

“Creativity requires freedom”: What will it take to create space within our education system to think and design creatively?

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Here we find ourselves in October. The Delta variant is declining, but the COVID-19 pandemic remains an ever-present reality for young people, educators, and families. Fall brings with it these stressors plus the usual crunch that any educator knows well. It’s no wonder that after eighteen months of living and learning with COVID in the U.S., many are driven to move on from the still-raging pandemic and “return to normal.”

And yet, a “return to normal” doesn’t feel like progress. The last eighteen months have been difficult, unsettling, and heartbreaking. And, these months also widened our field of vision to what learning could look like, when and how learning happens, who could be part of our young people’s learning, and so much more. Setting all of these lessons aside to “return to normal” doesn’t make sense but may be a risk if the education community doesn’t have an opportunity to collectively engage in the discussion of how to move forward. So we got to wondering: What would it take to ensure families, teachers, and members of our communities have an opportunity to surface their pandemic “lightbulb moments,” lessons learned, and potential discovered?

In mid-June, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), in partnership with the Reinvention Lab powered by Teach For America, gathered a “change-maker” group of students, educators, and education leaders. It was a small, intimate gathering of people committed to a learner-centered, radically different future of education. The question posed to the group, as we faced a summer that could lead to a “return to normal school” in most of the country, was:

How do we help schools prevent “back to normal” inertia and fuel change?

The conversation was vast and far-ranging. No simple blog post or white paper could do it justice. What was built in that room was a lasting moment for us all to build community and conviction for the battle against a “return to normal.” However, one key theme, and the nuances of that theme, kept trickling into our conversation as a potential answer to this question:

Create space.

Create space to acknowledge our collective fatigue, to engage in the work at hand, to embrace the diverse and confounding “authentic selves” of young people, to be imaginative and creative, and to open the doors and build the bridges from schools to the outside world in a way that truly engages learning everywhere.

And here we are in October, a time when people in the education field often find the least spaciousness. Many young people, educators, and others are sliding back into “normalcy” without pausing to consider the implications. This paper explores the nuances of what it means to create space, why it’s essential, and how the “change-makers” in the room are already doing that.

1. Create space to honor the exhaustion of everyone in the system.

The year was emotionally and physically exhausting. Simply ignoring this fact and pushing past it will not bring the rest or healing we all need. Our panel immediately surfaced the need to both acknowledge our collective fatigue and to create the space to respond to that need.

Elisha Roberts, chief academic officer of [STRIVE Prep](#) charter network, shared how she is attempting to create this spaciousness for students, educators, and leaders to reflect on what they’ve learned during the pandemic, and design new ways of structuring learning that works for their individual students in the current school year. She extended summer break, but with the instruction to “take the time that you need, and come back ready to try something new. . . . When we come back as a network, everyone would have hopefully done that reflective work to be ready to change the ways in which we are approaching our curriculum in a different way.”

It makes sense for leadership to mandate spaciousness as Elisha did; teachers tend to care and give so much. As David Muhammad, founder and executive director of [Sankofa Leadership Academy](#), put it, “One thing that we have to work on as an education system, as a whole, is recognizing that the professionals who work in these schools, it’s easy to convince them to sacrifice their own sanity because they care so much about the cause.”

Change takes time, especially when working to make changes within school systems—but windows of opportunity appear. If organizations have done the work of creating vision and trust with partners, then the system will be more ready to spring into action when it’s possible. Angela Habr, executive director of the [Hyde Park Neighborhood Club](#), shared with us that change is a marathon, not a sprint:

“I think people are absolutely exhausted emotionally, physically, and creatively. We’ve been meeting immediate crises for a prolonged period, and it zapped creative energy. I think that that’s where leadership comes in: to say, ‘Here’s a creative way that we can move beyond this,’ that can generate excitement and fuel other people’s creative potential to join the conversation.”

Another participant noted a similar sentiment: “What would it look like to make space for teachers to design what they’ve learned and reflected on this past year, in a way that’s going to work for them?”

2. Create space in the schedule.

The shifts to hybrid and remote learning schedules driven by the pandemic revealed that flexible time can be a powerful lever for change. They created space for students to engage in new forms of learning, to engage with new education partners, to establish new relationships with their classmates and their teachers.

As one teacher in the meeting noted, “It worked really well to have [classes] until 12:30 and then do more one-on-one, personalized time in the afternoon—what if we took those lessons back into the year? . . . If 8:00 to 12:40 can work in a pandemic, why can’t it work [all the time]?” The idea here is not to decrease learning time, but to change the way we conceptualize learning time; to challenge the assumption that a full school day of one-to-many, traditional instruction is the “right” way to spend school time. While teachers and families value increased flexibility in how they use time, schools accustomed to strict scheduling and compliance-oriented oversight must think intentionally about how to support teachers and learners to operate more independently.

A school leader from a traditional district is accepting this teacher’s challenge. She shared the flexible schedule the district is implementing this year. This schedule allows students open time during the school day to continue to pursue new interests they were able to work on during the pandemic. But she added that this wasn’t their “official,” state-sanctioned schedule. As she described, “We have our master schedule that we submit officially. And then we have what we actually do during the day.” She noted further: “I think there are ways we can get around laws and policies at schools, but I’d rather not have to do that.”

3. Create space for young people to be themselves.

The need to provide space for young people to express themselves is a need as old as time. The year of social isolation, remote classrooms, and protests for racial justice, as well as recent research on the toll the pandemic has taken on young people’s mental health and well-being only elevated the importance of honoring the identity and individuality of young people. The panel members were pointed in challenging leaders to turn the growing recognition of need into action.

Dieumerci Christel, an entrepreneurial founder of [EnlightApp](#) and college student, made an economic argument for this type of spaciousness: “A lot of work is going remote. I, as a company owner, can hire anybody around the world. In order for us [young people] to get a job, we have to be unique. And I feel like the education system is always wanting to create the same person over and over and over and over again.” He’s built his business on helping teachers create space to understand their students as individual, whole humans and considers it essential to resisting the pull toward normalcy.

Janine Gomez, executive director of [I Dream Public Charter School](#), made a strong equity and justice argument for this type of spaciousness in classrooms. “Everyone has the right to dream. There are affluent schools where adults create classes when young people decide they want to learn about a topic. There are whole units, colleges that do the same thing. But it’s not for all of us. A lot of it’s based on class and privilege and race and all of the systemic inequities that stem from colonization.” That’s why this school is designed around a “right to dream” for each and every young person. “[Dream Time](#)” is built into the schedule, so that young people have the space to learn about what is important to them, their families, and their communities.

4. Create space to build bridges outside the walls of the school.

We had no choice but to look outside the school walls last year. Schools and districts had to reach out to community-based organizations to help distribute food, to help set up internet in households, and to check in on families. Families had to look for agile community partners and each other to find childcare, enrichment activities, and even learning communities to engage in remote learning with. These experiences revealed a latent but powerful capacity in communities that should stay in our sights as we move forward. Panel member, Angela Habr of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club offered an expansive vision of community-school partnerships to carry forward: “There’s a lot of richness in our communities. Maybe schools provide that educational coach who can curate the academic experience of each kid. But then that’s not the be-all end-all, that’s one component in conjunction with the martial arts studio down the street, in conjunction with the art center, in conjunction with the parent group.”

Another panel member, Paola Ramirez, director of family and community partnerships at [RESCHOOL Colorado](#), echoed these sentiments and added the importance of co-creating solutions and learning opportunities with communities: “How can I create some kind of alternative model in our hyper-local community? Who do I convene? That’s what I’m going to do.”

Other leaders at the change-makers session are actively working toward these visions. For example, Tamera Miyasato, co-founder of [Indigenous Storytime](#), is planning an independent innovative, student-centered micro-school in partnership with the [Liber Institute](#). When she described the advantages, she shared that, “We’re going to be able to try on what works, talking to families, talking to the learners, asking their needs, and co-creating with them as we go.”

Building momentum in these spaces

Near the end of the meeting, one panel member said to another, “You just blew my mind a little bit.” Throughout our two hours together, we all felt this way at moments. It happened because we, ourselves, created space. We made time to be in conversation with complete strangers, and think bigger and more deeply than we typically would in our daily work. We created a moment in time to pause, discuss, and refine our thinking.

How can we help our schools and communities find the space to engage in this creativity? How can school systems and communities not only create the space to be creative but in those spaces build a momentum for change that will defeat the pull to “return to normal”? A few ideas came through in this discussion.

1. **Prepare for a marathon; not a sprint.** When districts and communities have done the work of creating trust and a vision of the future with partners capable of realizing that vision, the system will be more ready to spring into action when it’s possible.
2. **Design systems for inclusion.** School systems have been designed in many ways to explicitly and implicitly exclude diverse ideas and thinking. Strict parameters around who can teach, when and where, limits on who can enter and use school facilities, and when and on what terms parents and teachers can discuss a child’s learning are just a few of

the ways our school systems limit the diversity of perspectives and ideas in education. These limits can be changed. Small changes matter: opening up facilities for shared use or inviting community members into schools and classrooms to share their talents. More significant efforts, such as adopting more inclusive talent recruitment, rethinking the educator role to include individuals from broader training and experience, building out workplace learning experiences, or remaining open to community-supported learning communities can build even more energy for change.

- 3. Seek inspiration.** It's hard to innovate in a bubble. School and community leaders can seek out networks of innovators to find like-minded partners who will expose them to new perspectives and ideas—and challenge them. But as Jennifer O'Meara of Edgcombe County Public Schools shared in our conversation, leaders “just need more proof points of what is possible in education, and new values, and how we're measuring things.”

Visionary state and federal leaders can use their influence and, critically, their COVID-19 recovery funds, to give educators and community collaborators opportunities to build innovative proof points, and to create structures that allow them to actively disseminate lessons and inspiration throughout their systems and to other communities.

Whether this is enough remains to be seen. But our panel of young, committed, and thoughtful change-makers give us some hope. Panel member Janine Gomez of I Dream Public Charter School concluded, “Even in the school system, even in schools that are a part of the systemic, colonized, racist system that we live in, there are those of us who aren't about that. And we just have to continue to fight and continue to build community with each other. That's how we can build out, around, and through.”

Say it louder, Janine. Let's create more space to build with each other.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

About The Reinvention Lab at Teach For America

The Reinvention Lab is an exploratory space where we think about the future of learning. We use our power and privilege to accelerate, assemble, and amplify leaders and learners working toward reinvention. Together with youths, parents, and educators across the country, we hold up a mirror to ourselves and our systems, seek out radically different perspectives, and advocate fiercely for equitable innovation, including and especially at Teach For America.