

THE LEARNING CONDITIONS TOOLKIT™

Creating schools where students are **seen, known, challenged**, and positioned to thrive.

You cannot accelerate academics without creating the conditions for learning.

THE LEARNING CONDITIONS FRAMEWORK™

**BELONGING, IDENTITY
& PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

**INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE,
RELEVANCE & AGENCY**

**EQUITABLE SYSTEMS
& ADULT RESPONSIBILITY**

**DIGNIFYING & JOYFUL
ENVIRONMENTS**

CULTURE • IDENTITY • RACE • POWER • COMMUNITY • VOICE • EQUITY

A practical, culturally responsive framework and set of tools for school and district leaders.

NAVIGATE THE TOOLKIT

Use this page to move directly to the section you need.

The toolkit can be used as a full improvement cycle or as a set of targeted tools.

Framework + Purpose

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How to Use This Toolkit

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Learning Conditions Diagnostic™

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Culturally Responsive Stress Test™

GO →

Student Learning Conditions Pulse™

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Learning Conditions Walkthrough™

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Learning Conditions Dashboard™

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30/60/90-Day Learning Conditions Plan

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Learning Conditions Commitment

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IMPROVEMENT CYCLE

DIAGNOSE → LISTEN → EXAMINE → ACT → INSPECT → ADJUST

A NOTE FROM DERRICK

Throughout my career as a teacher, principal, principal manager, district leader, coach, and consultant, one lesson has remained consistent: **academic improvement cannot be separated from the conditions in which students are being asked to learn.**

We can adopt stronger curriculum, increase observations, create intervention blocks, analyze assessment data, and expand tutoring. All matter. But if students do not feel that they belong, if expectations change depending on the adult or student, if classrooms prioritize compliance over thinking, or if systems repeatedly exclude students from instruction, acceleration becomes harder.

This matters especially in communities educational systems have historically underserved. Schools serving Black and Brown students and students experiencing poverty cannot be organized only around what adults believe students lack. Students may need structure, intervention, accountability, and support - and they also deserve **joy, intellectual challenge, identity affirmation, creativity, leadership, agency, excellent instruction, and access to opportunity.**

The question is not: *How do we fix our students?* The better question is: What conditions have we created for them to succeed?

THE FOUR CONDITIONS

CONDITION 01 BELONGING, IDENTITY & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

I am seen, known, valued, and safe being who I am.

CONDITION 02 INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE, RELEVANCE & AGENCY

I am capable of rigorous thinking, my knowledge matters, and I have meaningful ownership of my learning.

CONDITION 03 DIGNIFYING & JOYFUL ENVIRONMENTS

This space communicates that I belong, excellence is expected, and school can be a place of joy.

CONDITION 04 EQUITABLE SYSTEMS & ADULT RESPONSIBILITY

Adults create consistent systems, examine their own practice, respond to inequity, and remove barriers.

FROM DEFICIT TO DESIGN

A culturally competent framework changes the questions leaders ask. Poverty, race, trauma, and community violence are not interchangeable. Blackness and Brownness are not risk factors. At the same time, inequitable access to housing, transportation, safety, health resources, and opportunity can create real barriers that schools must understand rather than misread as lack of motivation.

DEFICIT QUESTION	DESIGN QUESTION
Why don't these students care?	What are students experiencing, and what is getting in the way of engagement?
Why aren't these parents involved?	How have we designed access, communication, trust, and partnership with families?
Why are they so disrespectful?	What behavior occurred, what meaning did we assign, and what else might explain it?
Why can't they handle rigor?	Who has access to rigorous learning, and what scaffolds preserve the bar while expanding access?

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

You do not need to implement everything at once. Use this toolkit as an improvement cycle: understand the student experience, identify the adult and system conditions that need attention, take focused action, and check whether those actions are working.

1. ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM + ESTABLISH THE PURPOSE

Bring together 3-6 people who see the school from different perspectives. Begin with: **What conditions must be true for our students to thrive academically?**

2. DIAGNOSE THE CURRENT STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Complete the Learning Conditions Diagnostic™ individually before discussing scores. Rate what is **actually happening today**. Require evidence for ratings of 3 or 4.

3. LOOK FOR DIFFERENCES IN WHO EXPERIENCES SCHOOL WELL

Do not stop at schoolwide averages. Disaggregate available data and ask: **Who is thriving? Who is not experiencing these conditions consistently?**

4. LISTEN BEFORE EXPLAINING THE DATA

Use the Student Learning Conditions Pulse™, student conversations, family feedback, walkthroughs, and qualitative evidence. Differences between student and adult perceptions are information to investigate.

5. IDENTIFY ONE OR TWO PRIORITY CONDITIONS

Look for patterns across the diagnostic, student voice, walkthroughs, attendance, behavior, and academic data. Select the **one or two conditions most likely to unlock improvement**.

6. EXAMINE THE ADULT + SYSTEM CONTRIBUTION

Before asking what students need to do differently, ask what adults, instruction, policies, routines, or systems need to do differently.

7. TURN THE FINDING INTO AN OBSERVABLE ADULT ACTION

Avoid vague goals such as *improve belonging*. Define exactly what adults will do, how often, and what evidence will show implementation.

8. IMPLEMENT, INSPECT + ADJUST

Use the 30/60/90-Day Plan. Revisit the dashboard every 2-4 weeks and ask: **What changed for students? For whom? What did not change? What do we adjust?**

START HERE IF YOU'RE NEW TO THIS WORK

TIME	LEADER ACTION
FIRST MEETING	Complete the Diagnostic™ individually, compare evidence, and identify where ratings diverge.
FIRST WEEK	Gather student voice and baseline attendance, behavior, engagement, belonging, and academic data.
FIRST 30 DAYS	Select 1-2 priority conditions and define observable adult actions.
DAYS 31-60	Implement the actions, coach adults, gather walkthrough evidence, and communicate what you are learning.
DAYS 61-90	Reassess student experience, review equity gaps, determine what is improving, and adjust.

A SIMPLE FACILITATION ROUTINE

- **Silent score first.** Individual ratings reduce groupthink.
- **Evidence before explanation.** Ask, 'What did we see, hear, or measure?'
- **Center student experience.** Adult intention does not substitute for student impact.
- **Name the adult move.** Every priority should result in a specific adult behavior or system change.
- **Return to the evidence.** Improvement is not complete because an action occurred; it is complete when the student experience changes.

RESEARCH FOUNDATION

The framework is informed by research on the science of learning and development and relationship-centered secondary schooling. Learning Policy Institute syntheses emphasize personalized relationships, safety and belonging, culturally sustaining and relevant education, identity safety, student voice and agency, and meaningful family engagement as important structures and practices for adolescent learning and development.

Selected foundation: Hernández, L. E., Darling-Hammond, L., & Nielson, N. (2024). *Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Schools: Structures That Matter*; and *Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Classrooms: Practices That Matter*. Learning Policy Institute.

TOOL 1

THE LEARNING CONDITIONS DIAGNOSTIC™

WHEN TO USE	WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH
Beginning of an improvement cycle; repeat quarterly or after a major change.	Leadership team first; then representative staff and student/family voice where appropriate.	1-2 priority conditions, evidence, equity questions, and a baseline score.

How to complete the Diagnostic:

Tap ONE box (1-4) for each indicator. A visible checkmark will show your selection. Then type supporting evidence in Evidence / Notes. Complete individually first, then compare ratings as a team.

BELONGING, IDENTITY & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Indicator	1	2	3	4	Evidence / Notes
Students can identify at least one trusted adult.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Adults know students beyond academic performance or behavior.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students experience correction without humiliation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students' cultures and identities are respected.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students can disagree or ask questions without being automatically characterized as disrespectful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Families regularly receive positive communication.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Student perspectives influence meaningful decisions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Adults intentionally reconnect following conflict.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Equity check: Which students experience these conditions most consistently? Who might experience them differently?					

INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE, RELEVANCE & AGENCY

Indicator	1	2	3	4	Evidence / Notes
Students regularly engage with grade-appropriate rigorous content.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students explain and defend their thinking.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students engage in meaningful academic discourse.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students receive opportunities to revise work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Indicator	1	2	3	4	Evidence / Notes
Students make meaningful choices within rigorous learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Learning connects to authentic questions, contexts, or audiences.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Intervention increases access to rigorous instruction rather than replacing it.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Advanced opportunities are equitably accessible.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Equity check: Who gets the most intellectually challenging work? Who gets remediation? Who gets enrichment?					

DIGNIFYING & JOYFUL ENVIRONMENTS

Indicator	1	2	3	4	Evidence / Notes
Students are welcomed into classrooms and common spaces.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Student identity is meaningfully reflected throughout the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Student work and thinking are visible.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Bathrooms and common spaces preserve dignity.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Security and behavioral procedures are respectful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Students experience opportunities for celebration and joy.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Spaces support collaboration, independence, and regulation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Recognition systems celebrate multiple forms of excellence.	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Equity check: Whose excellence gets celebrated? Who is most frequently monitored, redirected, searched, removed, or restricted?

EQUITABLE SYSTEMS & ADULT RESPONSIBILITY

Indicator	1	2	3	4	Evidence / Notes
Adults share common academic and behavioral expectations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Expectations are implemented consistently across classrooms.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Leaders examine implementation rather than assume it.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Academic and culture data are reviewed together.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Outcomes are disaggregated.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Disproportionality triggers investigation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Intervention begins before crisis.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Leaders examine adult practice when outcomes are not improving.	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Equity check: Where does a student's experience depend on which adult they encounter?

Reciprocal accountability: students are responsible for their choices. Adults are responsible for the environments, instruction, relationships, expectations, and systems they create.

TOOL 2

THE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STRESS TEST™

WHEN TO USE	WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH
Before adopting, revising, or responding to a policy, practice, curriculum, intervention, or recurring student-experience problem.	Decision-makers plus people closest to the impact, including students/families when appropriate.	A clear decision: proceed, monitor, redesign, or stop - with evidence.

Policy / practice / system being reviewed:

For each lens, check **Strong** / **Needs Attention** / **Concern** and capture evidence or questions.

1. Identity & Dignity

Does it preserve dignity? Could cultural differences be misread as misconduct? Does success require unnecessary assimilation? Can students make mistakes without losing membership?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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2. Expectations & Opportunity

Who gets advanced opportunities? Who receives remediation? Do supports increase access to rigor? Do consequences unnecessarily remove students from instruction?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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3. Adult Interpretation & Bias

What are we calling disrespectful, aggressive, defiant, or disengaged? Would we interpret this differently from another student? What evidence challenges our first interpretation?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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4. Voice & Power

Were affected students involved? Were families consulted? Whose perspectives are missing? What will actually change because of feedback?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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5. Impact & Disproportionality

Who experiences the consequences? What patterns appear across discipline, attendance, failure, access, intervention, belonging, recognition, and leadership opportunities?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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6. Community Assets & Context

What strengths and knowledge already exist? Are external barriers affecting access? Are we interpreting lack of access as lack of motivation?

■ Strong	■ Needs Attention	■ Concern	Evidence / Questions	
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Decision: ■ Proceed ■ Proceed + Monitor ■ Redesign ■ Stop Why?

TOOL 3

STUDENT LEARNING CONDITIONS PULSE™

WHEN TO USE	WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH
At baseline, after major changes, and every 6-8 weeks during an improvement cycle.	Students complete it anonymously when possible; leaders analyze patterns and disaggregate results.	A student-experience baseline, priority gaps, and questions for deeper listening.

Directions for students: Read each statement and place one check in the box that best represents your experience at this school.

1 Strongly Disagree | 2 Disagree | 3 Unsure | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly Agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I feel like I belong at this school.	■	■	■	■	■
There is at least one adult here I trust.	■	■	■	■	■
Adults notice when I am not here.	■	■	■	■	■
My teachers know me beyond my grades.	■	■	■	■	■
I can be myself at this school.	■	■	■	■	■
Adults treat me with respect when correcting me.	■	■	■	■	■
Students from different backgrounds are treated fairly.	■	■	■	■	■
My culture and identity are respected.	■	■	■	■	■
My classes make me think.	■	■	■	■	■
My teachers believe I can do challenging work.	■	■	■	■	■
When I struggle, adults help without lowering the expectation.	■	■	■	■	■
I get useful feedback that helps me improve.	■	■	■	■	■
My ideas matter in class.	■	■	■	■	■

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I have meaningful choices in my learning.	■	■	■	■	■
Students have a voice in decisions that affect us.	■	■	■	■	■
I experience moments of joy at school.	■	■	■	■	■
Adults recognize my strengths.	■	■	■	■	■
I am proud of something I have accomplished here.	■	■	■	■	■

Open response: What should adults keep doing? What should adults change? What do you wish adults understood better about you or your community?

TOOL 4

LEARNING CONDITIONS WALKTHROUGH™

WHEN TO USE	WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH
Weekly or biweekly while implementing priority adult actions.	School leaders, coaches, teacher leaders; calibrate observers before using for trends.	Observable patterns in student experience and adult practice - not teacher evaluation.

0 = Not Observed | 1 = Emerging | 2 = Consistent. Record low-inference evidence, not judgments.

Domain / Look-for	0	1	2	Evidence
Belonging: Adults use student names; interactions communicate warmth and high expectations.	■	■	■	
Belonging: Students can ask for help without embarrassment; corrections preserve dignity.	■	■	■	
Challenge: Students do significant cognitive work and explain their thinking.	■	■	■	
Challenge: Students respond to peers; tasks require more than compliance or completion.	■	■	■	
Environment: Student thinking is visible; identities are reflected authentically.	■	■	■	
Environment: Routines maximize learning; joy and connection are visible.	■	■	■	
Equity: Attention, correction, praise, challenge, and help are distributed equitably.	■	■	■	
Equity: The observer can identify who spoke, who did not, and who did most of the thinking.	■	■	■	

Walkthrough reflection: What pattern do we see? Which adult action should we reinforce or change?

TOOL 5

THE LEARNING CONDITIONS DASHBOARD™

WHEN TO USE	WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH
Every 2-4 weeks during implementation and before major student-success decisions.	Leadership/data/student-support team; bring student/family voice into interpretation.	An integrated story connecting student conditions to academic and culture outcomes.

Never examine academic performance without examining the conditions surrounding it. Record the current picture, target, trend, and equity gap.

Domain / Suggested Indicators	Current	Target	Trend	Equity Gap / Note
Attendance ADA; chronic absenteeism; first-period attendance; students missing 2+ days				
Belonging overall belonging; trusted-adult %; dignity; fairness				
Engagement assignment completion; on-task engagement; discourse; participation				
Behavior referrals; repeats; removals/suspensions; location/time; referring adult				
Academics course passing; D/F rates; GPA; credits; mastery; on-track				

THE DATA PROTOCOL

Step	Team Notes
SEE IT What does the evidence objectively show?	
NAME IT What pattern are we actually trying to solve?	
UNDERSTAND IT What might be underneath it? What do students and families say?	

EXAMINE OURSELVES What adult actions, policies, practices, or systems might contribute?	
DO IT What one or two adult actions will change?	
INSPECT IT What evidence should look different in 2-4 weeks?	

TOOL 6

30/60/90-DAY LEARNING CONDITIONS PLAN

WHEN TO USE		WHO PARTICIPATES	LEAVE WITH		
Immediately after selecting 1-2 priority conditions.		The people who own implementation, coaching, data review, and communication.	A small number of actions with owners, deadlines, implementation evidence, and outcome evidence.		
Phase	Suggested Focus	Our Priority Action	Owner	Evidence of Progress	
DAYS 1-30 LISTEN & ESTABLISH	Belonging + Predictability Gather baseline voice; conduct diagnostic; establish expectations; identify students without trusted adults; review attendance/discipline; listen to families/community.				
DAYS 31-60 RESPOND & DEEPEN	Challenge + Engagement Respond visibly to feedback; strengthen discourse; examine access to rigor; analyze D/F + attendance; target interventions; stress-test one policy.				
DAYS 61-90 INTEGRATE & IMPROVE	Systems + Adult Responsibility Integrate dashboards; identify multiple barriers; compare classrooms; examine disproportionality; spread effective practices; coach priority adult behaviors; repeat diagnostic.				

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR EVERY STUDENT SUCCESS MEETING

Question	Evidence / Response
ATTENDANCE Is the student present enough to access learning?	
BELONGING Does the student have meaningful connections here?	

EXPERIENCE What might behavior or disengagement be communicating?	
INSTRUCTION Is the student receiving rigorous, relevant instruction with appropriate support?	
ADULT RESPONSE What have we changed based on what we've learned?	

THE LEARNING CONDITIONS COMMITMENT

A school organized around strong learning conditions should make these statements increasingly true for every student:

I AM SEEN.	I AM KNOWN.
I BELONG.	I AM SAFE BEING MYSELF.
I AM EXPECTED TO DO DIFFICULT THINGS.	I WILL RECEIVE THE SUPPORT TO DO THEM.
MY THINKING MATTERS.	MY COMMUNITY HAS VALUE.
MY VOICE HAS POWER.	I CAN EXPERIENCE JOY HERE.
THE ADULTS WILL NOT GIVE UP ON ME.	

Academic acceleration is the outcome. The conditions for learning are the infrastructure that makes it possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Derrick D. Bass Jr.
Educational Leader • Consultant • Leadership Coach • Facilitator

Derrick D. Bass Jr. is an educational leader, leadership coach, consultant, and facilitator with more than 15 years of experience across schools, districts, charter networks, and education organizations. His work spans classroom teaching, school leadership, principal management, district leadership, consulting, professional learning, and school improvement.

His work centers on a fundamental belief: **sustainable academic improvement requires leaders to build the conditions in which students and adults can thrive.**

BRING THE FRAMEWORK TO YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT

Downloading a framework is a starting point. Changing the student experience requires implementation. Derrick D. Bass Jr. LLC partners with schools, districts, and education organizations to examine and strengthen the conditions that make academic excellence possible.

Learning Conditions Audit™	Structured assessment of student experience, adult practice, data, and systems.
Creating the Conditions for Learning	Interactive professional learning for school and district leaders.
Culturally Responsive Systems Review	Apply the Stress Test™ to discipline, attendance, intervention, academics, engagement, or other systems.
Learning Conditions Improvement Partnership	Ongoing leadership coaching and implementation support.

USAGE & ATTRIBUTION

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Selected references: Hernández, L. E., Darling-Hammond, L., & Nielson, N. (2024). *Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Schools: Structures That Matter; Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Classrooms: Practices That Matter*. Learning Policy Institute.
Hernández, L. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2022). *Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms*. Learning Policy Institute.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

A diagnostic is useful only if it changes what students experience.

If this toolkit surfaces a gap, Derrick D. Bass Jr. LLC can help your team turn the finding into focused adult actions, implementation routines, and evidence of progress.

LEARNING CONDITIONS AUDIT™

A structured review of student experience, adult practice, data, and systems - ending with a prioritized improvement roadmap.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

Interactive professional learning that helps leaders connect belonging, rigor, culture, instruction, and equitable systems.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS REVIEW

Stress-test discipline, attendance, intervention, engagement, or academic systems for dignity, access, bias, and impact.

IMPLEMENTATION + LEADERSHIP COACHING

Ongoing support to translate priorities into adult practice, inspect implementation, and adjust based on student evidence.

BRING YOUR RESULTS TO THE CONVERSATION

Bring your completed Diagnostic™, Stress Test™, or 30/60/90-Day Plan. The goal is not another initiative. It is a focused strategy for changing the conditions students experience every day.

Derrick D. Bass Jr. LLC | School Improvement • Leadership Coaching • Professional Learning