

HARVARD



GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF EDUCATION

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**EDREDESIGN**

THE EDREDESIGN LAB

December 6, 2022

## **NGA: Opportunities for Shifting the Paradigm**

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All across the country educators and policy-makers are newly alert to the learning damage caused by COVID 19. They have already reviewed the alarming numbers, considered the causes, contemplated the wide variance in experience that our children have had over the last couple of years, with some enjoying every possible support and opportunity and others struggling with basic survival matters ranging from health and housing to hunger, to say nothing of internet connections, tech tools and various learning opportunities.

While remedying learning loss is an urgent priority, my message is that we should be careful to use this moment as an opportunity for long-needed systemic changes, rather than just short-term, technical interventions focused on academics and instruction. Yes, we need teaching and learning strategies to close the widening gaps, but we also need to work on welcoming students back to the learning enterprise, to inspiring them, re-connecting them and supporting them to actively engage in the learning process. We must be careful not to over-simplify the challenges ahead of us.

We all know that achievement and opportunity gaps are not new in our states all across this country. From before the pandemic to the present time, we have persistently had wide gaps in between our various subgroups and, sadly, an iron-law correlation between socio-economic status and educational achievement and attainment. Not what America was supposed to be about. Not a land of equal opportunity but instead a country in which social mobility is actually, steadily declining. So, learning deficits are not a new problem in the US, but this moment, fortunately, has given us a new opportunity, due to increased urgency and visibility coupled with unprecedented financial resources, to do something significant, perhaps transformational, to address our country's persistent inequity in educational opportunity and outcomes. Let's hope we can seize this moment, and policy-makers, like our governors, can lead us into a new era of educational justice.

So, let's begin by stipulating that the gaps are large and unacceptable. Let's agree that something needs to be done and done soon. Let's stipulate that the field, the front line of education is over-taxed, understaffed and exhausted. We must look to relieving their burden

while considering which are the most promising strategies, interventions and opportunities not just for short term gains and but for long-term transformation of an education system that is failing far too many students?

Time does not permit me to explore any of these approaches in depth but let me mention a few by briefly describing some areas of challenge and opportunity that I believe we should all be exploring.

### **Challenges and Opportunities:**

**Rebuilding Relationships and Connectivity:** For students, the COVID years were alienating and, for some, traumatizing. For most, the painful interruptions of schooling fractured students' relationships with one another, with faculty and staff and with the very processes of learning and going to school. Before jumping into the technical solutions and strategies for remediating learning loss, educators must focus on restoring these relationships and reconnecting students to school and learning, to re-connecting ties and re-inspiring students to learn.

Long before the pandemic, our secondary schools were structured to batch process and mass produce education. With fifty-minute periods, guidance counselors having loads of 400 students and teachers seeing more than a hundred students each week, school structure actively discouraged the formation of meaningful, motivating relationships, especially between adults and young people. Yet, relationships should be at the heart of the learning process. Even so, we actually have a system that allows for many students to go through middle and high school anonymously. That's a disgrace, and one which, with a little thought and design work, can be remedied. We need to rebuild secondary education to nurture essential relationships including peer to peer, guidance counseling, mentoring, coaching, navigating, student-teacher relationships and a host of activities that foster the growth of meaningful connections between the people at the heart of the educational process.

**Personalization:** That brings me to my second challenge. Every child deserves to be seen, heard, understood and responded to. This is what parents and students want and what teachers love to do. However, our "one size fits all", factory model of education ignores individuals. A redesigned system which aims to personalize education would have as its core design principle: "meet children where they are and give them what they need to succeed." Every child should have their own personalized "success plan" and a "navigator", a caring adult, should be assigned, for a period of several years, to each child and their family as an advocate, mentor and guide to fulfilling the success plan. The school system in Nashville, TN now has 80,000 students with a success plan and 6,000 teachers, staff and other adults serving as navigators. This can be done, and the resources from federal aid and other sources are here to do it. My organization at Harvard, EdRedesign, is now working with districts all across the country to make success planning a reality for students, especially those who have been most disconnected.

And my success planning recommendation is only one strategy for personalizing. Others include student advisory groups, meaningful student-counselor ratios, peer counseling, expanded extra-curriculars, and the use of various technology platforms to customize services, supports and

opportunities to students. Our school systems must be more nimble and adaptable to meet children's particular, individual needs. There's no such thing as average. Just as medicine customizes to meet the needs of individuals, rather than giving every patient the same treatment, so education must customize to meet the particular needs, academic, social and physical, of each learner.

**Children's Cabinets:** Children spend only 20% of their waking hours in school between kindergarten and high school graduation. 80% of their waking hours are spent outside of school. This simple fact has profound implications. As we saw in the pandemic, the factors shaping children's lives outside of school, poverty or affluence, for example, had everything to do with how much they learned. These factors intensified during the COVID years but social determinants like inequality have always been present in US education and have yielded results such as that embarrassing, iron law correlation between socio-economic status at birth and educational achievement and attainment. That's not what America is supposed to be about. That's not what Horace Mann had in mind when he conceived of the Common School as the great "balance wheel" of American society.

By now, we should all see that educators cannot be successful unless others in our community set about mitigating those factors in children's living circumstances that get in the way of them coming to school and being ready to learn if they get there. We need a new social compact and mechanisms like children's cabinets which summon community leaders, "grass roots" and "grass tops", to make common cause in addressing the impediments that undermine student learning, impediments like food and housing insecurity, inadequate physical and mental health supports, threats to safety, lack of internet connectivity and inadequate access to enrichment opportunities outside of school. Local collaborative action bodies, like Children's Cabinets, are increasingly popular around the country and doing impressive work in their communities to construct family-serving, holistic, cradle to career pipelines composed of quality education surrounded by robust support and opportunities.

All of our education reform has proved one thing for certain: schools, while necessary, are clearly insufficient to doing the job of equity in our nation. Schools are, on average, too weak an intervention to overcome significant disadvantage. If schools are to be successful, if school reform, school optimization, is to work, then the whole community must come together to pitch in to holistically develop each community's most precious resource, their children. Public policy should incentivize and support the building of place-based, local, collaborative action, Children's Cabinets, in communities throughout the country.

**Redesigning School Day, After-School and Summer:** We are locked in a legacy system of time utilization in education, a system that derives from the needs of society from more than a century ago. Our approach to education time is totally out of synch with modern society and, more importantly, not providing what children need. Decades ago, in 1994, the National Commission on Time and Learning declared that our schools system was a "prisoner of time," locked in a time utilization model derived from a factory model. A decade before the Time Commission made it's indictment, another prestigious national commission issued a clarion call, Nation at Risk, which described our legacy system of education as a peril to the future of our economy and democracy. Yet here we are, nearly four decades later, after an exhaustive,

expensive engagement in “school reform” (in which I was very much involved) and we’re still operating essentially the same system, with the same underlying assumptions and the same inequitable, nation-threatening results. It’s time to think differently and no better place to start than re-thinking the quantity, quality, distribution and differentiation in the way our education system utilizes time.

We could start, for example, by recognizing that it no longer makes sense to give all students the same quantity of instruction even though obviously some need more time to catch up from learning loss, to learn English or to overcome other forms of inequity, disadvantage or disability. We have to recognize that equity, not the same thing as equality, demands that we meet children’s needs and some children inevitably, because of life circumstances, need more institutionally sponsored enrichment, instruction and care than others. Figuring out how to structure and organize such differentiation is anathema to the standard operating procedures of an adult-centered school system that often functions more efficiently as a day care system than an education system, but if we are serious about equity, we have no choice but to begin to grapple with the challenges of differentiation.

And we can no longer ignore out of school time, or simply treat access to opportunity as an accident of birth. Out of school time for enrichment now accounts for 80% of students’ waking hours. Some children have a bulging menu of enrichment opportunities, while others have very slim pickings for after school or summer enrichments. At no time, more so than in the summer, is this gross disparity as evident. We know from mountains of research that summer learning and enrichment enhances student success and the lack of such opportunities sets students back, yet we have failed to make summer enrichment an entitlement. Some students are lucky enough to have access to summer opportunities, many are out if luck. We cannot and should not accept this reality as fixed. It is grossly inequitable.

We know, from abundant evidence, that enrichments matter to students’ learning, yet we continue to treat access to out of school learning as an incidental. Some kids get it, some don’t. Depends on the family’s access to opportunity. But, if we’re committed to equity in education, which we claim to be, then this situation must be rectified. Students learn every bit as much, probably more, out of school than in, but we always measure learning as a direct function of schooling and hold schools accountable even though they control only a fraction of the learning time and tools. We need to re-conceive learning more broadly than simply schooling in a bounded, legacy system. Both in school and out, we must differentiate between students and their needs. One size doesn’t fit all. Adults will need to be more flexible in meeting children where they are and providing for their needs. Tools of technology and the internet can be helpful here, as schools were forced to learn during the pandemic. Utilizing these tools for remote learning experiences, will help demolish the constraints of place and time that lock us into 19<sup>th</sup> century schoolhouses. Again, resources are available to get a start on meeting these time challenges, models of practice abound, and state policy can incentivize innovative practices and enable new ways of levelling this very uneven playing field.

**Family Engagement:** We hear so much rhetoric about family engagement but we see so little authentic action. We don’t incentivize schools to collaborate with parents, don’t reward them for doing so or hold them accountable for failing to connect with families. We don’t allow the time

and training necessary to do family engagement well. Quite simply, family engagement isn't now nor has it ever been, a system priority. Many school systems worked hard during the pandemic to reach out and connect with parents because children were getting lost. This good work needs to continue and be supported. Parents need to be met where they are and welcomed into the educational process as genuine partners. This is not difficult work but it takes time and support. Done properly, family engagement accelerates student learning while alleviating the burden on teachers via incorporating parents as partners. Again, research and best practices, incentives, time, training and accountability, point the way to needed improvements in this area.

**Secondary School Redesign:** Not only do secondary schools need to be redesigned to nurture key relationships as I have described, but we need to re-think and redesign curricula to engage and motivate students. Boredom is pervasive in our middle and high schools. As Secretary of Education, I regularly said that our main problem in Massachusetts secondary schools was boredom, lack of inspiration. We had significant inspiration gaps. Far too many students are leaving school woefully unprepared for the rigors of college and employment. Students need opportunities for deeper learning, applied learning, problem-solving on issues and challenges that are meaningful in their environments. Students need to be inspired and given the hope that a meaningful future is possible and attainable for them. Our job, as educators, is to connect them to that bright future. Many promising strategies exist for rethinking what and how we educate in our secondary schools. Most prominent among these are career pathways and early college programs. I know you have heard much and supported these initiatives, but they need to be expanded. Instead of wasting more time arguing, ad nauseam, about issues like testing and charter schools, we should concentrate on doing what we know works to prepare each and every student to be college and career ready.

Connecting secondary schools more actively to careers and the workplace has the added advantage of welcoming the business community, long alienated by our costly internecine wars, back to the field of education. We need the energy, resources, participation and support that the business community can bring to the education sector. Emphasizing the school to college to career pathways is an open invitation to a deeper, more effective partnership with the business community and one that can yield success and prosperity for our students.

**Harness and Amplify the Power of Technology as an Educational Tool:** I've already discussed how technology can help us break out of temporal and spatial constraints that lock us into brick and mortar schools, but there are other important ways in which the internet and associated software and tech tools can help transform education and enhance student learning. The good news is that our field, which had lagged far behind most professions and the business world in utilizing technology, has started to catch up as a result of having been forced to embrace these tools during the pandemic. Three areas beg for immediate application: improvement of instruction and assessment, sharing and integration of social capital and the enhancement of choice and other forms of family and student agency in shaping and creating their own educational pathways.

It is obvious that our field, with notable exceptions, has made only the most rudimentary use of technology to improve the quality of instruction, student engagement, enrichment and assessment of learning. Outside of the education sector, tech entrepreneurs are flourishing and

innovative educational products and applications are being created at a furious pace. However, there is little capacity, less time and lots of forbidding bureaucracy that impedes adoption of new tools particularly if the use of these tools challenge the traditional structure and hierarchy of educational practice. The doors to innovation must be swung open and capacity and incentives for adoption should be created.

My Harvard colleague, Raj Chetty, of Opportunity Insights has recently released some profound work shedding light on the power of social capital to change disadvantaged students' social mobility. In a penetrating analysis of billions of social media interactions, he found that low-income youngsters who had regular interaction with youth from higher socio-economic strata had a much better chance at achieving social mobility than peers who lacked such contact. In fact, a young person's social network was among the very strongest predictors of social mobility. His report sums it up this way, "Our analysis reveals that children who grow up in communities that are rich in bridging social capital – where low-income families are more likely to interact with high-income families – have significantly better chances of rising out of poverty."

The most obvious way to increase socio-economic integration would be to attack all of the factors that shape socio-economic segregation in our society, starting with red-lining and other forms of housing discrimination. These kinds of initiatives are essential, but there is an opportunity, as yet only barely explored, to use the tools of technology to bring about cross-sector friendships and socio-cultural integration. Once again, capacity, incentives, time and training will be key to exploring and creating such tools, but isn't this kind of innovation just what our field should be about? And couldn't students, given voice and opportunity, help us build powerful integrating tools of the future?

Finally, students and families, after a long disconnection from the school system, have grown accustomed to having more choice and agency in determining the course of their education. Families are voting with their feet as we see with the widespread public education enrollment declines and corresponding increases in approaches like home schooling. Technology can be a gateway to many variants of learning and enrichment choices. My colleagues at Bellwether, where I serve on the Board, are actively exploring these possibilities with their "Assembly" initiative. Acknowledging that affluent families have disproportionate access to such choices and opportunities, Bellwether goes on to describe this challenge as seeking "...to create equitable systems of education in which students can access a diversity of learning experiences, services, and supports that encourage their well-being, ensure mastery of knowledge and skills, and enable them to pursue their interests, talents, and goals."

That's my short list and, I know, it poses a tall order. It's also centered on the K-12 domain even though there's so much more we need to do to make early and higher education universally accessible and of uniformly high quality. That's for another day.

In conclusion, I would only say again that it would be a grave mistake to view COVID learning loss as simply an immediate technical problem that can be eradicated with a clever intervention. The pandemic stress-tested our education system in unprecedented ways and, in so doing, highlighted and exacerbated our longstanding systemic weaknesses. In this moment, we have a golden opportunity to remedy some of those weaknesses through transformative, system

changes. This is not only a moral imperative but an economic competitiveness priority. I urge you to take advantage of this promising moment, take advantage of a window that's open for change.

Think big!