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# Co-Design as a Catalyst for Equity



NATIONAL  
EQUITY  
PROJECT



Building  
Equitable  
Learning  
Environments  
Network



● “Racism and inequity  
● are products of  
● design. They can be  
● redesigned.”

Caroline Hill, Michelle Molitor &  
Christine Ortiz (2016)

## Acknowledgments

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# About the BELE Network & the National Equity Project



NATIONAL  
EQUITY  
PROJECT

The [Building Equitable Learning Environments \(BELE\) Network](#) is a multi-year effort bringing together educators, researchers, school support organizations, and philanthropic foundations to learn about, document, and share how to create equitable learning environments, grounded in the science of learning and development, that ensure every student has the experiences and support needed to thrive. At the core of our work is a commitment to learning about and transforming student experience, particularly the experiences of young people most often marginalized within schools. Educators in the BELE Network understand the tremendous opportunity we have to change the learning conditions that shape academic outcomes. We gather and learn from student experience data to inform changes in classroom, school, and district policies and practices.

The work of the BELE Network is grounded in a set of [Essential Actions](#). This document embodies three essential actions in particular:

- **Make Systems Human Centered**
- **Empower Youth**
- **Partner with Caregivers & Communities**

Since 1995, the [National Equity Project](#) has served as a leadership and systems change organization committed to increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities. Our mission is to transform the experiences, outcomes, and life options for children and families who have been historically underserved by our institutions and systems.

The resources offered here draw on over 27 years of organization experience and learning in supporting schools and districts across the U.S., and in particular from our facilitation of BELE supported networks of school districts from 2019–2023.

We are grateful for the support and collaboration of the Raikes Foundation in funding the development of this resource.



# Introduction

**M**any educators are coming to understand the importance of student, parent/caregiver and community voice as they make decisions and create programs that serve these stakeholders. Co-design pushes us to go beyond just centering the needs and realities of those we're designing **for**, and to create processes that allow us to design **with**. This opens up whole new possibilities for how challenges get understood and what solutions can emerge.

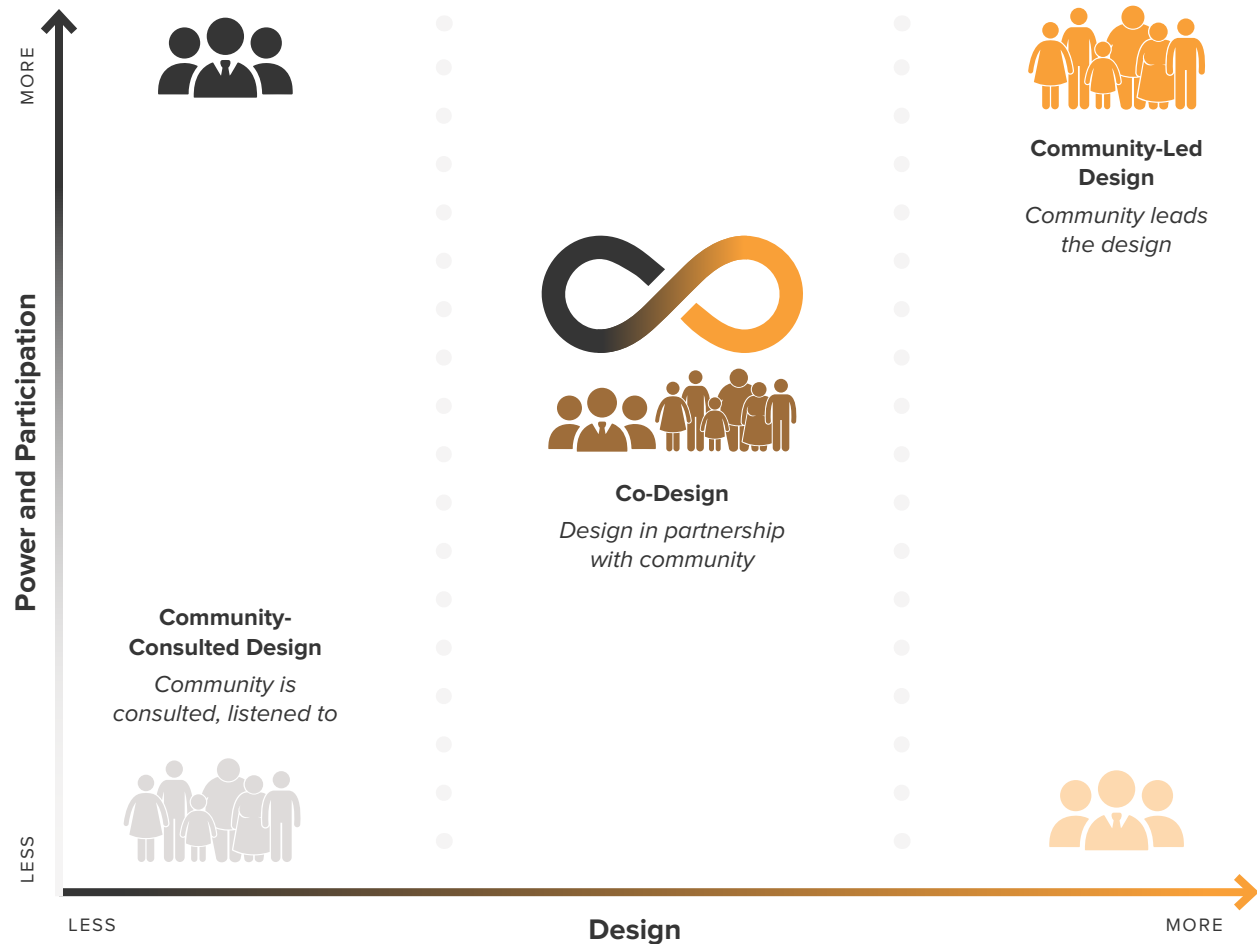
Addressing patterns of inequitable outcomes and experiences in any context brings us face to face with the multiple causes and pervasive effects of historical and systemic oppression. This is not the territory of simple solutions or quick fixes. The complexity of these equity challenges requires a different approach to designing strategies to interrupt and shift them.

# What is Co-design?

Co-design is a broad term that refers to the intentional forging of a design partnership over time between people working together across differences in power, identity/perspective, role, etc. to create positive change. As an approach to designing with, not for, people, co-design for equity pushes us to design with those “closest to the pain and furthest from power.”<sup>1</sup> Those who experience the oppressive pain of our systems hold unique perspectives on how these systems need to change. Co-design processes make liberatory forms of creative collaboration possible between those in the system and those the system is meant to serve. At its heart, co-design is not a technical endeavor with particular steps and methods, but rather a way of being in creative relationships across power.

<sup>1</sup> This quote is widely attributed to U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley during her 2018 campaign. See Pressley, A. (2020) reference.

Co-design exists along a continuum of design approaches:



### Continuum of Collaboration

Adapted from Human Design Practices Image (Bach et. al 2022) as adapted from Tania Anaissie of Beytna Design and equityXdesign

*Toward one end of the spectrum, community-consulted design is when designers working on a challenge consult those in the community who are most impacted by the problem at hand. In the middle, co-design, is when community members with lived experience are fully integrated into the design team — framing the challenge, conducting the design work, selecting the ideas to advance, and testing the ideas with stakeholders including those impacted by the problem. On the right, community-led design is when community members with lived experience are the design team, and design experts might provide support to community members who are leading the process. (Bach et. al 2022)*

Co-design <b>IS:</b>	Co-design is <b>NOT:</b>
<b>A partnership.</b> It is made possible by people deciding to work together across roles and power over time.	<b>Episodic.</b> It is not an event (e.g. a stakeholder engagement session)
<b>Relational.</b> The process is messy, emergent, responsive to the needs of people and situation — and beautiful.	<b>Technical.</b> It is not a predictable process with a clear sequence and consistent set of strategies.
<b>Authentic.</b> It is a process that can fundamentally transform the relationship between those traditionally deciding and those they serve.	<b>Tokenizing.</b> It is not a way to legitimize a process by saying that “community” has had a voice or to check off a requirement.
<b>Transformative.</b> It is way to open up solutions you would not have imagined — and that will have a greater chance to be effective	<b>Reproductive.</b> It is not a way to make similar types of decisions as have been made in the past, just with some new folks at the table.

## Beyond Empathy Listening

In recent years, methods from the field of design (specifically human-centered design) have been brought into the field of equity and social justice work. The combination can be powerful and represents a considerable shift from traditional hierarchical decision-making approaches where those with power and/or “expertise” decide what’s needed and what’s best for their stakeholders. Such design processes help ground the work in the actual needs of “users,” tap into deeper sources of creativity, and cultivate a prototyping sensibility that recognizes the importance of learning from early versions and iterating solutions over time.

However, such design processes can also keep traditional power hierarchies in place — with decision-makers still doing the designing and deciding. When patterns exist about who the deciders are and who the “users” are (e.g. racial identity, language, gender) it’s predictable that bias and blind spots will influence the outcomes.

Co-design is not the same as centering the needs of those you’re serving. Moving beyond empathy listening to co-design opens up a powerful range of possibilities.

# Co-design Considerations

**Co-design can take many forms.** It can play out through more formal processes, as well as informal ones. It can be utilized with large groups or with smaller ones. It can originate from within an organization and extend to community, and it can originate from community and engage those inside organizations.

**Co-design will be both messy and catalytic.** The idea of co-design has natural appeal for people working to address inequity. But it requires embracing the complexity and unpredictability of a non-traditional process. Co-design can feel challenging amidst the typical constraints within systems and organizations (limited time, deadlines, pressures for quick solutions, hierarchical structures and processes) so it's key to stay grounded in purpose and potential, be willing to let go of control and attachment to particular outcomes, and trust that what emerges will have more collective buy-in and take-up and ultimately be more likely to achieve equitable improvements.

**Lastly, co-design is both a practice and a stance.** As a practice, there are various processes, tools and activities that can be used in co-design work. As a stance, co-design means having the mindset to embrace co-design possibilities in various situations, to think creatively about the forms it can take. At its core, co-design is about building creative relationships across difference and moving from limiting forms of power to transformative ones.

Reference our other resources:

- 1 Co-Design as a Catalyst for Equity**  
Gain an understanding of the power and promise of co-design.
- 2 Developing Youth-Adult Design Partnerships**  
Learn ways to implement youth-adult design partnerships.
- 3 Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships**  
Understand the conditions necessary for intentionally creating youth-adult design partnerships.
- 4 Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design**  
Explore design processes that support successful youth-adult design partnerships.





**“Co-design is  
an approach to  
designing with,  
not for, people.”**

**Kelly Ann McKercher**  
*Beyond Sticky Notes: Doing  
Co-design for Real (2020)*

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Pressley, A, @AyanaPressley. (June 30, 2018). "(1/11) When I say... 'The people closest to the pain, should be the closest to the power, driving & informing the policymaking...' THIS is what I mean. (A) When I wanted to break cycles of #poverty by strengthening pathways to #graduation, preventing #dropout #MA7." Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/AyannaPressley/status/1013184081696346113?s=20>

# Appendix A: BELE Essential Actions



Creating educational environments where all young people thrive



## Essential Action 1: Make Systems Human Centered

Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.



## Essential Action 2: Transform Teaching & Learning

Create learning conditions that transform students' daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students' cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.



## Essential Action 3: Empower Youth

Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students – especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities – to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.



## Essential Action 4: Partner with Caregivers and Communities

Partner authentically with students' communities – including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners – to transform students' daily experiences, create a network of support for students and their families, and allow all to be healthy and whole.



## Essential Action 5: Invest In Staff

Create the conditions that allow all educators to fully engage in their work, feel equipped to form meaningful relationships with students, and to be positive contributors to students' daily experiences in school.



## Essential Action 6: Measure What Matters

Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback students provide about their experiences, along with feedback from educators and caregivers; use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments.



## Essential Action 7: Create Equitable Policies

Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students' experiences, voices, and humanity.



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