story of how Genesee Community Charter School (GCCS) brings to life an equitable education for students with disabilities and all other students – a story grounded in science, implemented systemically, and led from the heart.

The Science of Learning and Development: Brains, Bodies, the Classroom and Beyond

Converging research in the science of learning and development tells us there are essential characteristics of educational settings – including those for students with disabilities – that are designed to maximize the human potential of each student [see Figure 1: *Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design*]. They:

- Foster positive developmental relationships that build emotional connections and enable children to learn skills, grow in competence and confidence, and take on new challenges
- Provide environments filled with safety and belonging through shared values, routines, and high expectations, demonstrating cultural sensitivity and communicating worth
- Provide rich learning experiences for each student that deepen understanding and help transfer skills to new contexts and problems
- Help develop knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits by simultaneously developing content-specific knowledge and skills along with cognitive, emotional, and social skills
- Provide integrated systems of support, including health, mental health, and social service supports to bolster the assets and address the needs of each unique child

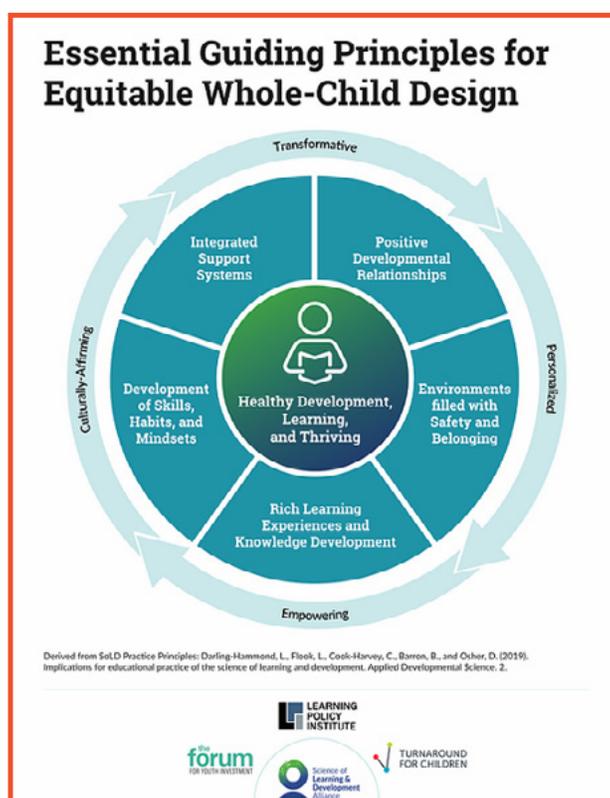


Figure 1. *Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design*

Incorporating these principles doesn't just happen. It requires a systematic approach to the organization of the school, one that is grounded in the science of learning and development and results in a personalized, empowering, culturally affirming, and transformative whole child education for every student.

Positive Developmental Relationships for Growth

The science of learning and development finds that relationships and relationship building are essential to learning and development, especially for students with disabilities, who benefit from individualized attention and support. Relationship building at GCCS begins first thing in the morning with Morning Meeting, a circle gathering in each classroom with all students and staff in each grade. "Every day starts with Morning Circle, and the whole point of that is to foster positive relationships," said Shannon Hillman, School Leader at GCCS. The daily gathering helps build feelings of unity and mutual support, and students are invited to greet each other by name each morning, engage in a collaborative activity to develop social problem-solving skills, like sharing an item from home — a favorite book or a valued toy — in a collaborative social setting.

Once a week, the entire staff and student body gather for Community Circle, an opportunity for the entire school community to gather, move together with music, do art projects, or celebrate a learning opportunity. Pre-pandemic, families were invited to the every-Wednesday event, scheduled to maximize opportunities for parent participation in service of developing stronger peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships. During the pandemic, Morning Meeting and Community Circle have continued remotely. These and other innovations embody adoption of the [crew model](#) for building durable, positive relationships with peers and adults.

"Students with disabilities are not seen with a label, but rather seen as a family member who has unique characteristics just as any other student is viewed in the classroom," said Shannon Hillman, School Leader at GCCS. "Since students 'grow up' together from kindergarten and stay together through their career at GCCS, students with disabilities form lifelong bonds with their peers to create a truly inclusive community of diverse learners."

Since each classroom is inclusive and houses students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 accommodation plans, students are also placed in heterogeneous groups called "crews" to create Final Products, the term for the culminating academic projects completed by all students, including students with disabilities. "This allows academically and socially diverse groups of students to learn collaborative skills as they work together for a common learning purpose. For our students with disabilities, the path to high expectations and outcomes is individualized to support their academic, social, and emotional development," said Hillman. "All students benefit from this strategic interaction, or relationship building, and students are provided with guidance from their classroom teachers and service providers along the way."

Building Safety and Belonging Through Diversity

From its origins in 2001, GCCS has sought to build a diverse and inclusive body in one of the most racially segregated communities in the country. The school originated out of a desire to help dismantle decades of systemic racism and educate more of Rochester's children together to erase social and academic boundaries in service of educational equity. Thirty-eight percent of students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; 40 percent are racial or ethnic minorities; and 11 percent are students with disabilities, including students with IEPs and/or 504 plans.

As a charter school within Rochester's public school system, the school actively monitors its racial and ethnic composition and takes affirmative steps to ensure diversity through the charter admissions lottery process. It then builds an environment to encourage team building, problem solving, cooperation, and belonging. As a small school with strong loyalty among families with enrolled children, a relatively small percentage of enrollments each year represent new families. This makes focused, targeted efforts to build diversity essential. To that end, GCCS has audited its marketing and recruitment to improve outreach to students impacted by poverty and English language learners; targeted marketing and advertising efforts in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty; and added new onsite and offsite opportunities for families from historically marginalized backgrounds to learn about the school and apply for admission.

That effort pays off, GCCS educators say, in a student body that sees itself as family and that builds relationships across social divisions. Students build rich and lasting relationships with peers of differing backgrounds that lead to a strong sense of safety and belonging. Indeed, the school builds lessons designed to help students understand the differing needs and abilities of classmates. In one exercise, students return from recess to a classroom with pieces of candy taped at different heights to the classroom walls, and are told that the class's mission is to ensure that everyone gets a piece of candy. This encourages teamwork and an understanding of how, by including everyone in the challenge, everyone can succeed.

Data shows the effectiveness of this approach toward building a strong sense of student belonging. According to internal survey results shared with NCLD, more than 9 in 10 students say they have a friend and a teacher or other adult they can depend on when they ask for help, and nearly 9 in 10 families say they can be open and honest with their child's teachers.

Rich Learning Through Community Connections to Past and Future

The decision to adopt the [Learning Expeditions curriculum framework by EL Education](#) provides GCCS an opportunity to help students build academic, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, and encourages awareness of their community, its history, and its current needs. Traditional classroom instruction is just the start. GCCS's approach is built on holistic learning keyed to six historical periods of the local community's past, present, and future. Each class studies three time periods per year by engaging in intensive, interdisciplinary learning expeditions that combine social studies, science, literacy, and the arts. Students studying Rochester's frontier past are immersed in solving the problems faced by the area's Native Americans and early settlers; those studying the area's role in early industrialization are likewise immersed in the lives of immigrant textile workers. Different grade levels are studying the same historic period at the same time, with each grade approaching different topics.

The combination of intensive research, reading, writing, scientific exploration, fieldwork, and real-world application provides deep, rich and meaningful development of academic skills and community belonging. For students with disabilities at GCCS, learning and development are supported by a co-teaching model in which general education and special education teachers collaborate to meet individual student needs so they can fully access the Learning Expeditions curriculum. At the end of each school year, each class develops a Final Product – a book, performance, public presentation, museum exhibit, or other product that incorporates knowledge and skills developed over the year, usually in service of a community organization or to fill an identified community need. Students with disabilities receive personalized supports, including social and emotional learning supports, to fully engage in the creation of Final Products along with the crew mates. Each class presents their Final Product to the community, including parents and invited local leaders, on Exhibition Night. The effort culminates for sixth graders in a high-stakes student-led conference in which each student presents their Passage Portfolio, a collection of work demonstrating their academic progress and their social-emotional preparedness to assume roles as community leaders to a panel of GCCS community stakeholders.

Whole Students: Developing Skills, Habits, and Mindsets

The deep learning opportunities and community connections of the Learning Expeditions structure are designed to simultaneously build academic and social-emotional development. Enhancing social-emotional development goes even deeper. Character education is built on a foundation of seven GCCS character traits that are embedded in the academic program: responsibility, compassion, collaboration, initiative, perseverance, courage, and gratitude.

Each academic unit at each grade level includes not just a learning target but a character target – and often, targets are set collaboratively by groups of students to reflect their unique needs and lived experiences. The school further incorporates social-emotional learning through its adoption of the [Responsive Classroom](#) model, which focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness, and is modified by teachers as needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This contrasts with punitive approaches to student discipline, which have been shown to produce disproportionately

The GCCS approach to SEL at a glance:

- Learning Expeditions structure
- Character education
- Responsive Classroom model

negative outcomes for students with disabilities. They have also embedded within all classes, including co-teaching settings, Restorative Practices, Zones of Regulation, and Habits of Mindfulness into their social-emotional learning program.

A System Built for Students: Integrated Supports

Supporting each GCCS student's academic, social, and emotional development is a carefully honed system designed to provide every individual student what they need to maximize development. The school assesses incoming students to determine if they have previously required an Individualized Education Program or special education services. It surrounds students with disabilities with a comprehensive set of services to support their education. It is staffed to provide those supports — including the presence of a special education coordinator and social worker on staff. And classroom teachers, special education and support teams, school leadership, and the intervention team (described below) meet regularly to track each student's progress and plan interventions to support their growth.

The system's foundation is a four-tiered intervention model. At Tier I, students are assessed using academic and behavioral baselines and identify potential intervention requirements. Students identified as not achieving sufficient progress enter Tier II, the beginning of comprehensive, targeted interventions to meet their specific needs. Tier II interventions can include steps as simple as constant teacher proximity, aids for emotional regulation, and academic assistance. Students requiring more intensive, individualized intervention are in Tier III, which can include a wide range of supports, including speech or occupational therapy, teacher assistance with tasks such as packing at the end of the day, additional academic skills benchmarking, and a variety of special education supports. Data collected in Tiers I–III are used in determining which students are potentially eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), and development of an IEP to guide their support.

GCCS is staffed and organized to provide this level of comprehensive support. Two certified classroom teachers and a teaching assistant are assigned to each class, providing adequate staff to meet the unique needs of each child. In addition to a special education coordinator, the school staff includes a restorative practice coach (for SEL support), ENL teacher (for students who need English language learning services), math intervention teacher, literacy coach, and transition coach (who provides both instructional coaching and Tier III reading intervention to students). This group, along with the special education coordinator and social worker, make up the intervention team. The curriculum coordinator and the school leader meet with the team weekly to discuss overall operating progress. The team meets once every four weeks with each grade level to discuss specific interventions, targets, and progress monitoring data.

Succeeding for Students

GCCS was sparked by a desire to build an educational environment that broke down divisions, fostered community, and provided educational opportunity that broke down barriers of inequality. Accomplishing that heartfelt goal has required diligence and planning: actively encouraging rich relationships; curating a sense of belonging and worth; building a curriculum that connects students to their community and that prioritizes character as well as academic development; comprehensively supporting students with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds; and organizing and staffing the school to deliver on its promise. The result: academic achievement that competes with or exceeds that of surrounding districts, including performance with key demographic subgroups; lasting student relationships across lines of social division; and a strong connection between the school and its surrounding community.