



Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning



### Joint Learning Agreement

By: Lindsey Halman, UP for Learning Executive Director



*The three tenets that [UP for Learning] focuses on are **shared power, shared responsibility and shared voice**. Those seem fundamental for democracy.*

*-Emily Rossier, UP for Learning Program Director*

*Working in partnership with youth and adults allows everybody... to **develop the skills that they need to exercise their right to be heard**, and for their voices to be valued in a democracy.*

*-Ana Lindert-Boyes, UP for Learning Youth Program Specialist*

*Human beings are likely to take more responsibility for what they have made than what is made for them. But when citizens create these things, it shows them that **they are powerful, that they can make a difference**.*

*- David Matthews With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*

## Overview

Every member of a community has a sphere of influence. In educational systems, this sphere contains an interwoven network of relationships that can influence decisions, policy and practices. The outcomes ultimately depend on the strength of the relationships between students, teachers, administrators, families, and community members. At [UP for Learning](#) (Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning) we support educational systems and communities as they fully engage youth in reimagining and transforming education. The work is grounded in the belief that in order for change to occur, youth and adults must experience learning and leading founded on equitable cross-generational relationships characterized by shared power, voice, and responsibility. Schools in the United States are founded on an industrial era model. They remain inflexible, constrained by rigid schedules and compartmentalized learning. Students tend to be passive recipients of their education, assuming few decision-making roles. Uniformity and obedience are highly prized by adults. This reality stands in stark contrast to the developmental needs of adolescents or individuals of any age for that matter. Humans thrive when we feel valued as partners in meaningful relationships, doing relevant work towards a common goal. Why then, at a time when youth most need to affirm their identity and value in the world, do we ask them to become passive, obedient, and voiceless? What is the cost of this reality for all students, but particularly for those who already feel devalued and disempowered?

### Research Focus

This project explored the impact on youth and adults, and the overall sustainability of the democratic process, when youth are co-designers and co-implementers of community change projects. At UP for Learning, we are curious about the tension and energy that occurs when youth and adults sit side by side as equal partners, sharing power, voice and responsibility for systemic change. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that this has on youth in how they see themselves as members of their communities. Furthermore, at UP for Learning we are also seeking to understand the impact that the [youth participatory action research \(YPAR\)](#) process has on communities when youth become researchers of their own communities in working to reimagine just and equitable educational systems. This research occurred in three different communities in Vermont, two that are more urban/suburban and representative of the global majority and one that is rural and predominantly white.

### Research Questions

- How does working in authentic youth-adult partnership reflect true participatory democracy?
- What is the impact of youth participatory action research on youth and their community?
- How does youth-adult partnership support youth in engaging in positive community/school change? How does this work change the way youth see themselves in their community?

The fundamental topic that was explored is understanding the democratic practices that are realized when youth and adults engage in authentic partnerships. The democratic principles that we are looking to sustain are agency, finding common ground, establishing deep listening practices, understanding issues, and involving all invested parties in a change process. Furthermore, we wanted to understand how youth-adult partnership and the paradigm shift to shared power, shared voice and shared responsibility can create change in a system that is sustainable. This work involves starting with an exploration of current mental models about the role of youth and adults in educational systems, as it is important to understand what we currently believe and then have the opportunity to envision the realm of possibilities for change.

Three unique projects were identified for this research. The communities were carefully selected based on the intergenerational partnerships on the teams and the commitment to having multiple invested parties (youth, school staff, school district leadership, families/caregivers, community partners, etc) engage in the project. What follows is a reflection on what we tried and what we learned in each of the three communities and the impact that this has had on our understanding of youth-adult partnerships reflecting authentic participatory democracy.



**\*Final video documentation links:**

**[FINAL DOCUMENTATION](#)**

[Overview \(Short\)](#)

[Trailer \(Shared at October Gathering\)](#)

## **Burlington School District Youth and Family Engagement Team**

*I think of this as a place where we can come together and connect on a different level.  
A place where I can be heard and other students can be heard by adults in our district,  
because that does not happen very often.*

*-Binti, youth, Burlington School District*

*People need to feel like their voice matters AND people need to feel a sense of  
responsibility.*

*-Emily Rossier, UP for Learning Program Director*



### **Background:**

Burlington is Vermont's largest city with a population of 43,000 and is one of more than a dozen towns and cities making up Chittenden County, the state's most populated region. Burlington is a vibrant small city, with a vitality that more closely resembles that of a large metropolis. Burlington serves as a refugee resettlement community and has been welcoming newcomers to Vermont since 1980. In the last 40 years, over 8,000 refugees have begun new lives in Vermont which offers rich and diverse opportunities for people from different cultures to live, work, and play together. [Burlington School District](#) (BSD) is

the largest school district in Vermont. In 2021, the strategic plan was revisited with the goal that Burlington School District “will be student-centered and responsive to the full range of identities, abilities, cultures, and languages in our community, such that every student is challenged, empowered, and engaged in their learning throughout their time in our schools”. UP for Learning has been a community partner with Burlington School District for the past three years working together with a goal to increase youth engagement and empowerment in learning and leading. Furthermore, much of our work together has been guided by the goal of reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the discipline system. Multiple youth-adult teams are working with UP throughout the District, but for the purpose of this research, we focused on the newly formed Youth and Family Engagement Team. During the 2021-2022 academic year, UP for Learning supported Burlington School District in the vision, design and implementation of the inaugural Youth and Family Engagement Team. Both youth and family voice were found to be opportunities for growth and were identified as important levers of change in the strategic plan.

**Essential Question for Youth and Family Engagement Team (Y&FE Team) facilitated by UP for Learning:** What is our shared vision for youth and family engagement in Burlington School District in regards to reducing and/or eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in the discipline data?

### **Overarching Goals**

*Members of the BSD Youth and Family Engagement Team (Y&FE Team) will:*

1. Build our community within our Y&FE team
2. Focus on racial justice and healing
3. Participate in restorative approaches
4. Collect and analyze data on youth and family engagement. Where are youth and families currently engaged? Where not? What is the impact of the disparities in the discipline system on youth and families? How will we make those changes?
5. Create a vision for change at BSD



## WHAT WE EXPLORED AND WHY:

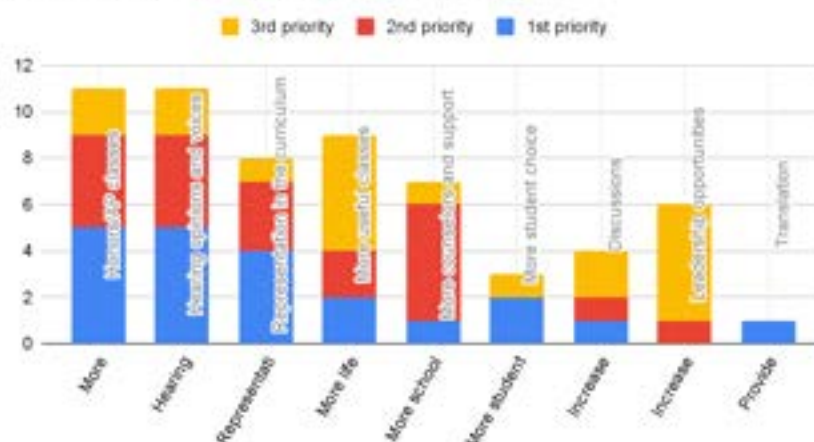
**Year 1 (November 2021-June 2022):** Facilitated by UP youth and adults facilitators, the Y&FE team began meeting in November of 2021. This team composed of youth from the middle schools and high school, BSD staff, BSD families/caregivers, BSD multilingual liaisons and BSD school board members met monthly for 1.5 hours. The team was co-facilitated by 4 middle and high school youth and 2 UP staff members. This core team worked together to design and facilitate all of the monthly meetings. The 4 youth facilitators were compensated by UP for their time meeting, planning and facilitating.

- During the initial months the team:
  - Focused on building relationships with one another and identified collective values
  - Explored the paradigm shift (mental models) and power dynamics that needs to change in order for youth and adults to be authentic partners in a democratic process
  - Identified priority areas for change in BSD
  - Developed action team sub-committees

Through UP for Learning's facilitation, the Y&FE Team was mobilized with the skills and resources to begin to collect data to determine their community's priorities for youth and family engagement. This led to the team finding ways to determine what issues are impacting students and families and what opportunities for change exist. During January of 2022, with COVID cases surging in the Burlington community, the team was forced to meet on Zoom for their regular in person meeting. Despite the challenges of meeting virtually, and ensuring that the meeting was accessible to the multilingual team, the team showed up strong and ready to discuss their findings from their initial research. The fact that so many youth and adults showed up on Zoom for this monthly meeting spoke volumes to the relationship building that had occurred in the previous months, as well as the focus on shared power, shared voice and responsibility. Our goal was to ensure that all team members understood what it meant to experience agency; *your own power to make effective change*.

During that January session, the team identified priority areas for the team to address based off of the data they had collected in their community. The chart shows the different areas that were identified when asked about their top three priorities as a team:

BSD Youth & Family Engagement Priorities



The data showed that it was important to prioritize:

- 1) Increased access to challenging educational opportunities and coursework for ALL students
- 2) Listening to the opinions and voices of those that have historically been marginalized
- 3) Representation in the curriculum of the global majority community

The Y&FE team examined the first issue around access to educational opportunities and did a root cause analysis to determine impact, causes and next steps.

## Impact:



## Causes:



## Next Steps:



Over the next few months, the Y&FE Team divided into Action Groups to work on addressing the priority areas. There was a small group that was working on creating community informational sessions for the middle schools, a team that sought to collect more data and information from the school counselors and a team that was developing an awareness campaign called “#algebraforall”. The motto of the Y&FE Team was “**we are a team of action**”. It was very important to this group that if they were coming together only once a month, that they continued to work on actionable steps to change. The team took a summer break with the goal to pick up their work with the new academic year.

**Year 2 (October 2022-present):** Along with the previous year projects, the team also expanded their work to also develop a set of recommendations to share with administration in May on how to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the discipline and suspensions in their school district. This had been identified as a priority area across all teams in the district and with an actionable and time specific goal, this team could support shifting policy in BSD. The team welcomed new members this fall and started with reconnecting and relationship building. They also refined their goals based on the previous year's work.

The overarching goals of this BSD youth adult team of middle/high school youth, families/caregivers, BSD staff, and community partners will be to:

- Explore and foster the core principles of restorative practices and build strong team connections - build our YFET community.
- Increase a sense of engagement, belonging and voice for youth and families by creating a culture and practice of youth-adult partnerships for school change.
- Conduct youth participatory action research (YPAR) to expand the use of restorative practices to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in suspensions in Burlington School District (BSD).
- Generate recommendations of change on how to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the discipline and suspensions and share with administration in May.
- Generate recommendations on how to sustain this work and how to ensure that youth and family are fully integrated at all levels of the RP work.
- Continue working on the action plan established in 2021-2022:
  - #algebraforall
  - interviewing school counselors
  - info sessions/awareness raising

During the first meeting, the team also looked at discipline data from BSD and held small restorative circles using the following protocol:

### **Getting Acquainted to the Root Problem - Circles of~6 - 8**

Take a breath and review guidelines:

1. You can always pass or answer in a different way from the prompt.
2. Speak from your own experience and refrain from responding to others'. This is a time to share and listen.
3. What is said in the circle stays in the circle- the story stays - the lesson goes.
4. Things you would like this group to share out, record on the chart paper.

Go around the circle one at a time to share your response to the prompt and pass a talking piece to signal you are done speaking.

**Round:** Briefly introduce yourselves. Why did you join this team? Why is this important to you?

(Pass out the data) **Round:** Looking at this data, if you were a researcher coming in, who is being suspended in our district, and why?

-Record on chart paper and themes you would like to share out.

**Round:** Does the data line up with your lived experience as a member of this community: as a parent, school board member, as a student, or as staff?

-Record on chart paper and themes you would like to share out.

**Round:** In what ways is suspension harmful?

-Record on chart paper and themes you would like to share out.

**Closing:** Popcorn style, take turns naming something you've appreciated or noticed about each other, what was said, or the circle process itself.

*Ex. of information recorded from Analyzing Data Circle*



At the next meetings, the team reviewed the themes that arose from their data analysis and identified their top concerns being:

- Communication with families
- Effects of suspension on the individual, the community and the family

- Specific schools suspending more than others

They have since analyzed more data and began to review the BSD Restorative Code of Conduct to see where this is alignment in the current practices and where changes need to be made. Now that this team has done a more thorough analysis of the data, they will find ways to share this data with the larger community and begin to draft their recommendations for the leadership team.



## FINDINGS: WHAT WE LEARNED

*If you're at the table...if everyone's voice is engaged in that process, I think that's the foundational piece to then using your voice in other settings.*

*-Harry Frank, UP for Learning Coordinator  
(Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together)*

In Year 1, it was essential to spend time building relationships and creating a space where people felt that their voices mattered and were valued. The need for more youth and family voices had been identified as a priority and this was the first time that BSD had a team of youth and family members. With only 1.5 hours per month to work together, it was important to revisit the purpose and goals of this team.

**What worked:** This team needed to be organized and facilitated in a manner that made it accessible for all youth and adults. This meant that:

- We met in the early evening at one of the local neighborhood elementary schools.
- If youth or adults needed transportation to get there, this was arranged.
- All members of the team were compensated for their time at the monthly meetings.
- Dinner and refreshments were always provided.

- Childcare was provided so that caregivers could attend.
- There were interpreters available for multilingual family members.
- There was flexibility in the start and end time. We also allowed for an “ease-in” start with music and pizza. We also followed the same structure each month, so team members knew what to expect: pizza, opening circle/community building, small group work, closing circle.
- A culture of care was established early on so that youth and adults felt comfortable working together as equal partners.
- The meetings were facilitated by UP for Learning faculty and youth from BSD.

The inaugural year of the Y&FE Team started strong, with strong participation from youth and adults. Perhaps because this team existed “outside” of the school schedule, it was easier for the youth and adults to integrate new ways of being together - sharing power, sharing voice and sharing decision-making. The power hierarchy was much easier to “flatten” as this team existed outside of the sometimes inflexible and rigid schedule of school.



**Challenges and New Learnings:** Being a brand new team also posed new challenges. The first was the limited amount of time for meeting and getting to the “action” steps. This team met once a month and although we tried to provide research tasks for the time between meetings, these tasks were not always completed. It was hard to keep the momentum going between meetings. We also found that in Year 1, as we moved into spring and the weather outside was nicer and lighter, we did not have as many of our team members show up. There was also a need to provide space for youth and families to share their own stories and experiences with BSD. There was often a tension between making space for sharing and also finding time for action and “the work”. What seems to be a learning for UP is that perhaps, the sharing is also “the work”. Historically marginalized groups, in this case, the youth and adults on this team, have not often been asked to share their own experience in a space that is brave and values their contributions. Thus, in thinking about the importance

of the story sharing, the facilitation team has decided to split the time evenly between relationship building and the action research project.

This specific team was funded by a grant that was addressing the racial and ethnic disparities in the discipline data. In Year 1, we wanted the youth and adults to identify their priorities for the team. The priority of reducing disparities in the discipline data did not explicitly come out of our data collection. As Year 2 approached, we knew that we had to guide the team toward addressing this priority area. This created a tension for our own process for facilitating change through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR is when youth and adults partner to improve the conditions of youth lives and communities using these research techniques. The information that comes out of the YPAR process is meant to be used to advocate for change in communities and the issues should be identified by the community. YPAR is a process that believes that youth are valuable experts and that it is important to develop the full potential of youth. That means that power between youth and adults should be shared. However, adults have an important role to structure the YPAR process to make sure that youth are getting the correct training and skills. The tension that was created was how much the adults drive the “issue” being addressed and how we can also return to the priorities from Year 1. We are still working through this tension, but there has been great interest in analyzing the discipline data and moving through the YPAR process to create recommendations for the leadership of BSD.



## **Lamoille North Supervisory Union Equity Design Team**

*Part of this work is the personal development of each person who is involved with it. So, as we all grow as individuals and support each other's growth as individuals, also through community, it allows all of us to gain footing really and become confident in using our own voices. ...I think this leads to more equity and democracy through this process of just gaining confidence, and being willing to step up and be part of the conversation when need be.*

*-Ana Lindert-Boyes, UP for Learning Youth Program Specialist*



### **Background:**

[Lamoille North Supervisory Union](#) serves the rural towns of Eden, Waterville, Hyde Park, Cambridge and Belvidere. This school district is located in northwestern Vermont and has a strong agricultural community. In 2022, UP for Learning partnered with LNSU for support with facilitating the visioning and design for equity through youth-adult partnership. The LNSU Equity Design Team is composed of youth and adults from the middle and high school, community partners and school leadership. During the Spring of 2022 (Phase 1), this core group gathered to form relationships, starting with exploring individual and collective identity and values. The team then learned about and experienced the benefits of intergenerational partnership and identified their hopes and dreams, as well as planned for specific action steps that would launch Phase 2 of the project in September of 2022, beginning with the design of their research plan.



UP for Learning's YPAR Trail Map

### Essential Questions for Project:

Through [Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\)](#), the goal is to collect and analyze data to identify key issues associated with the following questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from the successes, challenges, and needs of members of the school community?
2. What have we learned about effective policy and practices related to teaching, learning, equity, diversity, inclusion, relationships, engagement, etc.? Where are there gaps?
3. In what ways can the district, local schools, teachers and professional staff, students and families/caregivers work together to reimagine, reframe, and adapt to the diverse and changing needs of students, families and these communities?

### Goals:

- The Equity Design Team will hold community dialogue and engagement events to examine data and collect information to shape the shared vision.
- Based on the LNSU Equity Policy, The Equity Design team will draft a vision and action plan for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in LNSU that can be shared with all stakeholders.

*Youth and adults working in partnership is kind of the only way. It's the most respectful and it's necessary for everyone to work together. Youth and adults working*

*in partnership addresses the power dynamics in a way that brings out the best in everyone.*

*-Emily Rossier, UP for Learning Program Director*



## WHAT WE EXPLORED AND WHY:

**Phase 1 (Spring 2022):** The Equity Design team met five times between April and June of 2022. This [report captures some of the work from Phase 1](#) as the team worked on building intergenerational relationships, developing critical awareness and identifying issues for change. Something that is incredibly important to note, is that the adult partner at LNSU thoughtfully recruited youth that represented a variety of marginalized groups in our society. Despite the fact that this is a predominantly white community, the team composition reflects many of the voices that are not often heard when decisions are made in the educational system. Also, this group is composed of three youth whose first language is Spanish and in order to ensure that the team was inclusive and accessible for all, the team engaged in multilingual facilitation. As the team met throughout the spring, they continued to ask the question: what voices are missing from our team? There was a clear need to have middle school youth present, representatives from the middle and high school administration and more community partners. As the academic year came to an end, partners from [Lamoille Restorative Center](#) and [Healthy Lamoille Valley](#) joined the team.



**Phase 2 (September 2022-present):** This team now meets monthly, during the school day, for two hours to engage in the youth participatory action research cycle. Since September, this team has met monthly beginning with the design of their research plan. Two youth from the team have now joined UP for Learning as paid youth facilitators and plan and facilitate all of the meetings with UP adults. The team is currently conducting research on the culture and climate of their schools related to equity issues (Step 5 of the UP's YPAR Trail Map). Currently, the team has divided into two research groups - a survey group and a community engagement group. The survey group created a survey for youth and adults in the middle and high school that will help the team understand more about the culture and climate related to equity in the schools. The community engagement group is working on planning a community dialogue for the whole LNSU community that will allow them to capture more data through facilitated dialogue. Using these dialogues as a catalyst for change, the team will ensure that their work will model authentic youth-adult partnership and reflect true participatory democracy. Once the data is collected through the surveys and community dialogue events, the Equity Design Team will analyze the data, share their findings with the community and then develop an action plan that will address the key concerns that are reflected in the data. Bringing the community together to look at the data will also allow for opportunities for the larger community to offer their insights into specific next steps.



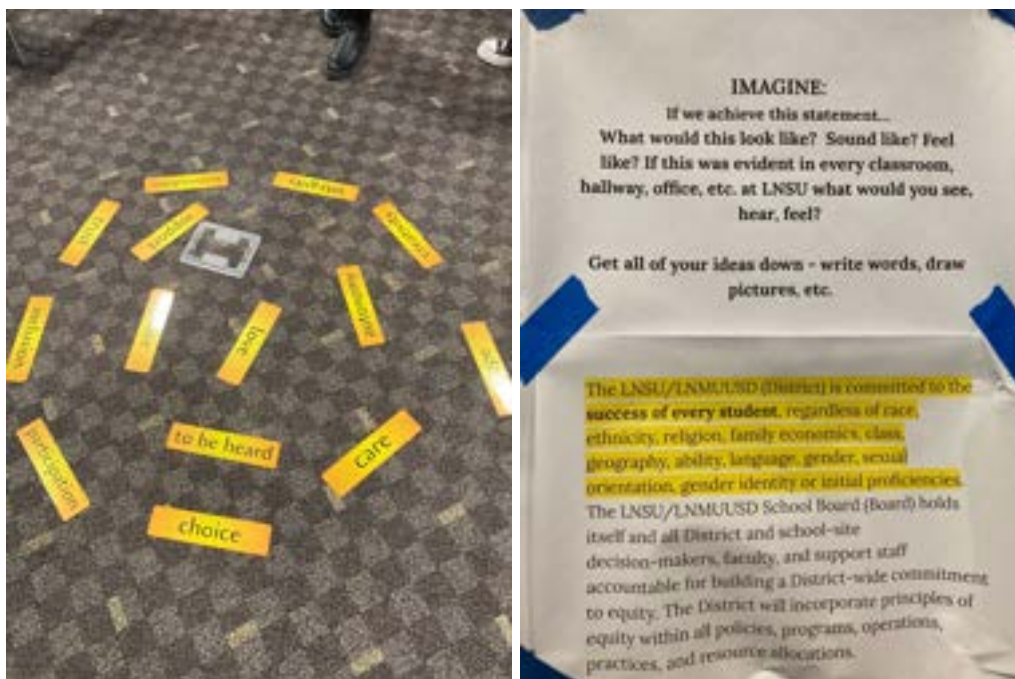
## FINDINGS: WHAT WE LEARNED

**What Worked:** In Phase 1 of this project, it was essential to spend time building relationships and creating a space where people felt that their voices mattered and were valued. The youth on the team all came with their own experiences of not feeling valued and a sense of belonging at school because of their identity. At UP, it felt important to devote the majority of time to building relationships, sharing our individual and collective values (see picture below), and creating space for the paradigm shift of youth and adults working as equal partners to develop.

This team needed to be organized and facilitated in a manner that made it inclusive and accessible for all youth and adults. This meant that:

- All materials were translated to Spanish, and meetings were facilitated in English and Spanish.
- We met during the school day, so that transportation was never an issue.
- All members of the team were compensated for their time at the meetings.
- The team co-created agreements/norms that they revisited each meeting to reflect on and revise as needed.
- The team included representation from the Green Mountain Tech and Career Center (youth and the administrator) which serves both LNSU and surrounding districts.
- There was strong communication between meetings with reminders and check-ins for all youth and adults.

By June, this team felt very connected and also clear on their vision for equity. They were a very engaged team and were excited to come back together after the summer break.



With the start of a new academic year, the youth and adults returned with energy to move to action. New members of the team also joined to ensure that there was stronger representation of more voices from the community. Two high school youth joined UP as facilitators for this project and are now co-planning and co-facilitating all of the meetings. The team was highly motivated to start collecting data. One group worked diligently to create a survey that would be administered to all youth and adults in the middle and high schools. Another group designed a community dialogue event that would elicit more data from families/caregivers and other members of the community.

**Challenges and New Learnings:** As the work moved from relationship building and visioning to data collection from the community, there were new tensions that emerged. In October, the survey team was ready to launch their climate survey to help the team understand how youth and adults think about their school. The survey contained questions about safety, equity and decision making. Youth representatives from the team met with the middle and high school administration to review the survey and create a timeline for distribution so that all youth and adults had an opportunity to engage in the survey. The youth were met with many questions about the survey and push back on administering the survey. The youth voiced their frustrations to their UP and Equity Design Team adult partners and asked for support. In a meeting with the administration, and adults on the Equity Design Team and UP for Learning facilitators, the administration voiced a concern about when they have the survey data “are they ready and able to do something about it?”. This question revealed a common issue that UP has experienced with youth-adult teams when engaging in equity work - the “pacing for privilege detour”.

*The most common detour is probably the pacing for privilege detour. This happens when equity work is implemented at a pace that is comfortable for the people who are most resistant to conversations about equity rather than at a pace that demonstrates an urgency to create more equity.*

*-Paul Gorski, [Avoiding Racial Equity Detours](#), Educational Leadership*

During the first phase of this project, there was no push back as perhaps there was an illusion of progress toward equity. The team was a diverse group of youth and adults and the work was still in the visioning phase, so the disruption to the system had not yet occurred. As the team moved into the data collection phase of the participatory action research cycle, the reality that disruption could occur became clear. At the December meeting, the administrators joined the team and the group engaged in a productive dialogue about the concerns that were raised. Youth and adults all left the meeting feeling clear on the next steps and how the survey would proceed. The administration agreed to do some final revisions to the survey and send it out before the December break. Unfortunately, the survey has not yet been sent out. The administration also shared that the policy is that all families need to give permission for their students to take a survey and need to have time to review it. The survey will be revisited at the next meeting in January.

UP has been working for years to help youth-adult teams hone their partnerships. We recognize the “teeter-totter effect,” where one generation or the other may end up with an outsized share of power and leave the other hanging. We know it takes time to get to “four feet on the ground,” the balanced sharing of responsibility and power that makes youth-adult partnership most effective. As adult partners, we know that it is often important to step up, step back, or stand beside our youth partners. In this scenario, there was a need for both UP adults to step up and advocate for the participatory action research process that will drive change and stand next to our youth partners as they articulated the importance of the survey data.

A final challenge will likely be continuing to keep the youth and adults engaged on the team with the pace slowing down. When the power dynamics become more clearly imbalanced, youth will often feel that this is just another example of “student voice” for the sake of student voice with little to no change occurring. As a committed partner and facilitator of this project, UP for Learning will continue to push the team to explore their concerns and fears and create a path forward for the community to continue to work toward equitable education for all students.



## **Winooski School District Antiracism Steering Committee**

*We have a right for our voices to be heard. This work in youth-adult partnership is really enforcing that and emphasizing that and giving people the skills to make use of their rights.*

*-Ana Lindert-Boyes, UP for Learning Youth Program Specialist*



**Background:** Winooski is a small city neighboring Burlington, that measures just one and a half square miles. Within the school and community over 20 languages are spoken and this is a city that is representative of the global majority. In 2020, after many weeks of research and community organizing, a group of Winooski students and alumni - organized as the Winooski Students for Antiracism (WSA) submitted a letter addressed to the WSD School Board and Leadership Team on July 5, 2020 calling for "immediate action to ensure that Winooski begin creating an anti-racist environment, particularly one that is supportive for our students of color." The letter included a list of eight demands outlining what this action should look like. WSA also released a petition to the Winooski community to garner broader support.

On July 15, 2020, WSA presented their letter and petition at the Winooski School Board. During public comments, over a dozen students and alumni shared personal testimonies illustrating the long history of prejudice and racism within the Winooski schools and community. After a series of meetings, six of the eight demands were approved by the school board.

In March 2021, the [Antiracism Steering Committee](#) (ARSC) was formed as an innovative multi-stakeholder committee that creatively guides the dynamic work of the WSA Demands,

serves as a communication hub for the demand-based working groups, and ensures that the WSA Demands are centered in every aspect of the work.

Over the past three years, UP for Learning has facilitated the work of the Antiracism Steering Committee ensuring that there is representation from youth and adults and that the youth and adults are working as authentic partners in creating change in their community. This team is composed of youth and adults from the Winooski schools, family members/caregivers, community partners and WSD leadership. This team will be working to change policy and practice in the school district to ensure that the school both adopts the student's demands and is truly a model antiracist learning environment.



## **WHAT WE EXPLORED AND WHY:**

UP for Learning has been partnering with WSD since 2020 to support the ARSC and Action Teams in centering youth-adult partnership in all of their work to meet the demands approved by the school board. This work that will be shared here is the work that occurred between April -December 2022. This team meets monthly for two hours and helped to design and launch the 6 Action Teams during the 2021-2022 academic year. Each Action Team was tasked with the work of a specific demand. The Action Teams have a youth and adult co-lead and are responsible for meeting regularly to achieve the goal of the demand.

The Action Teams are:

- #1: Racial Truth and Reconciliation
- #2: Hiring and Supporting Teachers, Staff and Administrators of Color
- #3: Ethnic Studies Curriculum
- #4: Review Committee/Equity Audit
- #5: Student Civil Rights
- #6: Multilingual Learner Mentorship Program

During the spring of 2022, the team of youth and adults worked together to create a budget for the work for the next academic year and presented the budget to the School Board. The team collected information from each of the Action Teams to determine what their needs would be for 2022-2023 in regards to compensation, resources, materials, etc. This experience of planning a budget, presenting it to a governing body and then implementing the budget demonstrates a true example of participatory democracy. The budget was approved by the school board in June of 2022.

After a short break in July, the ARSC picked up their monthly meetings to ensure that the work continued, that they were supporting the 6 Action Teams (also composed of youth and adults) and communicating the work and progress to the community. During a community back to school barbeque, youth and adult members of the ARSC set up an outreach table to share more information about the ARSC and recruit new members for both the ARSC and the Action Teams. The ARSC also presented about their work during the inservice for teachers and at a community event. During the previous school year, an equity audit had been conducted of both the city of Winooski and Winooski School District which was connected to one of the Action Teams. The ARSC used the data from the audit to think about how it could be used to engage the community in further dialogue. Currently, the ARSC members have been working hard to support each of the Action Teams. UP for Learning also has two youth facilitators (one alumni and one high school youth) supporting the facilitation of the ARSC. During the fall, the ARSC has put efforts into communicating who they are and what they are working on, so that more engagement can occur from the larger community.



## FINDINGS: WHAT WE LEARNED

**What worked:** This team has been committed to this work over the past three years. Creating an antiracist school system is not a short term goal. This is long term, ongoing work, and thus, needs the resources and facilitation to continue to keep the momentum going. It is easy for a system, like the educational system, that has been designed to work a particular way for so many years, to easily slip back to this way of producing inequitable outcomes. With WSD's commitment to this work and UP for Learning's facilitation the team has been able to continue to move forward. In general, there has been a very strong commitment from the leadership team and the School Board to ensure that this work is supported and funded. The Superintendent has been a core member of the ARSC from the beginning along with a member of the School Board.

This team needed to be structured and facilitated in a manner that made it accessible for all youth and adults. This meant that:

- We met in the early evening at the school on the first Monday of every month.
- If youth or adults needed transportation to get there, this was arranged.
- All members of the team were compensated for their time at the monthly meetings. This compensation was provided by WSD.
- Snacks were always provided.
- Childcare was provided so that caregivers could attend.
- We also followed the same structure each month, so team members knew what to expect.
- A culture of care was established early on so that youth and adults felt comfortable working together as equal partners.
- The meetings were facilitated by UP for Learning faculty and youth from WSD.
- Communications were sent out between meetings so that ARSC members had information about their next steps and upcoming meetings and events.
- A monthly "blurb" was sent out in the WSD newsletter so that the community was aware of the work that was occurring with the ARSC and Action Teams.



## Challenges and New Learnings:

**Power Dynamics:** Despite the strong effort to eliminate the power dynamics that existed between the youth and adults on the ARSC, it became clear that often when the team was ready for approval or a change to occur, they were often met with the same barriers that they were trying to eliminate in the system. These barriers were often linked to shared decision making. The hierarchical system still contained power dynamics and there was often a tension between the goal to distribute power and the system with power structures that have not changed. This often could lead to frustration for youth and the adults on the team. As facilitators, the UP team continued to keep the work moving forward to ensure that the team was engaged in actionable steps even when there were barriers.

**Communication:** As the youth on this team felt more empowered to use their voices for change, they became more aware of the imbalances of power and the issues around communication between leadership and the students. During the spring, youth organized a “sit-in” in the cafeteria after learning that two of their beloved educators were being “rified” for budget reasons. The youth had felt that this was an example of a decision being done to or for them, rather than with them, and they were seeking an opportunity to dialogue with the leadership about this decision. When they felt that this opportunity was not provided, they organized their peers to create a peaceful “sit-in” in the cafeteria. Youth and adults from WSD also attended a school board meeting where they shared testimony about the impact of this decision. Ultimately, the school board and leadership team determined a creative solution to retain these two educators.

This challenge has led to the youth pushing for a student government that develops strong lines of communication with the leadership at the schools. Starting this winter, UP will support the high school youth in visioning and designing a new student government.



## **CONCLUSION:** How does working in authentic youth-adult partnership reflect true participatory democracy?

*The work at UP is supporting schools in making schools a great place to be - something that is good for the individual, as well as is good for the community, and is ultimately good for democracy as a whole.*

*-Emily Rossier, UP for Learning Program Director*

Across all of these projects, UP has been collecting themes that begin to answer the questions: How does working in authentic youth-adult partnership reflect true participatory democracy? What is the impact of youth participatory action research on youth and their community? How does youth-adult partnership support youth in engaging in positive community/school change? How does this work change the way youth see themselves in their community?

The themes that emerged from this research provide a roadmap, or the “ingredients” to establishing what is needed for true participatory democracy to occur:

- **Intentional relationship building** to establish a brave space for all youth and adults to speak their truth and seek to understand others’ truth. Each of these teams have spent a large position of their time together working on building intergenerational relationships and continue to nurture these relationships throughout their time together. It is clear that both youth and adults on each of these teams see the other in a new way -as a partner, as a teammate and as an ally in change.
- **Structures and protocols** that support clear communication between all invested parties (youth and adults) so that there is both equity of voice and inclusivity and accessibility for all members.
- **Shared power** is perhaps one of the areas that becomes most complex for teams of youth and adults. Yet, this can begin as concrete as having the team sit in a circle. Creating structures for sharing power and sharing voice, allows for both youth and adults to understand what is needed to make this shift. At UP we have youth and adult co-facilitators planning and facilitating all of our projects, modeling what it looks like to share power in facilitation and leadership. This is often the area that we found the greatest tensions arise with our work. When there was the possibility of disruption to the system or for conflict to arise, there was often push back from those in positions of power to maintain the “status quo”.

- **Civic engagement** is a key component of this work and it is often the first time that youth and even some of the adults have experienced what it means to be civically engaged. This experience impacts both the individual and the collective.
- Everyone **brings value and can contribute to change!** Age does not determine one's value or ability to affect change. Once youth and adults have the skills and tools to conduct participatory action research, they both see their individual and collective value and their role as changemakers in their community.
- **Story sharing = Democratic process** - In each of these projects, there was a strong need to create space for both youth and adults on the team to share their own stories and experiences with their school systems. At times, this creates a tension around the idea of “getting to work” to make change. Perhaps, story sharing is key to actually making change? If we do not take time to get to know one another and each of our unique experiences, it might be that the action steps are ultimately not sustainable. Sharing stories allows teams to build their own capacity to work across differences in a thoughtful manner. They are able to see one another as complex people, not just “student” or “teacher” or “principal”. In our society, there is merit in getting to the end product. We have learned that story sharing will get teams to a much more sustainable outcome.
- **Finding a “WHY” is essential.** Exploring current mental models and working to shift mindsets to recognize that youth and adults can demonstrate ownership and responsibility for both their actions and the work of the team through shared power, decision making and voice.

*It's “the WITH” that is the heart... as opposed to “doing to” or “for”, it's about doing with.*

*-Marian Ackerman, UP for Learning adult partner*

**Hopes for Further Research at UP for Learning:** It would be important to understand the long-term impact that youth-adult partnership has on an individual and their greater community. How does youth-adult partnership bring value to transforming a school district? How does youth-adult partnership contribute to the engagement of youth in their communities? Most importantly, it will be important to understand how these democratic principles sustain over time when youth and adults work together, share power, voice and responsibility.

*There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.*

—Margaret Wheatley, “Turning to One Another,” 2002