

Our **7** Core Assumptions

What we believe to be true

In this section, we present our assumptions about human beings. These are basic ideas that we believe to be true about human nature and our relationships to the world. It is important to be aware of one's core assumptions, because what we believe to be true shapes what we see. Our beliefs form the prism through which we see ourselves and others in the world.

For example, when you look at this image, what do you see?



Most likely, you will see a picture of a black vase shaped something like a Grecian urn. Yet, take another look. Can you also see the image of two white faces? Both images are there, but what our mind tells us to expect shapes what our eyes are able to see. Your assumption about what is there shapes what you see!

The core assumptions that we are about to present are not unique to this resource guide. They are principles that can be found in wisdom and cultural traditions from around the world. We invite each person who uses this guide to reflect on these assumptions as well as to take time to examine your own.



The True Self in Everyone Is Good, Wise, & Powerful . . .

We believe that everyone has a self that is good, wise, powerful, and always there, always present. In this resource guide, we refer to this as the “core” or “true” self. The core self is in everyone. It is in you, your students, and the adults you work with everyday. The nature of the core self is wise, kind, just, good, and powerful. The core self cannot be destroyed. No matter what someone has done in the past and no matter what has happened to him or her in the past, the core self remains as good, wise, and powerful as the day they were born.

This model of the self distinguishes between doing and being. What we do is not the whole of who we are. We often get confused about this. We mistake the roles we play or the emotions we feel for our core self. But how we behave or feel is the not the same as who we are. Our core selves are not always reflected in our actions or feelings. But beneath the acts and masks we humans adopt is a deeper, healthier self. Helping students and all members of the school community tune into the goodness and wisdom of their true self is the first step toward realigning their behavior in the world with this deeper self.

To use a metaphor, the outer shell of the oyster is rough, mottled with lots of bumps and crevices. Some might say that it is ugly. Yet inside, at the center, is a magnificent, smooth, infinitely beautiful pearl. This is how we think of the core self.

The World is Profoundly Interconnected . . .

According to chaos theory, when a butterfly flaps its wings in South America, the wind changes in North America. This points to the interconnectedness of natural forces around the globe. Climate change is another visible reminder of interconnectedness within nature. We may not always be aware of the impact of our actions on our environment, but we must eventually realize that our actions have consequences. American folk wisdom expresses the same idea in the common phrase, “What goes around, comes around.” The Bible, too, says, “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.”

In our human relationships, we are every bit as profoundly interconnected. When Native peoples say, “We are all related,” they mean that human beings are connected to all living creatures and are part of the natural world. Traditional African society uses the term “ubuntu” to express the idea that each of us is

A human being is part of the whole, called by us the “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

— Albert Einstein

fundamentally a part of the whole. It translates: “I am because we are.”

We believe this principle reminds us that there are no throw-away kids or people. We cannot drop out, kick out, or get rid of anything without literally throwing away a part of ourselves. By excluding someone, we harm ourselves as well as the fabric of our community: every suspension and expulsion reverberates through a web of interconnected relationships with unintended harmful consequences. Because we are connected, what we do to others, we also do to ourselves, although we may not always realize that this is happening. The wonderful news is that even the smallest positive actions, the words of support, moments of understanding, and intentional kindnesses are likewise amplified through the interconnected web of relationships. Many wisdom traditions counsel us to act with this understanding in mind. The Buddha said,

Do not overlook negative actions merely because they are small; however small a spark may be, it can burn down a haystack as big as a mountain . . . Do not overlook tiny good actions, thinking they are of no benefit; even tiny drops of water in the end will fill a huge vessel.

All Human Beings have a **Deep Desire** to be in a **Good Relationship . . .**

We believe that all people want to love and be loved and that all people want to be respected. This may not be what they show in their behavior, particularly when they have not been loved and respected by others. But at our core, we all desire to be in good relationship with others. Nel Noddings reminds us that children “listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter.”

We must stop thinking of human nature as a problem. As Meg Wheatley teaches, human nature is the blessing, not the problem. In our culture, we have a tendency to focus on the bad sides of human conduct. While human greed, anger, fear, and envy are strong human emotions responsible for a great deal of human suffering, this is only half of the human story. In our culture today, we have a great need to remember the overwhelming fact of human goodness.

There is much suffering in the world—physical, material, mental . . . But the greatest suffering is being lonely, feeling unloved, having no one. I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience.

— Mother Teresa

When students feel supported and successful in the classroom, they rarely act out.

When teachers feel supported and successful in school, they rarely burn out.

— Esther Wright

All Humans Have Gifts, & Everyone Is Needed for What They Bring . . .

According to some Indigenous teachings, each child is born with four unique gifts from Mother Earth. It is the responsibility of the adults to recognize these four unique gifts and help youth cultivate them, so the child may grow up to realize his or her individual purpose in life and use these gifts to help others. According to a Swahili proverb, the greatest gift we can give each other is not to share our riches with others but to reveal the others' own riches to themselves. All of us need to feel we have something valuable to contribute to others.

We believe that, in human societies, all gifts are indispensable to the well-being of the whole. Within nature, diversity is the source of strength. Interdependence is essential for survival. It is the way of nature. Every cell in our body is differentiated to perform a specialized function that contributes to the whole. This is as true for families as it is for organizations. Different people are needed, because different people see and do things differently. We require the contribution of diverse talents, personalities, and perspectives to find creative and innovative solutions to meeting our needs.

It takes a sense of humility—realizing that each of us alone does not have all the answers—and a sense of gratitude for us to be open to the gifts that others bring.

We must be actively engaged in the setting free of every other person to be who she or he is intended: someone different from who we are, someone who will see the world from another perspective, someone who will not agree with us.

— Caroline A. Westerhoff

Everything

We Need to Make Positive Change Is Already Here . . .

Gather yourselves.

Banish the word 'struggle' from your vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

— Hopi Elders, 2001

This resource guide is a strength-based model. We believe that everything we need to make positive change within our school community is already here. This is because human creativity and human commitment are our greatest treasure and greatest hope. A deficit model identifies what is missing in order to create change. It is easy to slip into the belief that the resources we need to meet our common needs as human beings are scarce and dwindling. However, what we too often assume to be a lack of resources is, in fact, a question of values and priorities.

We believe school communities hold rich reservoirs of talent and wisdom that are waiting to be accessed. If we fail to see ourselves as creators of our school culture, we deny the power to change it. We need to learn how to tap into the wisdom and creative energy of all our human resources: students, teachers, parents, extended families, administrators, secretaries, custodial staff, school resource officers and many more who are present within our community. Meg Wheatley reminds us to look around ourselves and see who is here, because when a living system is struggling, it needs to start talking to itself and especially “to those it didn’t know were even part of itself.” By doing this, we liberate the potential of our collective power to create the world we desire. We *are* the ones we have been waiting for.

Human Beings are Holistic . . .

In the English language, the words “health” and “whole” come from the same root. Our minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits are in all that we do. These are equally important parts of us as human beings—each provides ways of knowing and sources of both knowledge and wisdom.

Learning is a holistic process engaging body, heart, and spirit as well as the mind in an integrated process. How we use our bodies affects the sharpness of our mental processes. No child can learn if they are hungry, tired, cold, or sick. The quality of how we feel about others affects learning. Modern brain research tells us that information with emotional content is more

deeply etched in our memory than information without emotional content, and it is often said that children don’t care what you know until they know you care. We know too that the absence of emotional and physical safety within the classroom creates stressful feelings, such as fear and dread, that interrupts cognition and prevents learning.

In this approach to creating healthy schools, we seek to engage all parts of ourselves: our intellect, emotions, spirit, and body. We seek to attend to the needs of each of these parts of ourselves so that we can nurture the multiple intelligences that are a part of the human capacities.

*The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts . . .
the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge.*

— Parker Palmer

We Need Practices to Build Habits of Living from the Core Self . . .

A Grandfather from the Cherokee nation was talking to his grandson.

"A fight is going on inside me," he tells the boy.

It is a terrible fight between two wolves.

One wolf is evil and ugly.

He is anger, envy, war, greed, self-pity, sorrow, regret, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, selfishness, and arrogance.

The other wolf is beautiful and good: he is friendly, joyful, peaceful, loving, hopeful, serene, humble, kind, just, and compassionate.

This same fight is going on inside of you and inside of every human being.

"But Grandfather!" cries the grandson, "which wolf will win?"

The elder looked at his grandson, "The one you feed."

We believe we need practices that help us connect with our core self, so we can live aligned with our values and build healthy relationships in classrooms and school communities. The kind of relationships among students and adults within a school community is a matter of intention: if we choose to nurture positive relationships, they will flourish.

Many of our current practices within schools reinforce the walls around the core self and increase our sense of disconnection from our own self and others. Our practices encourage us to assert power over others and to be fearful and distrustful of the wolves that lurk within. We have developed habits of closing our hearts and minds to the feelings of others as well as to our own selves.

The Circles in this guide offer many time-tested means for reconnecting with our healthy core self and to nurture positive relationships within the school environment. The peacemaking Circle has a natural affinity with practices that feed and nurture "the good wolf" in all of us. The magic of Circle is in the *practice* of Circle.