An Equity Journey with Natural Circles of Support

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**Natural Circles of Support (NCOS)** a flexible approach to addressing racial and other disparities that draws out the strengths and aspirations of African American and other students of color to promote social and academic success.

Our years of experience working with schools confirm for us that those most affected by racial and other disparities have an indispensable role to play in finding solutions to these challenges. African American and other students of color and their families have important, and we believe, *necessary,* knowledge, ideas, experiences, and insight that can serve school change. NCOS centers and enrolls the voices and perspectives of students and their families in an effort to establish lasting equity in schools.

**How are we different?**

What makes NCOS different is the simple but powerful insight that regardless of background or family situation most children have someone in their lives who cares for and supports them—their existing or *natural* supports and mentors. Often, assumptions about low-income families of color and a lack of knowledge about the important people in students’ lives make these individuals unknown and invisible to schools and thus impossible to connect or partner with in efforts to support students. We seek to identify and engage these individuals.

**How do we start?**

We begin the NCOS approach by looking for the “treasures” that students, families and schools already possess—the often unacknowledged and undervalued assets and resources that exist in themselves and their relationships. These serve as the foundation for crafting an approach to working together to create the conditions and relationships that promote and sustain equity.

**How do we strengthen and expand support?**

We use family engagement, community meetings and other strategies to build connections between the teachers, children and family members students name as support so they can work together to enhance that support. In addition, NCOS facilitators work closely with classroom teachers and families to share information and strategies that increase continuity, consistency and effectiveness in their efforts to improve student outcomes and success.

**What do we do?**

The central feature of NCOS is small grade-level cohorts that meet once each week for circle practice*.* Led by NCOS facilitators, students engage in discussion, reflective practices, and other activities that guide and encourage *positive peer relationships, social-emotional development, and intellectual curiosity and growth.* Consistent with positive child and youth development, NCOS also promotes belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity students through participatory and hands-on activities.

**How do schools benefit?**

NCOS provides a number of benefits to students, staff and families. For students, these include more peer support for school success, fewer behavior referrals, increased school engagement and feeling of belonging, more in-class learning opportunities, and increased academic achievement. Staff benefit by developing better relationships with students, professional growth in their understanding of the everyday culture of NCOS students and their families, which supports culturally responsive practices. Staff also report appreciation for the opportunity to collaborate with other staff to address equity with an assets-based approach, as well as develop new and supportive relationships with other staff working to address equity. Schools that have family engagement activities report better relationships with parents, a clearer understanding of what parents need from schools to support their children, and parents and families more willing to participate in, and occasionally provide leadership for, school related activities.

 