



NEPC VALENTINE'S DAY SPECIAL: A DOZEN ROSES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION



At their best, public schools in the U.S. educate and enhance the lives of millions of children per year in the effort to create a better and stronger society. Many of these schools are superb, providing their students with rich, engaging, and supported opportunities to learn. For that reason, in honor of Valentine's Day, NEPC is sharing, in no particular order, this list of 12 things to love about public schools.

- 1. Community schools:** Policymakers and educators are increasingly paying heed to longstanding research suggesting that, when it comes to providing equitable opportunities to all students, teachers can only do so much. The [research-based](#) community schools model is taking hold [across the U.S.](#) These schools take into account children's whole selves and their families too. Community schools develop partnerships with their communities, expand learning time, and offer wraparound services like in-school health clinics designed to address the fact that differences in achievement rates are driven by many factors that transcend the boundaries of the traditional school day.
- 2. High-quality preschool programs:** Few interventions in education provide benefits as [substantial and clear](#) as [high-quality preschool](#). The good news is that the percentage of three-, four-, and five-year-olds attending full-day programs has [risen substantially](#) in the past two decades. Certainly, not all of these programs are high in quality. But well-designed initiatives are being implemented across the U.S., with proponents in [both major political parties](#).
- 3. Restorative practices:** In the 1980s and 1990s, many schools moved toward so-called "[zero tolerance](#)" approaches to school discipline in which students were unrec-

essarily suspended or expelled when they broke specific rules. Perhaps predictably, the practice resulted in uneven outcomes, with students of color and students with disabilities [receiving a disproportionate number of suspensions and expulsions](#). In recent years, however, many schools are embracing so-called restorative practices (or “RJ”) in which wrongdoers are encouraged to work with their victims to think about ways to repair harm and restore relationships. RJ isn’t always called for; suspensions and expulsions are sometimes still necessary. But [when implemented well](#), RJ can turn bad behavior into an opportunity for victims and perpetrators alike to learn and grow.

4. **Voluntary desegregation:** [Research has demonstrated](#) a host of benefits of school integration, including higher student achievement and reductions in levels of prejudice. However, supporting this approach today is not easy given the restrictions resulting from the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1*, the [false narrative](#) that “we tried ‘busing’ but it failed.” Yet these obstacles are surmountable. [Many districts](#), including Chicago, Boston, Omaha, and Berkeley, [continue to voluntarily pursue](#) integration goals without a court order, through such race-conscious mechanisms as drawing neighborhood boundaries to minimize segregation, incentivizing inter-district transfers that encourage integration, and considering the racial demographics of a student’s neighborhood (as opposed to the demographics of the students themselves) as part of choice-school admissions.
5. **Dual language immersion and seals of biliteracy:** As exemplified by these policies, policymakers and educators have a growing awareness that bilingualism is an asset, not a deficit. In dual language immersion, students, including emerging bilinguals and native English speakers, are immersed in two or more languages with the goal of multilingualism. Seals of biliteracy honor students who have attained fluency in two or more languages by providing this information on their high school transcripts. Coupled with [the repeal or weakening](#) of turn-of-the-21st-century state laws that severely curtailed bilingual education, these programs represent an increasing appreciation of the benefits of multilingualism. The next step is to ensure that they are [implemented](#) in such a way that English learners themselves are never excluded.
6. **Sanctuary school districts:** Regardless of their own immigration status, or the fact that they are too young to have a say in where they live, [children have been swept up](#) in the current effort to arrest, detain, and deport immigrants. In response, school districts throughout the nation have declared themselves “sanctuaries” or “safe havens” that offer a welcoming and protective environment for immigrant families and children. While children already have a right to attend public school regardless of their immigration status or the status of their families, these safe haven districts take things a step further through such approaches as requiring immigration agents to attain a warrant, subpoena, or court order to come on campus, or helping families plan for emergency situations in which parents are detained while their children are at school. Educators can find [practical advice here](#) on creating a safe environment for immigrant students and families while remaining within the boundaries of the law.
7. **Schools of Opportunity:** There have long been programs that recognize high schools for good test scores that, given the strong correlation between socioeconomic status

and student achievement, signal little more than selective admissions policies and/or affluent student bodies. Almost by definition, scaling up or replicating such schools is not possible, especially those who value diversity. NEPC's [Schools of Opportunity program](#), by contrast, recognizes high schools that adopt research-based practices that provide all students with instruction that closes opportunity gaps. The most recent class of honorees includes schools that provide these rich opportunities through top-notch implementation of such straightforward approaches as an [early college](#) in which nearly every student graduates with postsecondary credits, [project-based learning](#), and [teacher-led professional development](#). These schools are true role models for policymakers and educators interested in understanding how excellent schools that serve all students are very feasible.

- 8. Class-size reduction:** There are [multiple benefits](#) to smaller classes, ranging from short-term outcomes like better student achievement to longer-term advantages like higher rates of college completion. Despite setbacks following the Great Recession of 2008, student-teacher ratios have been trending steadily downward in U.S. public schools [for decades](#). In 1955, the average pupil-teacher ratio in U.S. public schools was 26.9. According to the most recent federal data, it was 16 in 2016, and projected to decline to 15.3 by 2027. It's important to note that pupil-teacher ratios do not directly correspond to class size, since some teachers (like special educators) have very small classes. Comparative historic data are, however, more readily available for pupil-teacher ratios than for class size. The increases in the numbers of teachers have been real—and have outpaced increases in student enrollment. For example, between 1988 and 2016, the total number of teachers increased at [three times the rate](#) as the number of students, in part due to demands for smaller classes, especially in the early grades. Additional demands for smaller classes were included in several recent teacher strikes, with the teachers arguing that when they can better do their jobs, their students benefit.
- 9. Deeper learning:** The [idea behind](#) deeper learning is that students will move beyond the memorization of facts to more profound levels of understanding that permit them to apply what they have learned in novel contexts. This requires the development of such skills as collaboration, communication, and creative problem solving. [Teachers are critical](#) to the adoption of this [research-based](#) approach. Fortunately, [schools of education are catching on](#) and infusing deeper learning into their curricula.
- 10. Culturally responsive education** is the promising practice of meaningfully incorporating students' cultures, interests, and strengths into teaching and curriculum. Ethnic studies, which is a prominent approach for providing culturally responsive education, can [greatly increase attendance and achievement](#). Schools of Opportunity honorees meet this goal in multiple ways including [offering Native American language courses supported by elders who assist with tutoring](#), [having students lead teachers on walks through their communities](#), and [interdisciplinary coursework that encourages students to investigate topics from their own cultural perspectives](#).
- 11. Detracking schools:** Tracking is the practice of grouping students by their perceived levels of ability. For the most part, it's the default approach in American sec-

ondary schools, despite [research](#) documenting harms to low-track students without adding value to students in higher tracks. Because Native American, African American and Latinx students are disproportionately enrolled those lower tracks, such tracking practices widen opportunity gaps and achievement gaps. That said, districts and schools throughout the nation are challenging the status quo through such approaches as [removing barriers to taking Advanced Placement courses](#), [placing all middle school students in rigorous middle school math classes](#), and [phasing out elementary school gifted and talented programs](#) in an effort to provide enriched opportunities to all students.

12. Inclusion of students with disabilities: [Research suggests](#) that all students benefit from including students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, and then modifying curriculum and instruction as needed. For students with disabilities, the impacts include stronger reading and math skills, fewer behavioral problems, and, down the road, higher rates of employment and independent living. Inclusion does not typically affect the achievement of students without disabilities and may lead to benefits such as reductions in levels of prejudice. Schools of Opportunity are particularly adept at inclusion, adopting practices such as [pairing special education and non-special education teachers in every academic class](#), [using project-based and experiential learning to offer multiple entry points into the curriculum](#), and ensuring students with disabilities are participating in extracurriculars.

As NEPC publications and NEPC fellows doggedly point out, the nation’s public schools are far from perfect. Many of the above-described beneficial practices and reforms are found only in a minority of schools. Policymakers and educators all too frequently make decisions that contradict research on best and equitable practices. And our policymakers still provide our public schools with plainly inadequate resources, given all that we ask those schools to accomplish.

Yet there is also plenty to appreciate. Our public school system is not the decrepit edifice of opponents’ caricatures but rather a valuable if aging house that needs maintenance, updates, and repairs to ensure that it will retain its glory for generations to come. This Valentine’s Day, let’s show our love and commit ourselves to build on the “good bones” of that house, making it a warm and safe place for our children and theirs.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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