



How We Show Up: Compassionate Systems Leadership

If this global pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we live in deeply interdependent and complex global systems and that the arrogance born of our technological sophistication masks deep fissures in our social reality, including systemic racism. All-too-human conflicts and tensions, miscommunications and biases disrupt and block our ability to work cooperatively together for the greater good of whatever systems we are a part—from family to school, healthcare infrastructure to our relationship with the natural world.

In this context, education has a core mandate, how we—adults, young people, and most importantly the adults of tomorrow—learn how to navigate and thrive, individually and collectively, amidst the vibrancies and challenges of these complex global systems—both the entrenched ones we seek to dismantle and the emerging ones we aspire to build. But mainstream education, especially primary and secondary education, is a complex tradition-bound system, with many stakeholders, pressures and constraints, governed by often rigid state and local bureaucracies and unquestioned norms. Given this reality, it is not surprising that deep innovation in education may appear an oxymoron to many. Yet, that is exactly what is needed and is occurring.

Paradoxically, while the work is all about the kids, until the adult organizations that manage and lead education systems change, it is naive to imagine education changing at the scale needed. People need to work together in new ways, growing capacity at all levels, and within and beyond the formal school system, as “systems leaders,” people adept at fostering collaboration for systems change. The **Compassionate Systems framework** offers tools and practices for developing a set of core leadership capacities that are equally relevant to principals, superintendents, teachers, students, and community-based organizations that work with kids beyond school—whoever wants to be a positive agent in bringing about change:

Fostering Aspiration: What is our shared vision? What is the future we seek to grow? What is the change we wish to see if education served all children and young people?

Reflective Conversation: How do we get better at seeing our own unconscious biases and fostering generative dialogue and collaboration in our organizations and communities? Do we feel connected? How do we see and move past deeply ingrained mental models that contribute to deeply entrenched inequities in our systems?

Systems Thinking: Our systems are designed to produce what they produce. They are not broken. If this is true, what role do we play in the systems around us—particularly those that systematically produce inequitable conditions? How do the different parts of the system interact and influence one another, especially in ways that produce unintended consequences, that go unaddressed? Does our organization foster health and well-being, or distrust and stress? How might we create the conditions for education ecosystems to grow and produce the equitable outcomes we seek?



Through workshops, tools, peer learning and communities of practice, The Center for Systems Awareness is working with educators around the world to develop more effective, collaborative and compassionate leaders needed to face today's challenges.

Integrating evidence-based approaches from decades of research and practice in social-emotional learning, health and well-being, and systems thinking, the Compassionate Systems framework helps nurture more generative organizational cultures at all levels, in classrooms, schools, districts, counties and states, to ministries of education. The same basic tools and practices support individual and collective learning for students, teachers, local administrators and senior managers.

Because they shape how people “show up” and the nature of the relationships fostered, the Compassionate Systems practices can also enable integrating different bodies of work crucial for education innovation, from the rigor of improvement science to the urgent need to de-program racial, class and gender stereotypes and institutional structures. Through its grounding in the social, physical and emotional experiences of how real people reflect and talk more openly with one another, it supports people enacting new ways of working with one another in service of deep change.

Spotlight: California

Over the last four years, a large network of California state entities and programs called the **System of Support for Expanded Learning (SSEL)** and most recently the **larger California System of Support** consisting of educators, administrators and researchers embarked on a transformative journey of professional growth and institutional healing, grounded in attention to personal wellbeing, organizational learning, and systems thinking. Over 200 educators and practitioners across the State have been introduced to and, in some cases, co-designed these practices and tools through professional development workshops, trainings and coaching with the Center for Systems Awareness, a nonprofit that supports communities in fostering systemic well-being at all levels, from the individual to the larger systems of institutions, society, economy and ecology. As educators across California began adopting and adapting with these tools in their daily work, many began to observe real changes in their workplace atmosphere and interpersonal behavior amongst themselves and their colleagues, and ability to wrestle with the tensions and paradoxes that come with confronting real systems change.

Where there was once distrust, “there is meaningful, legitimate, authentic curiosity about how the other person is doing” as Michael Funk, Director of the Expanded Learning Division in the California Department of Education describes. In state-wide convenings, people now “see how people are interacting. It says to those in the space: this is a place I can be open. This is a place for me,” commenting on the profound “ripple effect of the field.” As one stakeholder poignantly summarizes,

“There is a change in tone, in attitude, in relationship, and how we all work together that I think permeates into an overall culture. **It feels like a celebration when we get together now.** There have been meetings in the past that—I don't have any other way to describe it—except for toxic and dysfunctional. That transformation can't be understated.”

To make such a transformation possible, the California team had to **invest deeply in their own capacity to learn with and from one another**, and in doing so are creating the conditions for greater learning statewide. For these educators, whose primary role is to work with local educational programs to improve the quality of learning experiences for young people, becoming more grounded and connected in their partnerships enabled them to become more effective in improving opportunities and experiences for students at the local level. The work in California is a part of a budding global community of practitioners and researchers with communities of practice in British Columbia, Jordan, Indonesia, Denmark, Hong Kong and China, and across the United States. California's early adoption of the Compassionate Systems Framework signals its leadership in innovative approaches to education on a global stage, and leads us into a future toward positive and equitable systemic change in education.

