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# Framing Possibility: Designing Learning with Families and Communities to Realize the Portrait of a Graduate




## A PORTRAIT OF GROWTH

From the first lines to the final details, this is more than a portrait. It is a journey of learning, reflection, and becoming.

Dr. Catherine V. Addor

Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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# Framing Possibility: Designing Learning with Families and Communities to Realize the Portrait of a Graduate

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A child stands in front of a wall filled with Portrait images.

A presenter. A collaborator. A problem-solver. A reflective thinker.

Each image looks polished, almost effortless. What the wall does not show are the voices behind those moments. The caregiver who asked a question at the dinner table changed how a student thought. The sibling who challenged an idea. The neighbor who shared a story. The coach who insisted on perseverance. The community that provided context, culture, and meaning.

The Portrait is not built in isolation.

It is shaped in relationships.

That relationship lives in the 98%.

The 98% represents the vast majority of a student's life beyond school, where identity, skills, and understanding are continuously shaped through everyday experiences with family, community, and the world around them. It reflects a simple reality: if students spend roughly 2% of their waking time in school, then the remaining 98% becomes the primary space where learning is practiced, reinforced, and made meaningful.

## Re-centering Families and Community as Co-Designers

Schools have traditionally positioned families and communities as supports to learning rather than as central contributors to it. Engagement has often meant attending events, receiving information, or reinforcing school expectations at home.

This is proximity, not a partnership.

True partnership recognizes that caregivers and community members are:

*First teachers and ongoing educators*

*Holders of cultural knowledge, language, and identity*

*Designers of learning experiences through daily life*

*Critical observers of student growth over time*

*Essential voices in shaping meaningful, relevant learning*




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Urie Bronfenbrenner reminds us that development is shaped through interactions across systems. When schools fail to authentically engage families and communities, they miss more than support. They are missing a core part of the developmental ecosystem.

Research reinforces this. Authentic family engagement is linked to stronger academic outcomes, increased motivation, and improved social-emotional development (Auerbach, 2012; Barger et al., 2019). What is often overlooked is *why*. Families and communities provide continuity. They see growth over time, across contexts, and through experiences that schools cannot fully access.

They see the 98%.

## What Families and Caregivers Actually Offer

Families don't need training to support learning. They need recognition for what they already do.

Consider what happens outside of school:

*A caregiver asks, "Why do you think that happened?"*

*A grandparent shares a story that reframes a historical concept.*

*A sibling challenges an explanation.*

*A parent models problem-solving in real time.*

*A family navigates language, culture, and identity together.*

These moments are the foundation of:

- ✓ Critical thinking
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Perspective-taking
- ✓ Resilience
- ✓ Identity development

These are the Portrait in practice.

The questions families ask often go deeper than academic prompts:

*"Does this make sense to you?"*

*"What would you do differently next time?"*

*"How does this connect to what we've experienced?"*

*"Who else might see this differently?"*

*"Why does this matter?"*

These questions sustain learning beyond completion. They push thinking into reflection and application.

## The Role Families and Community Must Play

In a system that honors the 98% as the studio, families and communities are embedded throughout the learning process. Their role includes:

**Co-Constructing Learning:** Providing input into what students learn and how learning connects to real life.

**Extending Inquiry:** Continuing conversations beyond the classroom, asking questions that deepen thinking.

**Contextualizing Content:** Connecting academic concepts to lived experiences, culture, and community realities.

**Observing Growth Over Time:** Noticing changes in confidence, communication, and problem-solving across settings.

**Supporting Identity Development:** Helping students understand who they are and how they relate to the world.

Community members extend this further:

Offering real-world problems and authentic audiences

Providing mentorship and expertise

Creating spaces where students can apply learning meaningfully




## What Schools and Institutions Must Do Differently

Institutions must fundamentally shift how they operate if families and communities are to play this role:

**From Access to Invitation:** Schools must move beyond providing access to intentionally inviting families into meaningful roles in learning design.

**From One-Way Communication to Dialogue:** Communication must become reciprocal. Listening becomes as important as informing.

**From Events to Embedded Practice:** Engagement cannot be occasional. It must be integrated into the curriculum, assessment, and daily routines.

**From Deficit to Asset-Based Thinking:** Educators must recognize the strengths, knowledge, and experiences that families bring, particularly across diverse cultural contexts.

**From Control to Partnership:** Schools must be willing to share ownership of learning. This requires trust, flexibility, and a willingness to learn alongside families.




## What Authentic Connection Looks Like in Practice

An authentic connection is visible in the design of learning itself. It looks like:

A unit that begins with family interviews and builds toward community-based action

Classrooms where multiple languages, cultures, and perspectives are present and valued

Projects that require students to engage with real issues in their communities

Caregivers participating not just in presentations, but in planning and reflection

Teachers using family insights to shape instruction and support

It also looks like systems that create space for these connections:

Flexible scheduling for engagement opportunities

Multiple modes of communication that honor different needs and access points

Structures for ongoing dialogue, not just reporting

## Assessing Growth Across the Continuum

If the Portrait is developed across the 98%, assessment must reflect that reality.

Assessment must capture growth across contexts and over time, and not be limited to classroom experiences.

This requires a shift from static measurement to dynamic documentation.

### What Growth Looks Like Across the Continuum:

**PreK–Elementary**
Increased ability to express ideas and listen to others
Early signs of curiosity and questioning
Growing independence in exploring and explaining

### Middle School
Development of perspective-taking and collaboration
Ability to connect ideas across contexts
Increased reflection on thinking and learning processes

### High School
Application of knowledge to real-world situations
Leadership and initiative in projects and community engagement
Deep reflection on identity, goals, and impact

## How to Assess This Growth:

### Multi-Source Evidence
Student work and performance tasks
Reflections and self-assessments
Caregiver observations and insights
Community feedback

### Student-Led Documentation
Portfolios that include learning from both school and life
Journals that capture thinking, questions, and growth over time
Artifacts from community-based experiences

### Narrative Feedback
Descriptions of growth rather than isolated scores
Feedback that connects skills to real-world application

### Conferences as Learning Conversations
Student-led conferences that include families
Discussions focused on growth across contexts, not just grades

### Returning to the Portrait
The images on the wall begin to shift.

They are no longer final products.

They are moments within a continuum.

Each one is connected to countless interactions across the 98%.

A graduate standing confidently is the result of years of questions, conversations, challenges, and support from families and communities.




## Redefining Engagement as the Core of Learning

Family, caregiver, and community engagement is not an initiative. It is the foundation of meaningful learning.

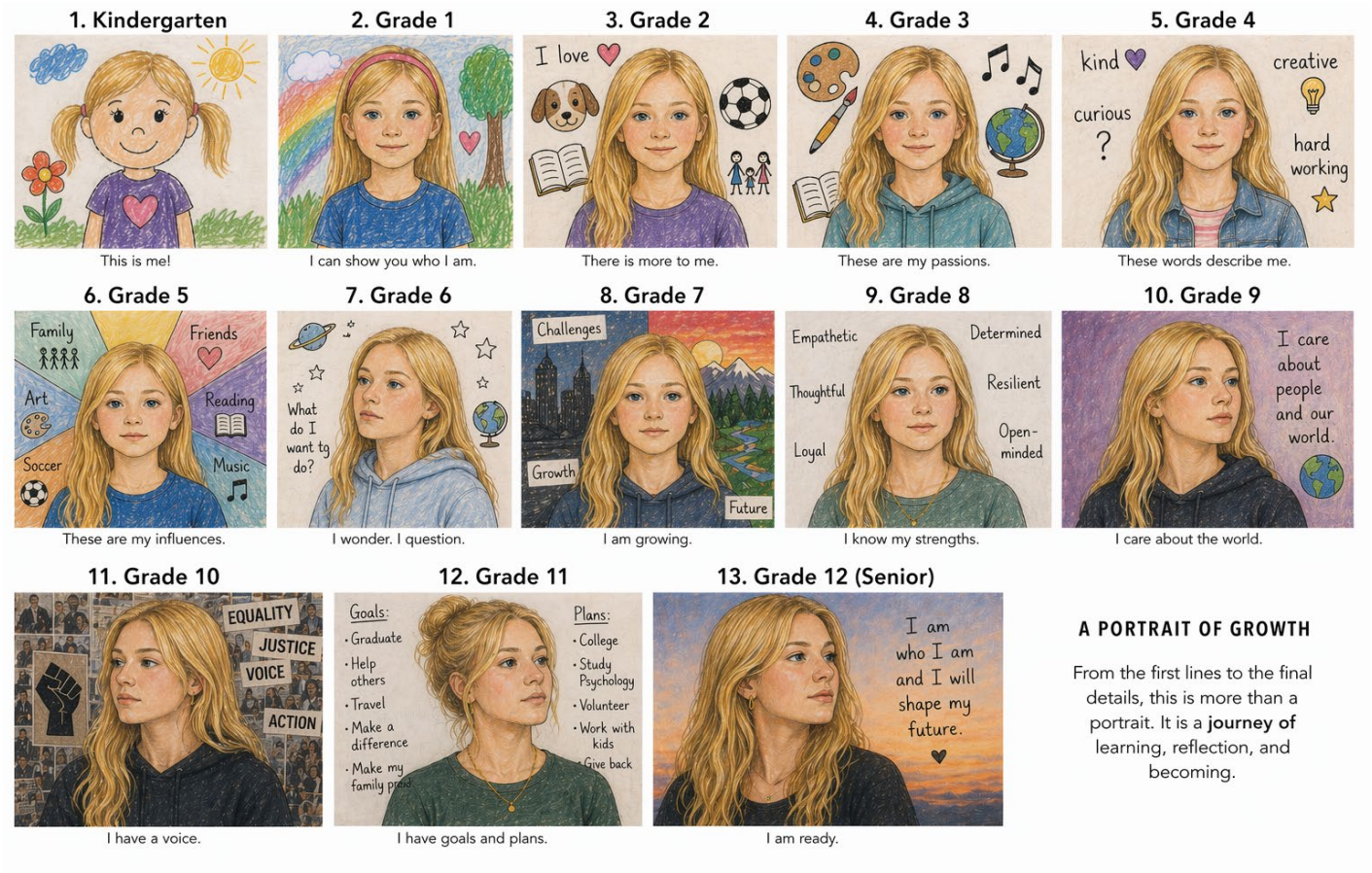
The 98% is not an extension of school. It is the primary studio where the Portrait of a Graduate is developed.

The work of educators is to:

- ✓ Recognize what already exists
- ✓ Build authentic partnerships
- ✓ Design for connection and coherence
- ✓ Assess growth in ways that honor the full learning experience

When schools, families, and communities operate as true partners, the Portrait is no longer an aspiration. It becomes a lived reality, visible not just on a wall, but in the lives students lead.

*The Studio Framework connects the Portrait of a Graduate to Families, Caregivers, and Community.*




## Reframing the Portrait

The Portrait of a Graduate is often displayed as a set of outcomes.

This framework positions it as a **continuum of development shaped across the 98% of time students spend outside of school**.

Each attribute is not taught once. Students **live, practice, reinforce, and observe it across contexts**.

The question shifts from: "What are we teaching in school?" to: "How are we designing a system where school, family, and community co-create these outcomes?"

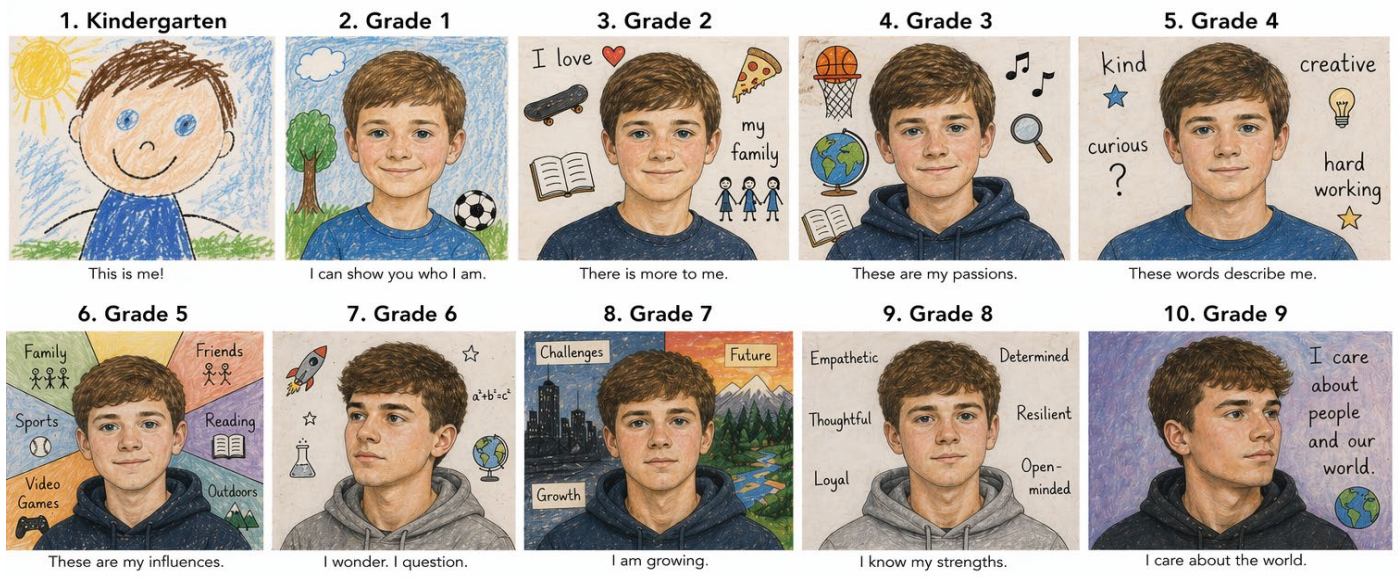
### Portrait of a Graduate in the 98% Studio

The 98% Studio is the world beyond the school day, where children spend most of their time learning, growing, practicing, connecting, and becoming who they are.

1. Critical Thinker

   In the 98% Studio (Family and Community Contribution):

   Caregivers ask open-ended questions that push reasoning
   Family discussions challenge assumptions and invite multiple perspectives
   Community experiences expose students to real-world complexity




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Questions Families Naturally Ask:

*"Why do you think that?"*

*"What makes you say that?"*

*"What would happen if...?"*

*"Does that always work?"*

What Schools Must Do Differently:
Design tasks that require students to bring outside perspectives into learning
Value multiple ways of knowing, including lived experience
Invite family insight into how students reason outside of school

What Growth Looks Like Across the Continuum:
Early: Asking "why" and making simple connections
Middle: Comparing perspectives and revising thinking
High: Applying reasoning to unfamiliar, real-world problems

How to Assess Growth:
Student explanations and reasoning artifacts
Reflection journals, including home and community experiences
Caregiver observations of decision-making and problem-solving

2. Effective Communicator

In the 98% Studio:
Students practice communication across generations, cultures, and contexts
Language development occurs in authentic, meaningful exchanges
Storytelling becomes a vehicle for identity and understanding

Questions Families Ask:

*"Can you explain that to me?"*

*"How would you say that differently?"*

*"Who are you speaking to?"*

What Schools Must Do Differently:
Honor home languages and communication styles
Create opportunities for communication beyond academic formats
Include family and community audiences

Growth Across the Continuum:
Early: Expressing ideas and listening
Middle: Adapting communication for different audiences
High: Presenting, persuading, and responding with clarity

**Assessment:**
Presentations to authentic audiences
Student-led conferences with caregivers
Feedback from community members

3. **Collaborator**

**In the 98% Studio:**
Students negotiate roles, resolve conflicts, and build relationships in real life.

Collaboration is practiced through family dynamics and peer interactions

**Questions Families Ask:**

*"How did you work that out?"*

*"Did everyone get a chance to share?"*

*"What could you do differently next time?"*

**What Schools Must Do Differently:**
Teach collaboration as a skill, not assume it
Connect group work to real-world collaboration experiences
Include family insights on how students interact outside of school

**Growth Across the Continuum:**
Early: Sharing and taking turns
Middle: Managing roles and resolving conflict
High: Leading, facilitating, and adapting within teams

**Assessment:**
Peer and self-assessment
Caregiver insights on social interaction
Observation across settings




4. **Global Citizen / Culturally Responsive Individual**

**In the 98% Studio:**
Identity, culture, and worldview are shaped within families and communities
Students engage with perspectives beyond their own

**Questions Families Ask:**

*"How do we do this in our family?"*

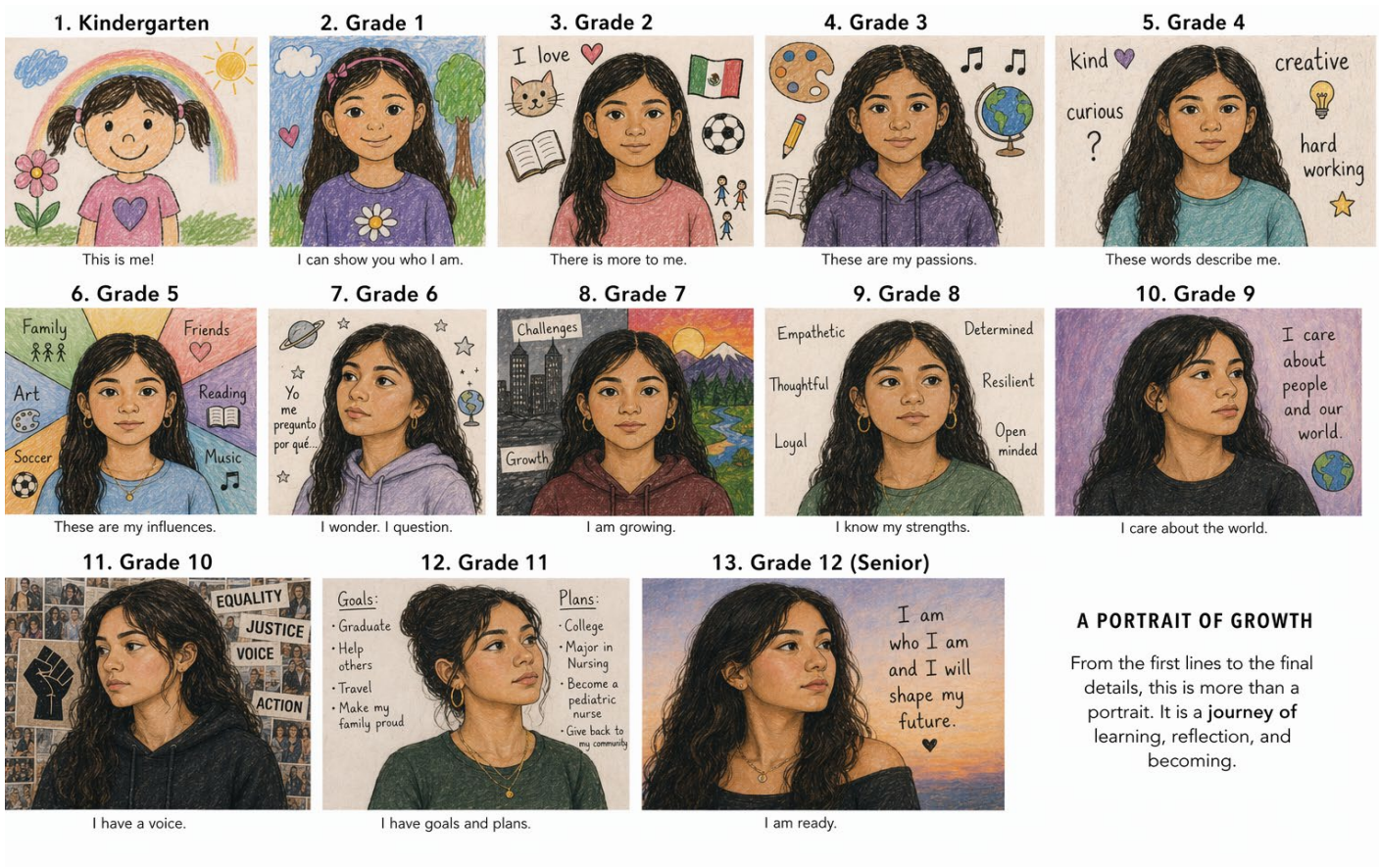
*"What do others believe?"*

*"Why is this important to us?"*

**What Schools Must Do Differently:**
Center culture, identity, and lived experience in the curriculum
Invite families to share traditions, perspectives, and knowledge
Build connections to global and local issues

**Growth Across the Continuum:**
Early: Awareness of self and others
Middle: Respecting and understanding differences
High: Acting with awareness and responsibility

**Assessment:**
Reflection on identity and perspective
Community-based projects
Family narratives and contributions




5. **Creative Innovator**

**In the 98% Studio:**
Creativity emerges through play, exploration, and problem-solving.

Families model adaptability and resourcefulness

**Questions Families Ask:**

*"What could you try instead?"*

*"How else could you do this?"*

*"What happens if it doesn't work?"*

**What Schools Must Do Differently:**
Value process over product
Encourage risk-taking and iteration
Connect innovation to real-life challenges

**Growth Across the Continuum:**
Early: Exploring and imagining
Middle: Designing and revising
High: Creating solutions with impact

**Assessment:**
Iterative design work
Documentation of process
Feedback from real users or audiences

6. **Self-Directed / Reflective Learner**

**In the 98% Studio:**
Students develop habits, routines, and independence
Reflection often happens informally through conversation




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Questions Families Ask:

*"How did that go?"*

*"What are you proud of?"*

*"What would you change?"*

What Schools Must Do Differently:
Build structured reflection into learning
Connect school-based reflection to life experiences
Include caregiver perspectives in understanding growth

Growth Across the Continuum:
Early: Recognizing success and effort
Middle: Setting goals and reflecting on progress
High: Managing learning and making informed decisions

Assessment:
Goal-setting and reflection tools
Student-led conferences
Ongoing portfolio development

## System-Level Shifts for Authentic Connection

To make this framework real, institutions must:

- ✓ Design curriculum that requires engagement with the 98%
- ✓ Create structures for ongoing dialogue with families
- ✓ Honor multiple forms of knowledge and experience
- ✓ Redefine assessment to include growth across contexts
- ✓ Build trust through consistent, meaningful partnership

What Assessment on the Continuum Truly Means

Assessment is no longer a moment.

It is a **story, over time**.

It includes:

- ✓ Evidence from school, home, and community
- ✓ Multiple voices, including students, caregivers, and educators
- ✓ Documentation of growth, not just performance
- ✓ Reflection as a central component

It answers both:

**"What does the student know?"** and

**"Who is the student becoming across the 98%?"**

## Return to the Portrait Wall

Now imagine each image layered with invisible threads:

- ✓ Threads that connect to conversations at home.
- ✓ Threads that connect to community experiences.
- ✓ Threads that connect to moments of struggle, growth, and discovery outside of school.

These threads are the 98%.

*When schools design with those threads in mind, the Portrait becomes more than a vision.*

*It becomes evidence of a system that understands where learning truly lives.*



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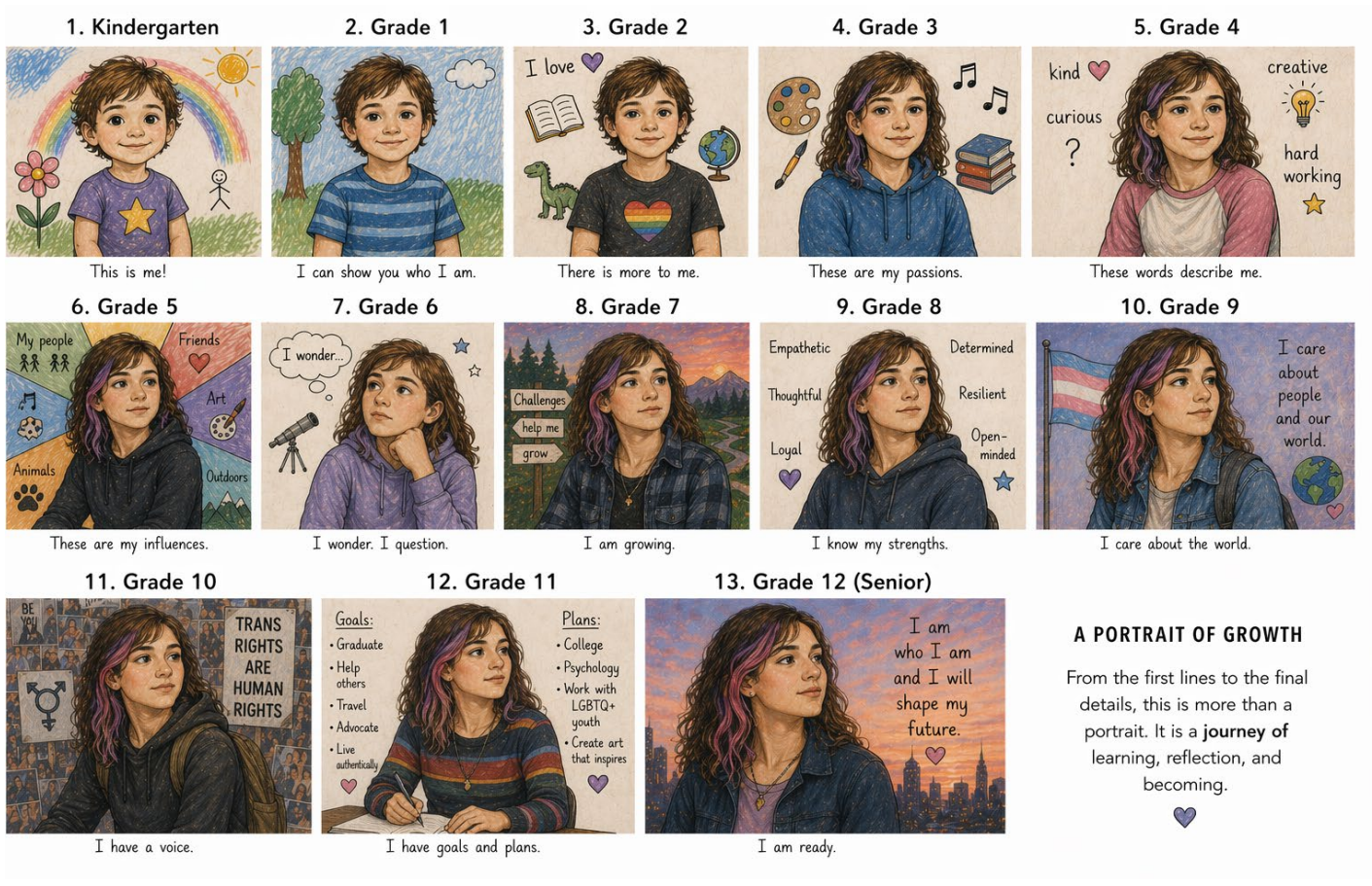
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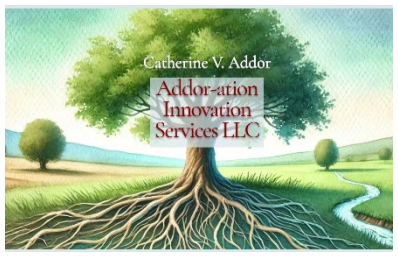
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*Dr. Catherine V. Addor is an educational leader, consultant, and founder of Addor-ation Innovation Services, LLC. With more than 35 years of experience in K–12 education, she has served in district leadership roles supporting curriculum, instruction, International Baccalaureate programming, world languages, ENL, professional learning, and school improvement. Her work centers on student agency, family and community engagement, instructional coherence, and leadership development. Dr. Addor holds an EdD in Educational Leadership from Manhattanville College, where her dissertation examined parent and caregiver engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. She supports schools in designing meaningful, equitable, and future-focused learning systems.*




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