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Not Allowing a Good Crisis to Go to Waste: Tapping into Transformational Power to Increase Utilization in Public Education as a Result of the Coronavirus

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Abstract

Despite all of the disruption the pandemic introduced into public education, COVID-19 also serves as an invitation for leaders to creatively explore ways to better utilize existing resources for the benefit of all students. The pandemic is the crisis that educational leaders cannot allow to go to waste. Instead of striving merely to return to a pre-pandemic normal, all stakeholders involved in public education should explore ways to better utilize existing resources to support each and every child's academic growth. In this call to action, we encourage public education stakeholders to work toward maximizing the utilization of time, facilities, funding, personnel, and instructional materials. We believe that this focus on maximizing utilization will result in the necessary transformational power to change the system of public education and will have a far greater impact on the improvement of public education than efforts focused on curriculum and instruction reform. This is not to say that curriculum and instruction are not important; rather, the systemic transformation needed represents the foundation of all that happens in public education.

Keywords

Pandemic, utilization, systemic transformation, time, funding, educational facilities

Introduction

One of the challenges with the governance of public education is allocating sufficient thought, time, and energy to forward planning. Leaders may often feel overwhelmed with immediate demands that interfere with their ability to address long-term needs for improvement. Even in the

most optimal situations and in the most successful schools and school districts, these immediate demands do not dissipate. But leaders who successfully focus on improvement in good times, as well as bad, successfully manage the immediate demands while leading the organization forward (Birnbaum et al., 2020/2021).

Periodically, leaders focused on changing an organization to ensure optimal utilization of limited resources will encounter external forces, such as crises, that justify immediate action to remove systemic barriers impeding change. The COVID-19 pandemic is such a crisis. Despite all of the disruption the pandemic introduced into public education, COVID-19 also serves as an invitation for leaders to creatively explore ways to better utilize existing resources for the benefit of all students (Ipson, 2020). There is a popular saying that illustrates this point: "Never let a good crisis go to waste." The pandemic is the current opportunity for educational leaders to collaboratively improve public education and, ultimately, ensure that all students are prepared for the next step in their educational journey (Heintz et al., 2021).

Consider the leadership of the *All Blacks* national rugby team from New Zealand, which instituted sweeping organizational changes that "would result in a complete overhaul of the most successful sporting culture in human history" (Kerr, 2013, p. 33). Why change something when it is working or when it is at its apex? One obvious answer is that forward thinking leaders are constantly looking to improve in order to stave off mediocrity or some semblance of a regression toward the norm. Although few would contend that public education is necessarily at its apex, there are many reasons to celebrate the work of public educators and, at the same time, look for ways to do this imperative work better, given that public education is the foundation of American democracy (Black, 2020).

In this paper, we invite educational leaders to work closely with other educators, education advocates, and policymakers to separate what needs to be done from how things have been done in the past. We invite leaders to redesign public education in a way that better serves each student, and all students. Our purpose is to initiate and encourage a multi-level, ongoing conversation focused on exploring ways to increase utilization of limited resources in public education to ensure each student is adequately prepared to succeed in the next step of her educational journey. Transformational power, or the ability to authentically engage a healthy cross-section of the community (or school) in discussions around improvement, enables those seeking to increase utilization of existing resources in public education to better serve all students (Block, 2018).

The paper is divided into six sections. In the first, we discuss the risks associated with missing this window of opportunity for public education created by the pandemic. Next, we examine the legal constraints inhibiting the changes necessary to maximize utilization in public education. After demonstrating why we believe these constraints are minimal to nonexistent, we argue that agents of change need to identify a focus to guide the change process and offer our views on what the focus should be. We caution against becoming distracted by extraneous factors and present examples of utilization that could improve the educational experiences of all students. Finally, we encourage all interested parties to break the debilitating cycle of tradition.

The Risk of the Missing Window

Change in public education happens at a tragically slow pace; if it happens at all (Tyack et al., 1991). In late 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a counselor at a Maryland high school said, "The idea of being in school for seven periods a day—I think it's a little outdated" (Scott et al., 2020, para. 12). That idea is much more than "a little outdated!" Scholars, teachers, parents, and certainly students have lobbied against the time and place requirements in public education for decades, particularly at the secondary level. For example, almost 30 years ago, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning (NECTL) wrote: "The boundaries of student growth are defined by schedules for bells, buses, and vacations instead of standards for students and learning" (NECTL, 1994, para. 4). The Commission concluded, "The six-hour, 180-day school year should be relegated to museums, an exhibit from our education past. Both learners and teachers need more time—not to do more of the same, but to use all time in new, different, and better ways. The key to liberating learners is unlocking time" (NECTL, 1994, para. 31).

COVID-19 perfectly illustrates the challenges imposed by the typical seat-time and location-based provision of education in public schools. In response to the pandemic, schools were closed, shifted to online instruction, and altered traditional bell schedules to promote social distancing. In short, COVID-19 required school leaders to creatively provide meaningful instruction to students. We may never get another chance like this, when there are mountains of evidence and well-informed stakeholders at every level of K-12 education seeing the potential of unlocking time and space--giving students, families, and teachers options about how, where, and when learners interact with educators.

Since the publication of the NECTL report in 1994, the world of public education has seen dramatic policy changes, while the actual experience of teaching and learning has changed little. Policy changes include the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which brought required proficiency measurements in language arts, math, and science (at some grade levels). The purpose of NCLB was to ensure the monitoring of academic growth and overall proficiency of all students, especially those who may be struggling. A second significant policy change is local school boards, universities, and nonprofit organizations separating oversight from operation of public schools through the practice chartering (Stralek & Papa, 2020). However, in the midst of these policy changes, learning and instruction has remained relatively constant.

Inertia and limited autonomy are significant obstacles to the pace of change in public education. As policy changes flow from federal and state legislatures, local school boards, school leaders, and teachers worked to implement these policies while still "flying the plane." As an example, states began using annual summative state test results for more than just assessing student progress; these results are also used to rate schools and, in some cases, individual teachers. Many teachers and their representatives were understandably concerned about being held accountable for student performance while working in a system over which the teachers had very little control. Measuring school performance through student proficiency on tests taken at the end of a school year did little to provide struggling students with timely interventions but successfully "punished" or disincentivized schools and teachers from trying to help students who face academic obstacles. In

the end, some have argued that the use of end of year testing data to rate schools and teachers results in a system designed to advantage the already advantaged, in terms of students and teachers. The result of these reform policies is for educators to seek safety in "how we've always done things," which is predictable and one of the greatest forces resisting innovation in public education.

Educational leaders have the ability to empower students to excel by changing current practice in public education and by giving educators more control over how students are served, which will empower students to excel. However, educational leaders focused on change typically run into the primary utilization hurdle: time. One of the challenges with the governance of public education is allocating sufficient thought, time, and energy to forward planning (Gatto, 1991). Leaders may often feel overwhelmed with immediate time demands and struggle to preserve the time and energy necessary to fully utilize all operational aspects of utilization.

The forward-thinking leadership that is acutely necessary during periods of uncertainty, underperformance, or less than ideal circumstances is illustrated by an innovative leader during the Civil War. On July 2, 1863, the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg in America's Civil War, Lieutenant Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's 20th Maine division was assigned to hold the left flank of the Union line atop the high ground known as Little Round Top. Chamberlain and his men repelled wave after wave of attacks from the South. As the fighting continued, the 20th Maine division ran low on ammunition. How could Chamberlain hold the left flank of the Union line without ammunition? Chamberlain introduced unconventional thinking to the art of warfare at the time. He ordered his men to fix their bayonets to their rifles. As the southern soldiers launched their final assault on the left flank, Chamberlain's men charged down the hill. Surprised and overwhelmed by this unexpected offensive attack, the southern soldiers retreated. The maneuver was a complete success that allowed the North to hold the line, win this pivotal battle, and, ultimately, prevail in the war (Shaara, 1987).

Public education currently finds itself in as dramatic a circumstance as Colonel Chamberlain's division at Little Round Top. Large numbers of young people face long odds, many not of their own making, regarding their academic success. And parents, educators, educational leaders, educational advocates, and policymakers are in a position to do something radical. As an example, only one in seven students in San Antonio, Texas is prepared to think critically and solve problems in familiar and unfamiliar situations. In Bexar County and its surrounding counties, more than half of the students (275,820 out of 497,249) had significant unmet needs *before* the pandemic. And these students are 97% Black and Hispanic. But, in nearby Austin, White and Asian students perform nearly three times better and do not have such significant needs (TEA, n.d.).

We believe COVID-19 affords all stakeholders an unprecedented opportunity to step back from the "business as usual" grind and to rethink how public education is financed and students are educated. We contend that improved utilization could be a valuable standard of measurement to ensure that this opportunity to drastically overhaul the system of education is not squandered. Educators, educational leaders, and state policymakers have an unusual chance to meet--if only virtually--and discuss how to better utilize the limited resources of instructional time, facilities, funding, personnel, and instructional materials.

Readers might expect us to delve into the ripeness for policy changes to meet the long-existing and recently highlighted challenges to ensuring equitable education for all students. We could explore the concept of The Overton Window, for example. The Overton Window is a way for politicians to assess sufficient public support for policy changes. It is a way for politicians to gauge whether their support for a particular idea will likely keep them in office in the future (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, n.d.).

However, we want to keep this article focused on practical changes education leaders can implement now, without changes to laws. This is a window for action, opened by a crisis and unprecedented levels of parental demand for the increased availability of resources and approaches for their children's education. While some legal changes may be necessary (like removing seat time restrictions), most of the recommendations we offer can be implemented without such changes.

Utilization: The Lack of Legal Constraints

Each state constitution contains a passage, commonly referred to as the education clause, dictating the constitutional requirements placed on elected officials concerning public education (Black, 2020). These education clauses are "fundamental and… determinative of the broad scope within which the legislature can operate" (Alexander & Alexander, 2019, p. 136). Given the foundational importance of education clauses, we begin our analysis of utilization in public education by examining those clauses that place the greatest requirements on state legislatures.

We relied on the works of three studies to determine states with the greatest constitutional requirements for public education (Dayton, 2001; Hutt et al., 2020; Ratner, 1985). These works divide state education clauses into one of four categories:

I – a weak education clause;

II – an education clause that introduces a standard of quality;

III – an education clause that enumerates specific educational mandates; and

IV – an education clause that establishes education as a fundamental right.

Our analysis of education clauses is limited to those states that have education clauses rated as either a category III or IV. These states are identified in Table 1.

Table 1

State Education Clauses Rated as Category III or IV

State	Year Adopted	Dayton (2001)	Ratner (1985)	Hutt et al. (2020)
California	1898	III	III	III+
Indiana	1851	III	III	III+
Iowa*	???	III	III	III+
Massachusetts	1854	III	III	III+
Nevada	1938	III	III	III+
Rhode Island	1965	III	III	III+
South Dakota	1889	III	III	III+
Wyoming	1890	III	III	III+
Georgia	1976	IV	IV	III+
Illinois	1970	IV	IV	III+
Maine	1983	IV	IV	III+
Michigan	1963	IV	IV	III+
Missouri	1945	IV	IV	III+
New Hampshire	1903	IV	IV	III+
Washington	1889	IV	IV	III+
Florida**	2002	N/A	N/A	III+

Note: In Hutt et al. the researchers grouped states with a category III and IV rating into one group and did not differentiate between the two categories.

* Iowa technically does not have an education clause in its constitution. Instead, the education clause is found in statutory provisions found in Chapters 256 and 262 of Iowa Code.

** Florida adopted a new state education clause in 2002, which placed greater expectations on the state legislature. The current education clause was not rated by Ratner (1985) or Dayton (2001).

These 16 highest rated education clauses have a number of noteworthy commonalities related to the constitutional requirements placed on the legislature specific to the standard of public education. These commonalities include:

- Diffusion of knowledge: Eight of the 16 highest rated education clauses in the nation require state legislatures to establish a system of education that ensures the "diffusion of knowledge" (California, 1879). The standard of diffusion of knowledge appears to focus on the end result; namely, ensuring all students receive "educational development…to the limits of their capacity" (Illinois, 1970) while not detailing the means to this end. Implicit in the diffusion of knowledge is that state legislatures and other educational leaders have the necessary latitude to determine the optimal path that leads to the desired end result—a high functioning system of education. In short, we contend that efforts focused on increasing utilization within public education, which result in increased diffusion of knowledge, align with this constitutional mandate. (*The other states that require a diffusion of knowledge are Indiana, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Illinois)*

- Adopt all means: There were six education clauses where the state legislature is required to "adopt all means" (Rhode Island, 1965) necessary to achieve the state's constitutional mandate. The phrase of adopting all means possible serves as a call to action for state policymakers and local educational leaders to examine ways to increase the utilization of educational time, funding, facilities, and services. *(The other states are California, Indiana, Rhode Island, Wyoming, and Michigan)*

- General and uniform: Although this is a phrase typically reserved for a category II education clause, "general and uniform" (South Dakota, 1889) appeared in five education clauses. The importance of this constitutional language is found in its connection to concepts of equity. In order to achieve true equity within public education, all efforts designed to increase utilization of time, funding, facilities, and services must be uniformly made available to all school districts within the state. *(The other four states are Indiana, Nevada, Wyoming, and Florida)*

Based on this analysis of the highest rated education clauses in the 50 states, we conclude that state education clauses do not hinder nor deter efforts aimed at increasing the utilization of time, funding, facilities, and services within public education. By contrast, these education clauses appear to invite state policymakers to work with local educational leaders to ensure that knowledge is properly diffused to all students, to promote greater utilization through all possible means, and ensure that efforts are made available to all school districts within each state.

Utilization: The Focus

Looking back over the past year, Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell, put this window of opportunity into stark focus:

> This past year was completely exhausting, disappointing on many levels, but also revealing and inspiring. The crisis showed how deeply inequities are hardwired into the institutional structures of American public education and our thinking. But the creative solutions that did arise begin to point to a path forward. We can create education solutions that live up to the promise of this generation, and future generations, of students (Lake, 2021, para. 26).

In order to use the opportunity presented by COVID-19 to dramatically increase utilization in public education, we have to keep our focus on the intended beneficiaries of this $600 billion industry: the students.

We have an unprecedented opportunity to live up to a longstanding obligation contained in the education clauses within state constitutions. We can make changes to technology, time, funding, or giving personnel new responsibilities, all in the service of preparing young people to "become leaders in their communities and agents of their own success — whether in college, career, future workforce, or our communities" (Aurora Institute, n.d., para. 12). Those are the promises we make to each in our state constitutions. Professor Joshua Weishart (2020) recently argued that we can make education "special by giving students a voice in their own education and teachers more autonomous choices over how to address their students' needs, capacities, and interests" (p. 1). Weishart called this "an opportunity to bet the future of the statehouse on the success of the schoolhouse, one that is furnished to re-engineer democratic education with a remedy that benefits all schoolchildren" (p. 12). Educators are well-suited to design the learning experience for students. We argue for rethinking the use of existing resources and redeploying these resources with the aim of maximizing utilization and individually tailoring learning experiences for all students.

Utilization: Ignoring Extraneous Factors

Fullan and Gallagher (2020) wrote about the challenges associated with educational leadership as change-agents are working within larger economic and political systems. Change is influenced by leaders at three distinct levels: the micro (the school building leadership), the middle (school district leadership), and the macro (state policymakers). In order for public education to substantially improve in the best of circumstances, a dramatic increase of "the proportion of system thinkers and doers at all levels of the system" is needed (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020, p. 26). It may seem daunting it to have the micro, the middle, and the macro levels working together simultaneously. But educational leaders can actively work to tear down barriers impeding improvement and innovation while also attempting to engage decision-makers at all three levels in ongoing discussions focused on improving utilization of existing limited resources.

In short, educational leaders will constantly find themselves at a proverbial crossroad related to proposed innovation: these leaders can either support change now or wait until the conditions are perfect. Our contention is that conditions are never perfect for change. Fullan and Gallagher (2020) described the need for immediate action with the following statement, "Education must choose

between being a recipient of whatever society dishes up or an active agent of transformation" (p. 160). Educational leaders become "agents of transformation" as they collaboratively work with a representative cross-section of the school community to bring about the necessary change. We summarize the challenge with the following question: Are educational leaders going to be proactive or reactive during the COVID-19 pandemic? If the latter, our fear is that the pandemic will end, public education will revert to the way it was before COVID-19, and a powerful opportunity to introduce meaningful reform will be missed.

In the summer of 2020, one of the authors listened with interest as Arizona State University President Michael Crow encouraged K-12 education leaders not to think about "responding to COVID," but to see this time as the chance to "carry out the technological modernization we should have done a long time ago. Let's just do it now. Get out of response mode and consider yourself as proactive in the circumstances" (personal notes).

As multi-tiered conversations occur related to the structure of post-pandemic public education, there will be a number of tired excuses that will arise as justifications for inaction. We will anticipate a few of these extraneous factors and discuss why they should not be allowed to impede this essential work focused on promoting greater utilization of limited resources. The first potential barrier to supporting change is the lack of fiscal resources – as exemplified by some iteration of the following response to proposed change, "That is a great idea, but there is not enough money to make this happen." The most effective educational leaders will refuse to allow fiscal limitations to impede the change process. Instead of falling into the trap of either-or thinking related to limited monetary resources, educational leaders will employ creative problem-solving strategies designed to overcome insufficient budgets (Weiler & Serna, 2016, p. 147). For example, leaders may not be excited about continuing to offer a virtual education option despite many families realizing during the pandemic how well suited it may be for some of their children. Instead of limiting their consideration to whether to do it or not, leaders may recognize the fiscal reality failing to offer that option presents and then make the most of it. In Dickson County, Tennessee, for example, the superintendent explained, "Every other school district in the state of Tennessee is going to have a virtual option. And, unfortunately, if we don't have one, they will have permission to take our students away from us." Effective solutions to overcoming financial restraints include grants, donations, partnerships, reallocation of existing resources, and securing contributions to the expenditure from multiple sources.

A second extraneous factor that educational leaders must not allow to hinder the change process is time. Fullan and Gallagher (2020) wrote that the "biggest resource needed to support changes in schools is time. Teachers need time to meet, to learn, to plan together, and this time is in chronically short supply" (p. 75). Knowing that change to the educational process that more fully utilizes existing resources will take time to plan, how are educational leaders to find more time? Our answer can be summarized in one word – creatively. We will discuss the element of time in greater detail below.

As an extension to the lack of time, some leaders feel overwhelmed by the various federal-, state-, and school district-imposed requirements. From reports to compliance expectations, educational leaders have a lot of minutia to attend to on a regular basis. And, in reality, these demands on time

are not going to disappear any time soon. Instead, educational leaders focused on increasing the utilization of limited resources will refuse to allow this barrier, or excuse, to impede the work that must occur. In short, advocates for greater utilization at all three levels (micro, middle, and macro) must develop the mantra of "we cannot afford to allow that to be a problem" when naysayers suggest the essential work of improving public education cannot occur because of specific limitations. Instead, these leaders will creatively work to remove barriers to ensure that utilization is maximized to benefit all students. It is imperative to remember that leaders' "governance choices help to create conditions that can influence" the change process, either positively or negatively (McGuinn & Manna, 2013, p. 4).

Utilization: Exploring Examples

Fullan and Gallagher (2020) offered a chilling assessment of public education: "By the time they reach twelfth grade, the vast majority of students are no longer engaged; many attend, if they do attend regularly, out of habit and compliance, based upon the promise of a more successful future if they stay in school longer" (p. 70). If Fullan and Gallagher's premise is accepted, then public education is in need of reform to ensure students are invigorated by learning, as opposed to the numbing that is currently occurring. According to Hodas (2020), the current pandemic educational climate represents "a 100-year opportunity to foster a new ecosystem of diverse providers, services and spaces for learning eager to work with districts to support students and families" (para. 5). Hodas continued,

> Under the old model, services, curriculum, facilities and personnel were owned, controlled or operated by schools and districts themselves. When schools require — or citizens desire — a more inclusive and flexible approach, one where families, community groups and grassroots providers of services and spaces also play central roles in the education of children, that centralized model breaks down (para. 6).

How can public educators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders utilize the available resources to better serve individual students now and the future? Below are questions that invite consideration of unconventional approaches to resource allocation to support the unlimited potential of young people. Utilization work could focus on any aspect of public education. For the scope of this work, we will limit our discussion to four examples where utilization-focused change could significantly improve the educational experience of all students: time, facilities, funding, personnel, and instructional materials.

Time

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic has made plain for all to see that time sitting in a certain place does not necessarily or always equal learning. Many young people have been learning in mastery-based, individualized programs. But, for most young people attending public schools, education is not only treated as synonymous with attending a school building, but school is synonymous with seat-time, spending a specified number of minutes, hours, and days in a classroom before students are supposedly prepared for the real world.

The pandemic has provided many opportunities to adjust not only how and where publicly-funded education happens, but when. We will share some examples and some questions to help stakeholders to make time an ally instead of an enemy of learning and reform. Before doing so, however, we believe it is critical for educators to define why they do what they do for students. Teacher Dave Stuart (2015) defined the purpose of education as "the long-term flourishing" of young people (para. 2). The Aurora Institute (n.d.) defined the purpose of K-12 education as preparing "all of our students to graduate high school with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to become leaders in their communities and agents of their own success — whether in college, career, future workforce, or our communities" (para. 11).

When the pandemic first shut down public education in the spring of 2020, not all school officials reacted in a similar manner. Some educational leaders focused on the purpose of their work, as opposed to seat-time requirements, and their schools and systems of schools were able to take advantage of existing flexibility or found new ways to make time a resource instead of a constraint. For example:

- Schools in Oregon demonstrate compliance with seat-time requirements by documenting competency or recording prior work.

- The New York State Department of Education provided guidance to schools that any student meeting the specified learning outcomes for a course would be given credit "without regard to the 180-minute/week unit of study requirement in [existing rules]."

- All public schools in New York City were given access to "a centralized system for monitoring, tracking, and reporting student engagement and interaction that will be collected as attendance."

- Virtual public education programs in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Ohio, among other states, are required to "use nontraditional data, such as course progress, engagement, synchronous instructional time, system activity, and student logs, to create an equivalency that can meet the rules of traditional reporting." (Patrick & Chambers, 2020, pp. 2-5)

In addition to finding new ways to meet otherwise constraining time requirements during the pandemic, school leaders reorganized school days in ways that students and teachers found more effective. The question remains whether public education will continue these adjustments or revert back to what was done before the pandemic, effectively ignoring the satisfaction of teachers and students.

We acknowledge that time constraints are situational, but, in general, we offer the following thoughts in the form of questions. Could time be created if teachers no longer had duties during the school day (and, by extension, could volunteers cover the various duties currently assigned to teachers)? Are there traditions within the school day that inefficiently consume the limited time that educators have during the work week? Are there different academic schedules that would afford educators more time to plan for change while still meeting state attendance requirements?

We contend that creative problem-solving is the bridge that spans the gap between the current time constraints and the desired time allocated to exploring maximizing utilization of existing resources.

Facilities

The pandemic has illustrated that learning can be independent of location. There are learning activities that are easier to conduct when a certain number of students are together. Many families rely on schools as places where their children are not only taught but are kept safe while their caregivers work. Classrooms, labs, athletic facilities, and music rooms make a wide range of learning experiences possible. But the learning goals of K-12 education do not actually require all students to be physically present at a certain location. Education laws also do not require publicly funded schools to feed, transport, or house students while at school.

Schools, students, educators, and other stakeholders quickly adapted to the changes imposed on them due to COVID-19. Some school officials struggled to adjust to these changes and most educators lacked experience related to effectively providing virtual learning opportunities to students, at least at the start of the pandemic. However, a year later, educators are to be commended for all of the accomplishments achieved during the 2020-2021 school year. Daycare providers were back providing services to families after only short closure, families coordinated care that enabled children to participate in remote learning while parents worked, school systems connected families with virtual learning programs offered by other providers, and some families decided to homeschool independent of their local school district.

The pandemic has made it clear that education providers, including schools and systems of schools, do not need large physical facilities to offer educational services to children in their communities. During the past year, families in virtually every school district across the nation opted for individualized educational options for their children even after school buildings reopened. We anticipate the demand for individualized educational options to increase following the pandemic and public education will need to be responsive to these needs in order to maintain current funding levels. In the effort to be responsive to family desires, educational leaders need to rethink how to utilize facilities for "the long-term flourishing of young people" and the financial well-being of their communities.

There are examples of unique approaches to facility use since the start of the pandemic. Las Vegas, Nevada, responding to the data it showed that many students were "floundering amid remote learning," launched a microacademy "as an option for families who wanted or needed in-person instruction. The microschool, serving first- through eighth-grade students, operates out of recreation centers turned into classrooms" (Valley & Messerly, 2021, para. 57). The following are questions to encourage creative thinking related to greater utilization of existing facilities:

- First, related to ownership and maintenance: How much of a school district's money is dedicated to physical facilities maintenance when these facilities were underutilized during the spring of 2020 and for most, if not all, of the 2020-21 school year? What if school districts did not own facilities and were not responsible for their maintenance? How much money could be reallocated to directly supporting student learning?

- The second set of questions focus on the layout of facilities: What costs do the floor plans, particularly classroom layouts, impose on schools attempting to design limited in-person instruction for students in the 2020-21 school year? How many schools are currently configured or built to allow for easy reconfiguration to have students working in larger spaces at appropriate physical distances? We contend the pandemic has highlighted the need for flexible learning spaces that allow educators to efficiently work with any size groups of students – from one to one hundred (or more).

- Third, a question related to time: Do school buildings need to remain open for more hours each school day? As the costs associated with building a new school significantly increases each year, we feel school districts should explore ways to maximize the return on this costly investment by keeping school buildings open for instructional purposes for more hours each day. Instead of a building being open for seven hours a day, we believe there are academic benefits with having a building open for learning for 12-14 hours per day.

- Finally, some questions for government entities charged with school oversight: What would happen if school districts got completely out of the business of owning or operating facilities? What if the burden of meeting a uniform standard of quality and the risks of utilization or overpricing shifted to other entities (either the state or private investors)? How would students and families, who currently attend school buildings in conditions that tell them they are not worth much, be affected if they all went to school in facilities as nice as the best facilities in well-off communities?

Funding and Personnel

Since the inception of the pandemic, three states (Idaho, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) have enacted statutes that directly provide individual families with funding to support educational efforts during the pandemic (Peshek, 2020). The overarching question related to greater utilization of funding is how can changes in state funding formulas for public education promote optimal equity? Are equity, adequacy, and utilization enhanced if resources are directly allocated to individual families? We contend that educational leaders and state policymakers need to, first, define the purpose of education. With that definition in hand, state and local leaders can assess the effectiveness of the current funding formula and, ultimately, create a funding formula that is designed to achieve the stated purpose. What follows are a few questions to consider related to funding include:

- Should the federal government be called on to provide public education with supplemental funding? This could include actually funding special education services at the stated 40%, providing states with significant resources to elevate the lowest performing schools, and/or taking the lead in all future new or renovation construction costs.

- Can funding be used to incentivize schools and school districts to promote greater equity and enhances utilization of time, resources, facilities, and services? For example, if states determine that smaller learning environments are preferable to schools with large student populations, could resources encourage educators to create small schools within existing schools?

Given that personnel costs typically represent over 80% of a school district's budget (Weiler & Serna, 2016), any discussion on increasing the utilization of funding resources must include personnel matters. Here are two personnel-related questions to consider:

- Is the notion of fixed class sizes an outdated vestige of an ineffective form of public education? Many secondary schools have outstanding educators teaching advanced curriculum (for example, advanced placement, honor, or dual-enrollment courses) but their classes are limited by the capacity of the classroom. In some settings, more students would willingly enroll in these teachers' classes. Is it time for secondary schools, high schools in particular, to create flexible physical learning spaces that would allow larger enrollments in high demand courses? Or should some of these classes continue to be offered online following the pandemic since space limitations do not exist in virtual classrooms? It stands to reason that educators with larger classes would require additional support in terms of instructional assistants and should be compensated differently.

- Are there inefficiencies in the allocation of full-time equivalencies? We contend that all layers of staffing should be closely scrutinized. As an example, a majority of school districts have traditionally invested in a cadre of administrators who have developed the skills to effectively run a school and then placed these effective leaders in a central office building – outside of schools. What if the director of curriculum and instruction was housed in an elementary school? Could that leader also support the building principal, and would that justify the elimination of an administrative position (in the form of an assistant principal)?

Instructional Materials

To conclude the discussion on what utilization might look like in post-pandemic public education, we will turn our attention to instructional materials. However, before posing a few questions, we stress the fact that utilization will look different from school district to school district due to local factors. Related to instructional materials, we pose the following questions:

- Is there a less-expensive and more-effective way for school district officials to obtain needed curriculum materials? For example, instead of purchasing textbooks and other instructional materials that are created by for-profit publication houses, school district officials could hire their own teachers, who are content experts, over the summer to develop curriculum for the school district. For a fraction of the cost associated with textbook adoption, these "in-house" materials could be made to reflect local contributions to each curriculum and could be updated annually. In addition, the educators hired to write the instructional materials would have the opportunity to increase their income by working during the summer.

- Can school districts increase their sustainability efforts by increasing utilization of existing resources? For example, school districts with ubiquitous laptop programs should be actively weaning themselves from the traditional copy paper addictions. Such a shift in

daily operations would represent a systemic commitment to increased utilization of existing resources.

Not Waiting for Permission

The purpose of this paper is to call educators, educational leaders, and policymakers to action. It is time to closely examine current practices in public education and find ways to more effectively and efficiently support all students with existing resources. Those interested in increasing utilization in public education should not wait for permission to explore ways to improve the educational process. Instead, invested stakeholders should ask utilization-focused questions and closely examine every aspect of public education through the lenses of efficiency, effectiveness, and utilization.

In addition, all invested stakeholders need to recognize that schools and school districts have powerful documents that can drive this vital examination of current practices in public education. These documents are the mission statement, the vision statement, the organizational values, and goals. We conclude this section by reinforcing the importance of ensuring that all decisions align with a school's and school district's mission, vision, values, and goals (Weiler & Serna, 2016).

Breaking the Cycle of Tradition with Transformational Power

Peter Block (2018) wrote about the power of community in bringing about lasting change. In this work, Block cautioned against an overreliance on outside experts to guide the change process and concluded that such efforts, typically, only succeed in treating symptoms of the ailment. These outside experts typically lack the systemic awareness to effectively bring about the needed change in an organization and are incentivized to perpetuate status quo. An organization, such as a school, can only find the needed cure to the ailment, as opposed to just treating the symptoms, by tapping into transformational power. Block defined transformational power as the power to bring about the necessary change of an organization, resulting in systemic improvement. Transformational power only occurs when a healthy cross-section of the community is authentically engaged in the discussions focused on improvement. Those within the community are invested in its success, know what needs to happen, and value the inputs of others.

Block's (2018) work holds implications for our discussion on increasing utilization in public education. Educational leaders must, first, avoid the temptation of relying on external forces to drive the improvement process. Instead, educational leaders should establish a cross-section of stakeholders from the school or school district committed to better utilizing existing resources during the pandemic to guarantee that all students receive a world-class, and individually appropriate, educational experience. Such change can only occur as educational leaders tap into transformational power and then refuse to allow external forces that normally inhibit change to derail increased utilization efforts.

During the past year, leaders and educators have experimented with a variety of expanded or new methods of teaching and learning. Students and families have participated in learning remotely in dramatically greater numbers than ever before. New approaches to curriculum and instruction are foundational. They are the main courses offered in education. However, we need to use the

pandemic as the unprecedented opportunity it presents to completely change the setting where those main courses are offered. Incredible energy has been expended on curriculum and instruction over the last 30 years. However, we believe that we still have the savage inequalities Jonathan Kozol wrote about 30 years ago because the elements of the system for delivering excellent curriculum haven't changed.

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