FOR SUPERINTENDENTS & DISTRICT LEADERS

Make Joy Measurable.

The National School of Joy Certification turns joy from a word in your strategic plan into a verified, nationally recognized standard of practice.

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Founder & CEO, Joyful Collaborative, LLC® | District Leadership Briefing

NATIONAL

School of Joy

CERTIFICATION

THE CHALLENGE

Our schools function. Too many of them do not feel alive.

Test scores have recovered unevenly since the pandemic, but the deeper conditions for learning remain unresolved, and they show up in the metrics boards watch most closely.

40%

of high schoolers

reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023

<½

of Philadelphia students

felt they consistently belong, feel welcome, or enjoy being at school.

School District of Philadelphia

$20K+

per teacher departure

National estimates of the cost of each teacher who leaves.

National turnover studies

β = .24

teacher engagement

predicts student gains; emotional exhaustion predicts losses (β = −.18).

Klusmann et al., 1,193 teachers

THE MOVEMENT

Leading districts are already naming joy as a core value.

Large urban, suburban, and charter systems alike are writing joy into their strategic plans, values, and graduate profiles.

School District of Philadelphia Philadelphia, PA	Formal core value: Joy "inspires active engagement and belonging"
DC Public Schools Washington, D.C.	"Joyful and rigorous learning" as the core student experience
Rockwood School District St. Louis County, MO	Core value: "We find joy in our work"
Seattle Public Schools Seattle, WA	"Joyful learning" as an equity strategy in literacy and math
RePublic Charter Schools Nashville & Memphis, TN	Joy as a "strategic move" with structured daily practices
Jackson Public Schools Jackson, MS	Full strategic pillar: "JPS Joy" across every school space
Portland Public Schools Portland, ME	Initiative for a "joyful, supportive, and safe school culture"
Chula Vista Elementary SD Chula Vista, CA	Vision: "the joy and importance of learning for all students"
Minneapolis Public Schools Minneapolis, MN	Staff joy as a BIPOC educator retention strategy
Concord Public Schools Concord, MA	Graduates who "find joy in learning"

THE EVIDENCE

Joy is not in tension with achievement. It drives it.

Positive emotional environments, belonging, and well-being are linked to the outcomes districts are accountable for: achievement, attendance, climate, and retention.

11–17

percentile points

Average academic gain for students in SEL programs over comparison groups.

CASEL research synthesis

424

studies, 500,000+ students

Yale meta-analysis: higher achievement, attendance, and grades.

Cipriano et al., Child Development, 2023

d = 0.41

teacher well-being effect

Positive link between teacher well-being and student achievement across 46 studies.

Duong et al., 2021

43%

more likely effective

Teachers with higher life satisfaction were more likely to be effective in the classroom.

Cited in The Case for Joy, 2026

Universal SEL programs show school-wide gains in reading and math scores and **reductions in suspensions and office referrals** (meta-analysis of 213 studies).

THE GAP

A strategic plan states intent. It does not create practice.

Without a shared framework, joy remains inspirational rather than operational. Districts that commit to joy tell us they need:

- A shared definition of what joy-centered education looks like in practice
- A self-assessment and school-level diagnostic tool
- Professional development and implementation guidance
- Measurable indicators that connect joy to student outcomes
- A certification process that validates and celebrates the work
- A national community of practice and network of certified schools

The National School of Joy Framework is the first research-grounded national system purpose-built to fill all six needs.

THE SOLUTION

National School of Joy Certification

A rigorous, multi-domain standard for what it means to be a joyful learning community, modeled after the nationally respected designations district leaders already know.

Blue Ribbon Schools

U.S. Department of Education recognition of excellence.

National Schools of Character

Character.org designation for culture and values.

STEM.org Accreditation

Standards-based accreditation framework.

Joy, in this context, is not a feeling left to chance. It is a cultural posture actively cultivated through leadership, systems, relationships, and daily practice: a place where students arrive expecting to belong and staff show up ready to contribute.

THE FRAMEWORK

Six Domains of Joy. 40 indicators. 200 points.

Together, the domains form a complete picture of a joyful school or district, including district-only indicators for central office support.

1	**Joyful Leadership**	How leaders model, protect, and institutionalize joy, from the superintendent's office to the classroom	35 points
2	**Staff Culture & Belonging**	Whether the district cultivates a joyful workplace for educators and staff	35 points
3	**Student Experience & Engagement**	Whether students experience joy, belonging, voice, and engagement daily	40 points
4	**Learning Environment & Physical Space**	How physical and emotional spaces reflect and reinforce a culture of joy	25 points
5	**Family & Community Engagement**	How joyful culture extends beyond the building into families and community	25 points
6	**Systems, Sustainability & Equity**	Whether joy lives in structures, data, and equity commitments, not one person	40 points

RIGOR & INTEGRITY

A certification your board can trust.

Three evaluation lenses

Self-assessment, trained NSJ Peer Review, and an on-site Lead Evaluator visit are scored and averaged. Gaps of more than 8 points trigger a follow-up review.

Evidence required

Every indicator is scored 1–5 using documents, survey data, observation, interviews, and testimony. No 4 or 5 without observable or documented evidence.

No masking weak spots

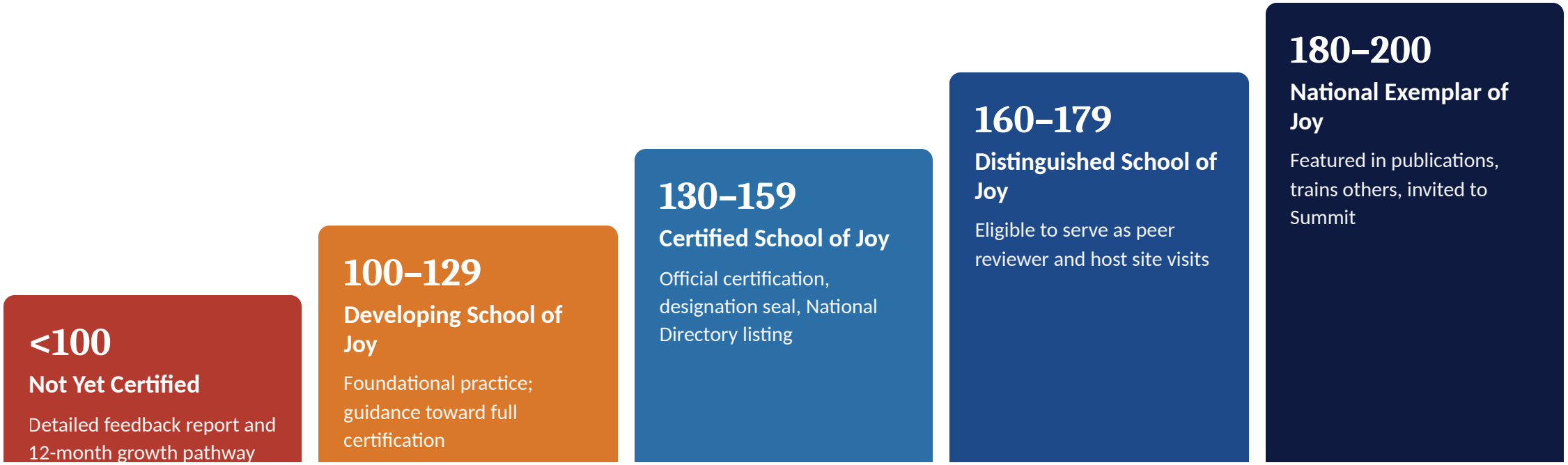
Every domain must reach a 40% minimum threshold. A high total cannot hide a critical gap in another area.

Equity lens throughout. A school where joy is experienced only by certain groups, grade levels, or programs does not meet the standard for certification.

RECOGNITION LEVELS

A clear pathway from developing to national exemplar.

Every applicant receives actionable feedback, so the process builds capacity whether or not certification is earned this cycle.



RETURN ON INVESTMENT

What certification delivers for your district

Board-ready accountability

A common language and measurement system for progress monitoring, board reports, and state and funder communication.

Recruitment & retention

A visible differentiator in competitive hiring markets where educator well-being is a top consideration.

Attendance & engagement

Addresses root causes of chronic absenteeism: belonging, connection, and wanting to be at school.

Community trust

Aligns with family expectations for whole-child education and strengthens family partnership.

National recognition

Designation seal, National Directory listing, and celebration at the annual Joyful Schools Summit.

Strategic plan alignment

Operationalizes joy, belonging, and SEL goals already named in your plan, with defined indicators.

THE PROCESS

An annual cycle built around the school year

1

BY OCT 1

Letter of Intent

One page describing your school or district and its joy journey.

2

BY NOV 15

Self-Assessment

Complete the rubric with artifacts, survey data, and photos.

3

30 DAYS

Peer Review

A trained NSJ Peer Reviewer scores the application.

4

JAN–APR

Site Visit

Half- or full-day visit by a Lead Evaluator.

5

BY MAY 31

Decision

Composite score and written determination.

6

SUMMIT

Celebration

Certificate, digital seal, and National Directory listing.

Certification is valid for **two years**, with a streamlined Annual Culture Progress Report in Year 2 showing updated data and at least one new or strengthened practice.

WAYS TO ENGAGE

Start where your district is.

GET READY

Certification Coaching

A structured pre-application engagement that helps leadership teams build evidence, close gaps, and prepare a strong application.

PILOT

Pilot School Cohort

Certify a small set of schools first, build internal champions, and create proof points for the board.

SCALE

Multi-Year District Partnership

District-wide implementation with coaching, leadership development, and pursuit of National District of Joy™ recognition.

Application fees follow a **sliding scale based on enrollment**. Fee waivers are available for schools in high-poverty and high-need communities.

THE MOMENT DEMANDS A FRAMEWORK

The question is not whether joy matters. The question is whether your district will be a leader in defining what joy-centered excellence looks like.

I would welcome the opportunity to walk your leadership team through the rubric and map it to the goals already in your strategic plan.

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