

# Participatory Systems Change for Equity

## An Inquiry Guide for Child-, Youth-, and Family-Serving Agencies

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Systems-change efforts have the potential to transform inequitable conditions that perpetuate oppression and, ultimately, harm young people, families, and communities. In a time of growing disparities and exponential change, system leaders are increasingly seeking opportunities to partner with communities in order to transform systems that have consistently fallen short in promoting the well-being of the people they are intended to serve. Although those most impacted by systemic oppression—including Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); people with disabilities; and people who identify as LGBTQ+—are regular recipients of services and supports offered by child-, youth-, and family-serving agencies (e.g., education, health, workforce, housing), typically they have inequitable access to, experiences with, and outcomes from these systems. Further, they are often excluded as active participants in transforming systems.

The agencies and organizations—including those in the nonprofit, for-profit, government, and philanthropic sectors—that impact the lives of marginalized communities are heavily influenced by hierarchical practices, largely make decisions about how to improve inequitable systems without the input of the very people who are impacted by these systems, and are often led by people who do not represent the lived experiences of the communities they serve. These conditions can create and reinforce oppressive systems, causing enduring harm to young people, families, and communities.

Whether and how systems-change efforts are done in partnership with communities can determine the potential for liberating and lasting change. Drawing on participatory methods, community cultural wealth, liberatory design, and complex systems change frameworks, *participatory systems change* is an approach to change that centers community wisdom and collective action in order to dismantle oppressive systems and generate conditions for equity, opportunity, and well-being.



# About This Guide

Child-, youth-, and family-serving agencies that attempt to improve their systems often employ a range of strategies, including needs assessments, initiative inventories, vision setting, intervention design, and impact evaluations. Though these efforts represent a significant opportunity for systems change, they are traditionally designed to emphasize and establish order and control, hierarchical management, and top-down decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Participatory systems change invites community members<sup>2</sup> and system leaders<sup>3</sup> to collectively identify, design, decide, implement, and assess priorities, actions, and investments that work toward eliminating systemic oppression and generating system conditions that promote equity, opportunity, and well-being.

The purpose of this guide is to help system leaders facilitate participatory systems change for equity. The guide is based on the idea that meaningful, liberatory, and lasting change is more likely to result when young people, families, community partners, and system leaders work side by side to design and improve child-, youth-, and family-serving systems. This guide describes elements of participatory systems change that institutions and organizations can apply depending on local context and locally defined goals. With this guide, system leaders will

- understand what participatory systems change is and how it can contribute to transformative change at the systems level that promotes equity, opportunity, and well-being for young people, families, and communities;
- gain insights into integrating elements of participatory systems change into any initiative at any phase of implementation; and
- consider key questions and resources in order to align change initiatives with elements of participatory systems change.

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1 National Equity Project, 2019, *Leading for equity framework*. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cbio1KxH7Xrh4DoPMkxkUdBNFCP98MR8/view>

2 A community member is anyone who is intended to be served by child-, youth-, and family-serving systems and/or has indirect insight into a system as a member of a community.

3 A systems leader is anyone employed by a child-, youth-, and family-serving institution or organization.



# Framework for Participatory Systems Change

## Guiding Principles

Participatory systems change is conceptually grounded in the continuum of participation,<sup>4</sup> community cultural wealth,<sup>5</sup> liberatory engagement,<sup>6</sup> and complex systems change<sup>7</sup> and is guided by six principles.

**Share power and center self-determination.** Leadership and decision-making power are shared by young people, families, community partners, and system leaders. The members of a community are experts of their own experiences and are therefore best positioned to determine what is best for their own communities.

**Elevate community strengths and attend to place.** System-change efforts center community wisdom and elevate the strengths of a community to generate meaningful change. Change efforts attend to the unique history, relationships, and political and economic contexts of a place with the understanding that no one place is the same. The priorities in one community are not necessarily the same priorities in another, nor should the change process itself be designed to be exactly the same.

**Build individual and collective capacity.** Everyone involved in systems-change efforts has the information, tools, skills, and liberatory consciousness<sup>8</sup> they need to participate meaningfully and make informed decisions. Communities work toward building collective capacity to collaborate, make shared decisions, and move in interdependence and reciprocity.

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4 Participatory systems change is informed by the following continuum of participation frameworks: Hart's ladder of children's participation and youth voice continuum.

5 Yosso, T. J., 2005, Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

6 Participatory systems change is informed by the following liberatory engagement frameworks: dual capacity-building for school-family partnerships, equitable collaboration framework, and the principles for equitable and inclusive civic engagement.

7 Participatory systems change is informed by the following complex systems-change frameworks: the lens of systemic oppression, the six conditions of systems change, ecological systems theory, emergent strategy, liberatory design, and street data.

8 Leadership for Educational Equity, n.d., *Tools for social change: How to develop a liberatory consciousness*. <https://educationalequity.org/blog/tools-social-change-how-develop-liberatory-consciousness#:~:text=Liberatory%20consciousness%20is%20reclaiming%20choice,change%E2%80%9D%20from%20systems%20%26%20institutions>



**Promote culturally responsive and sustaining change.** System-change efforts recognize and regard the cultural assets within a community and are responsive to diverse ways of knowing, being, and relating as change processes are carried out.

**Prioritize transparency and accessibility.** Transparent decision-making processes, accessible information, and bidirectional communication between young people, families, community partners, and system leaders are fundamental to an inclusive change process that seeks to build relational trust and to partner with the community.

**Illuminate oppression and take liberatory action.** The change process and resulting actions are rooted in antiracist, decolonizing approaches and focus on seeing and transforming oppressive system conditions in order to increase opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and people of color and other minoritized communities.

## Elements

This guide is organized by seven elements of participatory systems change. Each element represents a key component of any change process:

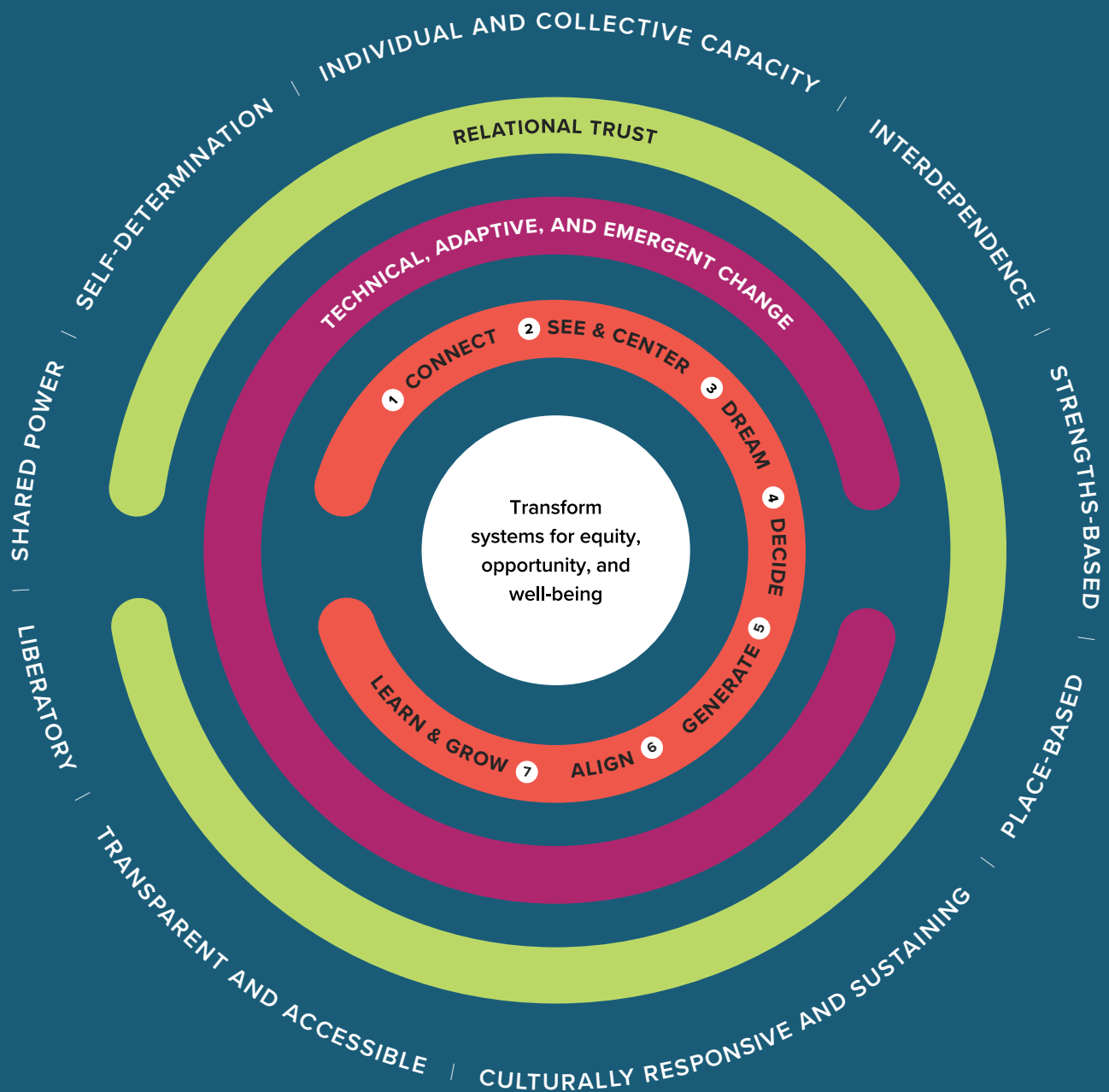
1. **Connect** in community.
2. **See** the system and **center** community experiences.
3. **Dream** a vision for the future.
4. **Decide** priorities and goals.
5. **Generate** change approaches.
6. **Align** policies, practices, and resources to hold change.
7. **Learn** together and **grow** change.

For each of these elements, this guide offers technical and adaptive strategies for system leaders to work side by side with young people, families, and community partners for transformational systems change. Also provided are questions and resources to help move system leaders toward deeper levels of anti-oppressive inquiry and action.

Figure 1 illustrates the connections and interdependencies between the principles and elements of participatory systems change. Participatory systems change involves seeing how systems have been designed to oppress the very people they are intended to serve and then engaging with those people in continuous inquiry and reflection to identify opportunities for interrupting oppressive policies, practices, and relational dynamics. It also involves attending to the complex nature of systems and change: that *change* is chaotic, relational, and emergent and that *systems* are a constellation of individual mindsets, beliefs, values, relationships, power dynamics, and imperfect and often siloed policies, practices, and resources. Finally, the elements of participatory systems change are situated within **technical**, **adaptive**, and **emergent** change that is ongoing at the personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. The elements are held and strengthened by the **relational trust** that exists within a community.



# Figure 1. Participatory Systems Change Framework





# Element 1: Connect in Community

Meaningful, lasting change happens within community and is carried by trust. Attend to building community and growing relational trust throughout the course of the change process, including when new members of the community are introduced into the work. This involves creating opportunities for interpersonal connections, designing shared spaces that center belonging and that invite people to bring their full selves to the work, practicing active listening, and taking action that is responsive to community interests.

## Prioritize connection, belonging, and relational trust.

- Is your team creating opportunities for deep interpersonal connection with one another and with other participants throughout the change process? What opportunities are there to build connection and understanding across racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, role, power, and other differences?
- Is your team designing opportunities to strengthen belonging in virtual and in-person spaces?
- Are those closest to the impact of systemic inequities participating in the process?
- Is your team communicating to the broader community in ways that are frequent, consistent, dependable, and accessible in order to help build awareness about your change efforts and about opportunities for community members to participate?
- Has trust been broken with the community in previous systems-change efforts? Is your team working intentionally to acknowledge this broken trust with the community and move toward healing?

## Attend to power dynamics.

- Is your team attending to power imbalances as you work toward building relational trust?
- Is your team—and individual team members—considering positional power and how this may influence the change process?
- How is your team learning about and addressing power dynamics related to race and ethnicity?



## Engage in active listening, deep reflection, and responsive action.

- Are there opportunities for your team to engage in active listening about participant ideas, motivations, and experiences? How might you design for this?
- Are there opportunities for participants to engage in deep reflection with one another about what is being learned throughout the change process?
- Does your team have opportunities to learn and reflect together on how participants are experiencing the change process?
- Is your team taking action in ways that are responsive to community input and feedback? Are the team's actions being communicated back to the community?

## Develop and practice community agreements.

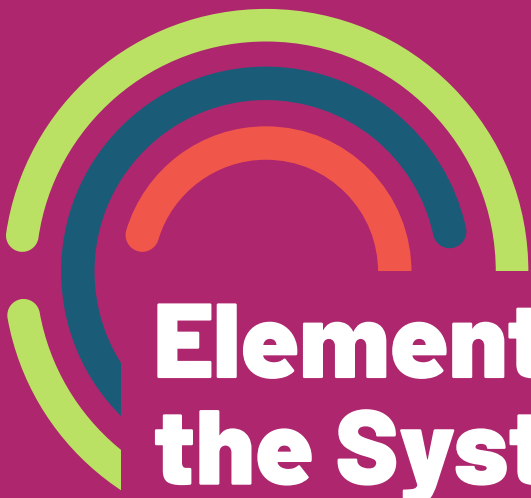
- Are there shared community agreements for how people will relate with one another as they move together through the change process? Are these agreements determined together with the community?
- Are there opportunities to revisit community agreements to make sure the agreements continue to resonate for everyone participating in the change effort?

## Element 1 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 1 into action.

**Table 1. Resources for Connecting in Community**

Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Six principles for equitable and inclusive engagement</u></a>	A framework that describes the essential elements of equitable, inclusive, and effective civic engagement
<a href="#"><u>Trauma-informed community building</u></a>	A guide for applying trauma-informed practices to community building
<a href="#"><u>Design for Belonging's community toolkit</u></a>	A toolkit for understanding and improving belonging in your team, organization, or community
<a href="#"><u>Constructivist listening</u></a>	A description of constructivist listening as a strategy for engaging in intellectually demanding and emotionally challenging conversations
<a href="#"><u>Family engagement toolkit</u></a>	A toolkit that describes practical planning and evaluation strategies that support effective family engagement in system improvement efforts



# Element 2: See the System, and Center Community Experiences

Learn together with young people, families, and community partners about past and present community experiences. This involves exploring the history and impact of systemic oppression within a community, how systems have been designed and then experienced over time and by different groups, and how these systems are experienced by community members today at the individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels. This element also involves learning together about a community's local assets, needs, and opportunities, including historical knowledge, community expertise, and local organizations, partnerships, and resources.

## Work together to gather data on community experiences and the design of the current system.

- Does your data include a balance of historical, quantitative, qualitative, and experiential data?
- Is your team learning from those with historical experience and wisdom about the community?
- Are those most impacted by systemic oppression participating in designing and implementing data-gathering protocols?
- Are data being gathered in a way that centers reciprocity?
- Are data shared and presented in ways that are accessible to all community members?

## Identify and map community strengths and needs.

- Has your team partnered with the community to determine a definition of a community strength or asset?
- Are members of the community participating in identifying the assets that exist within the community?
- Is your team partnering with local community organizations and agencies that may have existing demographic, outcome, or experiential data and a deep knowledge of the community?





## Engage in collective sense-making.

- Are there opportunities to disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, gender identity, language, income, geography, and other characteristics?
- Is your team considering how implicit biases, confirmation biases, and positional power may influence sense-making?
- Is your team partnering with the community to make sense of the data that has been gathered?
- Do sense-making efforts include opportunities to reflect on how the system has been designed to perpetuate inequity?

## Share emerging findings.

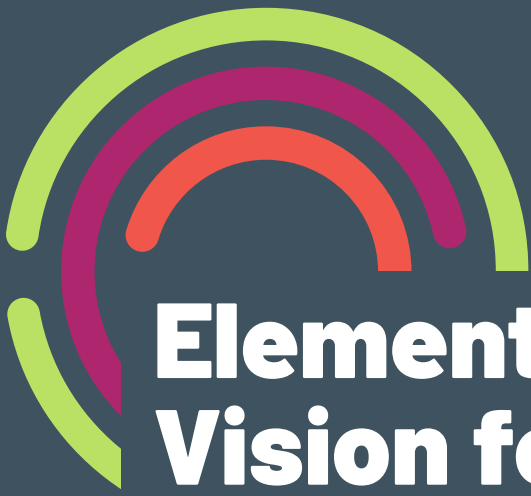
- Are findings shared consistently and frequently with the broader community?
- Are findings shared and communicated in ways that are accessible and useful to the broader community? Is your team consulting with community members to determine the accessibility and usefulness of how data and findings are shared?
- Are there opportunities for the broader community to reflect, react, and respond to findings?

## Element 2 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 2 into action.

**Table 2. Resources for Seeing the System and Centering Community Experiences**

Resource	Description
<a href="#">Ten ways to collect street data</a>	A list of activities for gathering and learning from street-level data
<a href="#">Empathy interviews</a>	An approach to interviewing that elicits deeper understanding and empathy for an individual's lived experiences
<a href="#">5 whys for inquiry</a>	An inquiry tool that can be used to help understand the root cause of an issue
<a href="#">Storytelling project model</a>	A framework that can help groups analyze and understand how racism operates and impacts organizations, communities, and society
<a href="#">Data for equity protocol</a>	A protocol for helping a group reflect on data with an equity lens
<a href="#">Mapping community strengths and assets</a>	A resource for mapping the gifts, talents, and strengths within a community



# Element 3: Dream a Vision for the Future

Collaborate with young people, families, community partners, and system leaders to build a vision for the future that is based on a shared understanding of the system, both past and present, and on an understanding of community experiences, strengths, needs, opportunities, and motivations. This vision is the collective dream that a community has for itself, its young people, and its families.

## Dream together.

- Are those setting the vision representative of the community? Are young people, families, and community partners participating in determining a vision for systems change that serves the well-being of their community?
- Is your team offering data, information, and questions that inspire visioning for a more equitable and liberatory future for young people, families, and communities?
- Is your team designing visioning activities and spaces that are safe, supportive, and conducive to generative and collective visioning?

## Clarify your shared vision and communicate it widely.

- Are there opportunities to reflect with the community on whether the vision is equity centered and responsive to community aspirations? Will there be opportunities to revisit and adapt the vision over time to make sure it remains relevant to the community?
- Are young people, families, and community partners participating in consolidating the outcomes of collective visioning activities into a vision that can be shared and understood by the broader community?
- Are young people, families, and community partners participating in determining how the vision will be communicated to the broader community, including identifying the types of communication channels that will reach the most people?

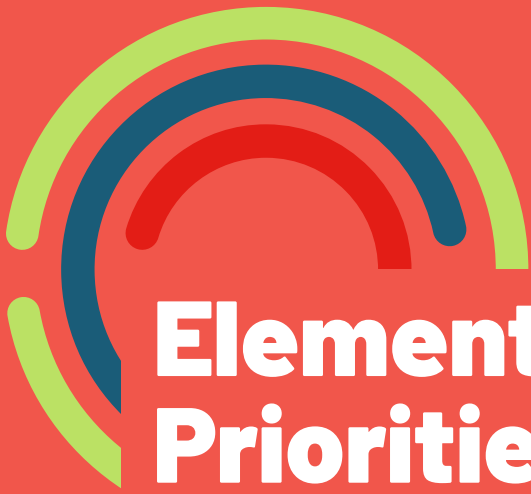


## Element 3 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 3 into action.

**Table 3. Resources for Dreaming a Vision of the Future**

Resource	Description
<a href="#">Future protocol</a>	A protocol for building a vision with a team
<a href="#">Determining a team's mission and vision</a>	A protocol for developing a team mission and vision



# Element 4: Decide Priorities and Goals

Work together to determine priorities and goals that align with the community-defined vision and that are rooted in an understanding of the system and the community's experiences and aspirations. Priorities will help guide future investments, actions, and services, and goals will inform how the impact of systems-change efforts is measured.

## Revisit what you have learned so far.

- Are there opportunities to partner with community members to revisit what was gleaned from the data that were gathered, including community assets, motivations, opportunities, challenges, and needs?
- Are there opportunities to revisit what was learned from the visioning activities about what is most important to the community, including community aspirations, hopes, and dreams?

## Organize your thinking.

- Is your team working alongside participants to determine how to best demonstrate to the broader community how the emerging priorities and goals are grounded in what has been learned so far about community experiences, strengths, needs, and aspirations?
- Is your team partnering with young people, families, and community partners to determine optimal methods for organizing and communicating the emerging priorities and goals in ways that all community members can understand?



## Decide what is most important and create goals.

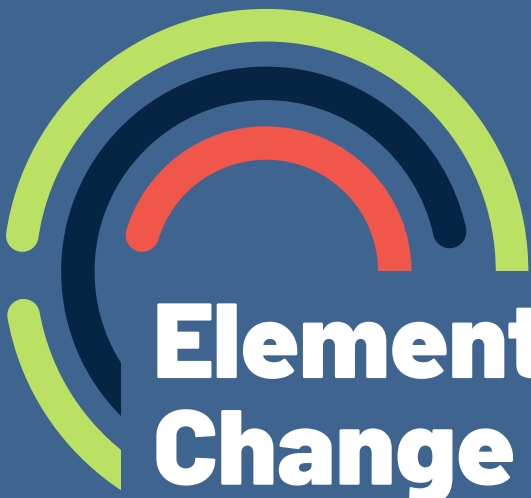
- Is it clear which root causes might be contributing most to the equity challenges experienced by the community? Have these causes been confirmed in partnership with community members?
- Are the priorities and goals determined by those most impacted by systemic inequities? Are decision-making processes attending to power dynamics and elevating the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by the system?
- Has your team partnered with young people, families, and other community members to determine which goals will demonstrate meaningful progress toward equity?
- Do the priorities and goals reflect strengths-based language?
- Do the priorities and goals seek to address the root causes identified by the community? Will the priority areas move the community closer to the shared vision?
- Has your team confirmed with young people, families, and other partners that the priorities and goals are transparent, accessible, and understood by the community?

## Element 4 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 4 into action.

**Table 4. Resources for Deciding Priorities and Goals**

Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Interrelationship digraph</u></a>	A tool that can be used to help determine which root causes are most important to address
<a href="#"><u>Circle keeping</u></a>	An Indigenous process of communication that emphasizes equality, shared values, and consensus building
<a href="#"><u>Consensus-based decision-making process</u></a>	A process for building consensus and arriving at a final decision
<a href="#"><u>Fist to five decision-making</u></a>	An activity for building consensus and coming to a final decision
<a href="#"><u>Decision-making norms</u></a>	A list of agreements that can be used to help guide how community members engage with one another as they make decisions
<a href="#"><u>Consensus-building process checking</u></a>	A tool for assessing how a consensus-building process is going



# Element 5: Generate Change Approaches

Work collectively to generate ideas for how to move from the current state of the system to the community-defined vision. This involves brainstorming and designing actions, services, and programs that interrupt inequitable system conditions and create opportunities for young people, families, and communities to thrive.

## Revisit your vision and priorities.

- Has your team revisited the community-defined vision and priorities in order to understand key emerging areas for change?
- Are there any change ideas that may have already been shared by community members throughout the change process?

## Generate and prioritize ideas.

- Is your team working alongside young people, families, and community partners to determine what it will take to realize a more equitable system and move toward the collective vision? Are those most impacted by systemic inequity participating in generating and prioritizing ideas for change?
- Is your team working with community members to identify community assets that can contribute to addressing the community-defined priorities and goals?
- Has your team asked young people, families, and community partners about which existing policies, practices, services, or programs are working and which might need to be strengthened or expanded?
- Is your team working with community members to determine whether the proposed change ideas are contributing to greater equity and more opportunity for young people and their families? Is your team working with community members to determine the potential level of impact and effort for each change idea?



## Design change approaches.

- Are those most impacted by systemic inequities participating in designing actions, services, and programs that will help address inequitable system conditions?
- Is your team creating spaces for collaboration and design that promote safety, inclusion, belonging, and innovation? Is your team attending to power dynamics in the design and facilitation of these spaces?
- Are young people, families, and community partners involved in testing, iterating, and scaling change ideas?

## Define and communicate your theory of change.

- Are young people, families, community partners, and system leaders engaged in cocreating a theory of change together?
- Is the theory of change grounded in the community-defined vision, priorities, goals, and change ideas? Does the theory of change address the inequitable system conditions identified by the community?
- Is the theory of change communicated in a way that is transparent and accessible to the community? Has this been confirmed with community members?

## Element 5 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 5 into action.

**Table 5. Resources for Generating Change Approaches**

Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Open space method</u></a>	A process that invites participants to join sessions that interest them and contribute to decisions that are on the agenda for each session
<a href="#"><u>Design charette</u></a>	A process for working in teams to design a new product or change approach or to improve a change effort that already exists
<a href="#"><u>9 Best Exercises to Spark Creativity in Ideation</u></a>	A list of exercises that can be used to help groups generate ideas
<a href="#"><u>Impact effort matrix</u></a>	A tool for deciding which actions to take based on the level of effort to implement the action and the impact the action will have
<a href="#"><u>Driver diagram</u></a>	A tool for visualizing your theory of improvement, including your aim, drivers of change, and change ideas



# Element 6: Align Policies, Practices, and Resources to Hold Change

Change efforts are more likely to be effective and sustained when they operate within an aligned and coherent system. Work together with young people, families, and community partners to identify opportunities for alignment and coherence across policies, funding, communications, capacity building, data use, and goals.<sup>9</sup> Practice participatory policymaking and participatory budgeting to support the implementation and sustainability of community-generated change strategies.

## Revisit what was learned about community assets and the design of the current system.

- Are there community assets that might contribute to implementing and sustaining change efforts?
- Are there existing policies, practices, or resource flows that might advance or hinder change efforts over the near and long term?

## Align policies, practices, and resources to support systems change.

- Are existing policies, funding, partnerships, and other resources aligned to support the implementation and sustainability of change approaches that have been identified by the community? Are there new policies or resources that might be needed to grow and sustain change?
- Are those most impacted by the system participating in policy development that supports equitable, sustainable systems change?
- Are those most impacted by the system participating in shared decision-making about how resources are allocated to support change efforts?

<sup>9</sup> Walrond, N., & Romer, N., 2021, *Serving the whole person: An alignment and coherence guide for state education agencies*, WestEd. <https://selcenter.wested.org/resource/serving-the-whole-person-an-alignment-and-coherence-guide-for-state-education-agencies/>





## Element 6 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 6 into action.

**Table 6. Resources for Aligning Policies, Practices, and Resources to Hold Change**

Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies</u></a>	A guide that offers <i>state agencies</i> a practical process for improving the alignment and coherence of their whole-person initiatives
<a href="#"><u>Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for Local Education Agencies</u></a>	A guide that offers <i>local education agencies</i> a practical process for improving the alignment and coherence of their whole-person initiatives
<a href="#"><u>Participatory Budgeting Scoping Toolkit: A Guide for Officials &amp; Staff Interested in Starting PB</u></a>	A toolkit that helps system leaders understand what it takes to start a participatory budgeting process



# Element 7: Learn Together and Grow Change

Implement routines that provide opportunities for young people, families, community partners, and system leaders to learn together about what is working and what is not as change ideas are carried out. Rooted in principles of continuous improvement, this involves cocreating meaningful and practical measures of change and working together to iterate and scale change approaches over time.

## Cocreate measures of change.

- Are those most impacted by system changes involved in developing measures of change and impact? Are *success* and *evidence* defined in partnership with the community? Are the validity and cultural relevance of measurement methods determined with the community?
- Are the measures of change practical and meaningful to the community? Do they include measures of equity and impact?
- Are there plans to track and address potential unintended consequences of change efforts?

## Implement learning routines.

- Are learning routines in place to understand whether change efforts are having a positive impact? Are the routines practical, frequent, and consistent? Are they done in partnership with young people, families, and community partners?
- Is data being gathered regularly regarding how those impacted by change efforts are experiencing these changes? Are those impacted involved in determining whether progress is being made and whether the change efforts are having a positive impact? Are feedback loops with the community in place in order to inform the continuous improvement of the system?
- How is learning being communicated to the broader community, including young people, families, community partners, agency staff, and system leaders?



## Scale change.

- Are change approaches being tested, iterated, and scaled over time? Are ongoing learning routines informing the iteration and expansion of change efforts?
- Are there conditions in place (e.g., policies, funding, partnerships, capacity) to support the scaling of change efforts that demonstrate early success?
- Are young people, families, community partners, agency staff, and system leaders engaged in shared decision-making about what change approaches are adapted, adopted, abandoned, or expanded?

## Element 7 in Action

Here are some resources you might consider using to put Element 7 into action.

**Table 7. Resources for Learning Together and Growing Change**

Resource	Description
<a href="#"><u>Anti-Racist Evaluation Strategies: A Guide for Evaluation Teams</u></a>	A guide for evaluation teams that aims to build awareness and capacity in antiracist evaluation strategies
<a href="#"><u>Participatory action research and evaluation</u></a>	An approach to community-driven research, evaluation, and social change
<a href="#"><u>Participatory evaluation</u></a>	A participatory approach that involves those directly impacted by an initiative in evaluating the initiative
<a href="#"><u>Practice-policy feedback loops</u></a>	A resource that describes the crucial role that feedback loops play in effective implementation cycles, specifically how feedback from the practice level should inform educational leaders' efforts to develop aligned and effective educational policy, procedures, and resources
<a href="#"><u>Science of Improvement: Establishing Measures</u></a>	A resource on the types of measures that can be used to measure system improvement



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