UVA Partnership for Leaders in Education

Exploring New Frontiers for K12 Systems Transformation

Note: These preliminary draft insights ignited reflection and ideas at our Inaugural Frontier Forum on October 3-4. UVA-PLE will leverage learning during the Forum and stories of spectacular impact collected following it to inform edits prior to publication. We will also cultivate inspiring stories beyond those in the paper to create a national repository of spotlights. These preliminary insights are not to be widely distributed.

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Introduction

For too long change in public education has been pursued at the edges without disrupting the system conditions in which schools operate."

Authors: William Robinson, Amy Dujon, Margaret Graney

Project Leads: Laura Mitchell, Ann Clark

Contributors: LeAnn Buntrock, Scott Guggenheimer, Biaze Houston, Leighann Lenti

This is an era for transformational change in K-12 education. The often heroic problem-solving and ingenuity required to respond to a shifting reality during the last couple of years demonstrated that with strong, adaptable leadership our school systems are more capable than ever imagined to significantly change the way they work. We must invest more in cultivating and insisting upon systems leadership that simultaneously pursues courageous, inspiring goals while committing to the type of shared ownership necessary to truly solve the most pressing issues of our time.

COVID-19 highlighted pre-existing vulnerabilities and exacerbated persistent inequities that have vexed and been built into the U.S. education system since its inception. Prior to the pandemic, Black and Hispanic students were by many measures over 50% less likely to be proficient in reading and mathematics than White students. During the pandemic, students in majority-Black and Hispanic schools fell at least four months behind historical achievement levels, while majority-White students lost two months. The pandemic also negatively impacted already alarming national trends regarding the readiness of students across the economic spectrum for the problem-solving, collaboration, science, and writing skills critical for post-secondary success. Beyond their individual success, these students will be called on to solve problems we have yet to imagine. We must build on learning the last few years to deliver dramatically improved organizational design and outcomes in our schools; we observe educators across the country igniting meaningful shifts to do just that.

The disruption created by the pandemic has brought us to the edge of a new frontier that provides unprecedented opportunities to leverage the lessons learned from the last couple of years to meaningfully address fundamental flaws that plague us. Although constant calls for the reimagination of our education system have failed to unleash the redesign that our students deserve, we observe pockets of administrators and teachers across the country leading real, systemic change. Frustrated by the status quo and the rising politicization of K-12 education, these educators are responding with openness and action to change efforts that invite them help advance breakthrough solutions. To inspire shared ownership, successful leaders are prioritizing strategies that promote clearer focus, invest in their staff, and advance fresh, well-designed organizational strategies to dramatically improve student results. This moment, more than any other in our lifetimes, requires courageous, visionary leadership and a fresh approach in which we acknowledge our daunting challenges while defying a business-as-usual response to build from where there is strength and promise.

This high-stakes moment requires a systemic leadership approach. For too long change in public education has been pursued at the edges without disrupting the system conditions in which schools operate. Education leaders across the country have been explicit about the fact that they do not want a return to pre-pandemic practice. However, strong organizational inertia and incentives to maintain the status quo are prevalent. It will be imperative for educational leaders to pause and take stock. Leaders must make this moment count. To that end, UVA-PLE set out to learn from leaders across the country who were willing to challenge existing paradigms and tackle vexing challenges. Though our organization has a proven, research-informed approach that provides a strong foundation for igniting systems to establish conditions where schools thrive, we recognize that transformational success in this new era will require all K-12 organizations, including our own, to challenge their models and assumptions and to work together to explore new possibilities.

Based on our observations of transformation efforts across the country, we identified four major themes where disruptive change at the school system level seems necessary. We conducted interviews with 12 strategically selected superintendents, half that engaged in our partnership with successful results at scale, and solicited feedback from another 12 leaders with proven results across the country. We are packaging our initial learning to articulate emergent insights on what seems critical as leaders explore new frontiers of transformation. We amplify spotlights and anecdotes not for the purpose of prescribing specific strategies but to share ideas that may provoke other teams to be more curious, creative, and courageous about what is possible for their communities.

The interviews revealed a number of common leadership threads around the most promising change endeavors, which we describe in more detail in the closing section. These all include the criticality of shared leadership that co-creates change through districts and schools, disparate departments, and even multiple organizations working differently together to create breakthroughs Not least among these similarities is a shared recognition that disruptive change is essential coupled with a commitment

to motivate their teams towards an inspiring future state. These leaders explore, identify, and invest in breakthrough opportunities and risks to accelerate progress towards this desired state. Also, the leaders recognize solutions to their complex challenges require finding new ways of redesigning their organization, promoting collaboration across departments, and allocating resources. To put an ambitious vision into existence, leaders are investing in their people and capabilities to drive this change forward and in the continuous learning and adaptation it takes to drive lasting change.

While there are no easy answers to our complex challenges, leaders across all corners of our country are changing the paradigm to advance transformation. To demonstrate how leaders are tackling vexing systems challenges, we will dive into four areas essential to address more creatively and successfully to achieve dramatically different results:

1. **Innovative Secondary Models.** How are leaders redesigning the secondary experience to align with the needs of the future, their students, and their community?

2. **Far-Reaching Academic Acceleration.** How do leaders ignite system-wide efforts to accelerate academic learning in a COVID-era environment with an increased span of student academic and social-emotional needs?

3. **Creative Staffing.** How do leaders attract, fill, retain, and newly design critical positions while cultivating pipelines amidst a time of the supposed "great resignation"?

4. **Equitable Resource Reallocation**. How do leaders ensure resources align with student needs, breakthrough opportunities like the ones above, and an authentic commitment to eradicating educational inequities?

Whether addressing these four areas or others, we believe leaders will need to cultivate shared ownership in that way forward that both: (1) embraces disruption, strategic opportunities and risks; and (2) invests in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently. Thus, we conclude each section with strategies that embrace these shared ownership themes.

01

Innovative Secondary Models

The Why

Over the past decade, in reaction to the adoption of college and career readiness standards, the majority of districts have worked to enhance articulation of pathways for both college bound and non-college bound students. New forms of Career and Technical Education (CTE) are starting to take hold, and an increasing number of students are participating in hands-on career exploration experiences and graduating high school with college credits, industry certification, and the ability to enter the workforce. As more districts in the COVID era started to disrupt secondary experiences, many realized that they were not preparing students for concrete opportunities. Even when students are better prepared academically, secondary schools need to better help students see a path to success. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, affluence is a better predictor of career outcomes than merit. For instance, students in the highest socio-economic quartile who score below the country's median math score in 10th grade are more likely to complete both Bachelor's and Associate's degrees than students in the lowest socio-economic quartile who score above the median.

For these opportunities to meaningfully address structural barriers, CTE and other future-oriented secondary student programs need to accelerate pathways for interested students to pursue degrees or jobs that unlock greater opportunity. These opportunities need to work in service of the community and of students, creating pathways for students to explore their passions and future vision. Promising secondary redesigns and intentional community partnerships across the country prepare students to enter the community workforce and secure other post-secondary opportunities of their choice. Community context matters.

Forward thinking leaders are redesigning the secondary experience in alignment with the needs of the future, their community, and their students, discovering new approaches to shift the paradigm and design of a traditional model to a landscape reflective of the real world.

The Work

Systems of innovation are strategically abandoning traditional approaches for a more inspired design. These leaders' efforts provide clues on what new frontiers will take that prepare students for a more diverse world, to do jobs that don't exist, solve problems we don't even see coming, and use technologies that have not yet been developed or conceived.

College and Industry Partnerships

When asked to define success after high school, the answer used to be a four-year post-secondary degree. Now, according to Superintendents, everyone needs some sort of advanced degree or extended learning, and the credentialing for each might look different. These districts are **embracing the notion that authentically preparing students for college and career readiness opens up pathways to students for both higher education and career.**

Leaders exploring new frontiers are expanding advanced coursework access and provideing opportunities for students to explore a myriad of careers held by alumni with advanced degrees within the community. As a result, students see a mirror of themselves in those positions and consider college as a viable option. Systems where students define aspirations beyond "being in college" produce graduates better able to sustain motivation amidst barriers.

Likewise, students choosing a trade define a trajectory beyond their first job.

We see districts **expanding local industry partnerships to promote career pathway training, experience, and credentialing.** Some promising partnerships deliberately link to industries and position students to be hirable right out of high school.

Warsaw County (Indiana) Schools, Superintendent David Hoffert shared how their team is creating courses of study matched to local community needs. Home to the country's largest orthopedics manufacturing companies, he started by asking the question, how do we help keep businesses in our community? Hoffert, noting the exodus of corporate offices, met with the industry leaders and asked what they needed in their future workforce and inspired his team to shift the messaging to promote high school and post-high school opportunities. New opportunities via now 100 courses and four different diploma types (Core, Academic Honors, Technical Honors, and Academic/Technical Honors) were created. Concurrently high school graduation has increased to 95.6%, 1028 students earned college credit during 2021-22, and now 72% of students are enrolled in Advanced Placement or Dual Credit classes. Additionally, for the first time in over 20 years, the district expanded their welding program, and since the surrounding county is known as the "Orthopedic Capital of the World'' that expansion was needed to meet the community's needs. The district's partnership with post-secondary institutions allows students to graduate with certification enhancing their ability to be hired locally and in neighboring states with the opportunity to make six figure salaries.

Shifting in-person offerings is not enough to build bridges to opportunity for students. Many of the leaders we interviewed cited expanding virtual offerings, user-friendly access to financial aid, and emphasis on career exploration early in secondary. For instance, in Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Superintendent Eric Gordon noted the district secured 100% college tuition for high school students who graduate and get accepted into the participating universities. This strategy also assists students in filling out financial aid forms and college applications and provides opportunities for college visits. This created a tremendous opportunity for the approximately 50% of graduates who now go to college. But what about the other 50% who signaled they were not going to college? The reality was, they "got nothing." In response to this endemic issue across the country, CMSD created a 6-12th grade curriculum and ecosystem called PACE (Planning and Career Exploration). All of which is tracked in an app with personal student portfolios. Every experience is tracked to help students find their passion and link it to living-wage opportunities with over 75 different employers.

Rethinking School Models and Scheduling

This work also highlighted the need for districts to **creatively rethink school models and schedules.** So how do these organizations meet a combination of students' needs and passion and the broader community's needs? Most, if not all, the school leaders interviewed admitted to an iterative evolution in need of further refinement.

Cajon Valley School District alongside the San Diego Workforce Partnership introduced a World of Work career center that inspires students to articulate broad interests and understand why and how their current classes will open doors. Superintendent Lamar Goree and his team at Caddo Parish (Louisiana) also recognized the need to reinvent middle school years. His district's approach is to adopt the K-8 model to allow for extending and fostering relationships in a way that is typically seen only in elementary schools. Goree also believes high school hours and models are far too stringent and call for more creativity. So, Caddo Parish is piloting a new 4-day, 10-hour high school model with no school on Mondays. This is a community and campus driven initiative, supported by district leaders who helped to set outcomes and expectations around how the adults in the building will use the extra day to strengthen and support students.

To ensure a strong academic foundation that equips students for college and career exploration, leaders are advancing non-traditional academic practices into school models. Our schools today too often provide students high grades aligned to low expectations that stifle equity and excellence, as the same students making an "A" cannot score proficient on international or state examinations. Districts such as CMSD are accelerating a shift away from traditional grading towards true content mastery, whether it is paper and pencil or real-world application practice,

Even when students are better prepared academically, secondary schools need to better help students see a path to success.

which promise to increase requisite competencies for each student. Districts such as Houston ISD are also lifting students' learning and experience by accelerating incorporation of rigorous case studies and project-based application (linked to measures of competency growth) into high school curriculum by implementing 3DE and other forward-looking instructional models. Through this real-world application and integration of learning across the core academics, in just one year HISD is already seeing all participating 3DE schools outperform non-participating schools on state assessments and 40.1% fewer cases of chronic absenteeism. Based on similar implementation in metro Atlanta, graduation rates are expected to increase by an average of 33.9% and college enrollment by 42.0%.

The Way Forward

There is no one formula to successfully innovate to shift the paradigm and expand opportunities for secondary students. We are confident K-12 leaders must make bold moves to challenge the status quo, considering the following:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Identify and invest in pilot systems that bolster student autonomy and leadership

- Begin career exploration in middle school, exposing students to a depth and breadth of opportunities within various fields and from employees who look like them

- Forge new partnerships with post-secondary schools and local industries

- Reimagine delivery models and incorporate virtual learning, flexible scheduling, and real-world application

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Examine district and building-level systems to understand from school and community stakeholders where current model could better elevate community needs, emphasize pathways to well-paying opportunities, and invest in STEM

- Challenge traditional grading and pedagogical systems to advance real world mastery

- Invest in new staffing models and systems essential to advance designs that diverge from the status quo

Spotlight: Michael Hinojosa

Michael Hinojosa is the recently retired superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District. The Dallas Independent School District is the seventeenth-largest in the United States; the district's student body is 90% free and reduced lunch, 95% ethnic minorities, and 48% English Learners.

His team took calculated, catalytic risks to promote rethinking their secondary approach. One of these included implementation of the Pathways in Technology or "P-Tech" program. As part of this initiative, Superintendent Hinojosa worked to obtain and maintain 90 varying industry partners with the Dallas community.
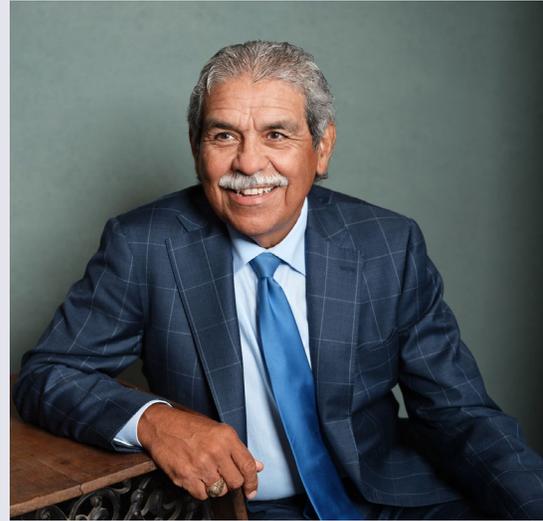
Michael Hinojosa

Before his second stint as superintendent of Dallas Independent School Districts, there were 3 early college high schools within the district. These schools had approximately 300 students each. Because of the small school size, students had to sacrifice other opportunities like extracurriculars to attend. Noting that in 2009, only 7% of Dallas' students earned a post-secondary degree within 6 years of graduation and yet high school students in those 3 schools were earning college credits at a higher rate than the national average for community colleges, Superintendent Hinojosa saw an opportunity. His team expanded and replicated the early college model through implementation of what became the "P-Tech" program. The team launched innovation with schools within schools housing about 100 students each and later expanded the innovation now in 18 schools including standalone schools and schools within community colleges.

During 2021-22, even amidst the pandemic, 1,100 students or nearly 12% of the senior class, graduated with an associate's degree. A third of the students enrolled failed their 8th grade assessment, meaning that they did not even qualify to start high school, yet many of them now graduate with an associate's degree. The district invested in replicating success in part by providing a designated principal, counselor, and workplace coordinator for P-Tech on every campus. To expand impact beyond the core 100 students admitted to the P-Tech program at each campus, the district includes career institutes for broader populations. Through these career institutes, industry partners provide specialized training to any interested students in areas such as: cybersecurity, mechanical electronics, HVAC systems, and more opportunities providing pathways to high paying jobs. Now that all Dallas high schools include early college high school opportunities, there is no longer a need for students to attend schools outside of their neighborhood to earn college credit and credentials or to participate in extracurricular activities.

As of today, 25% of high school students (approximately 10,000) are enrolled in an early college high school or in P-Tech. As a result, the district has more than tripled over the past decade the number of students earning an associate degree. It is projected by 2025 that nearly 1,500 graduates per year will earn an associate's degree and 3,000 will earn stackable credits before graduation. The district should be on pace to from 2015 to 2030 more than double the percentage of students earning post-secondary degrees within 6 years of graduation.

02

Far-Reaching Academic Acceleration

The Why

Due to unfinished learning during the pandemic, already persistent student learning gaps widened, especially for Black students and those students in vulnerable and low socioeconomic subgroups.

What's more, the pandemic has shone a light on an ever-increasing mental health crisis stifling students and educators. While district leaders have leveraged ESSR funding to devote more resources to the mental health of students and staff in the short-term, the depth and breadth of the issue suggests more strategic, cross-institutional approaches are essential. Social emotional standards and practices in isolation can look like one more thing on teachers' plates serving as a foundational remedy. We can create an environment in which every student and adult in every classroom feels a sense of connectedness and belonging alongside heightened expectations for what they can achieve. Just as post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrated that rapid recovery along with the strengthening of outdated systems is possible, the resilience of school districts post-pandemic continues to be demonstrated through bright spots of academic acceleration across the country as highlighted below. Champions of this work will invest in strong core practices, advocate for students, and challenge traditional instructional systems to reach never achieved goals

The Work

Strong Systems for Tier One Instruction and Re-Teaching

Districts that focus on accelerating academic achievement insist on raising the academic floor and expectations. At its heart, this still often starts with delivering strong student-centered tier one instruction. Such essential work suggests a clear focus on using research-informed curriculum and formative assessment cycles (as our research shows that a quality curriculum promotes equity by assuring all students and teachers have access to resources that define high expectations for student mastery; this research also shows effective leaders ensure teachers needs are met by providing timely, accurate student data to adjust instruction to meet student needs). UVA-PLE and broader research promotes that quality curriculum and assessments are most impactful when complemented by instructional collaboration and coaching that balance the identification of student learning and teacher practice gaps with professional growth opportunities to advance teacher effectiveness in delivery.

These types of core strategies are often executed poorly. **Executing core academic strategies well post-pandemic requires deploying resources aligned to a laser-focused set of priorities and monitoring progress to ensure practices and experiences in the classroom actually improve**. Centrally requiring too many new things at once does not provide school leaders the opportunity to innovate for their context. For instance, some systems are now reevaluating their priority standards and pacing guides to reassess how content is mapped for the year to ensure schools, teachers, and students have the time to address gaps and adapt for context while still ensuring students experience the grade level, standards aligned learning they deserve.

UVA-PLE is seeing partners across the country, including Winston-Salem Forsyth County's Inspire 340 Zone, experiencing tremendous academic growth during 2021-22. Under the leadership of Tricia McManus and Timisha Barnes-Jones, the majority of schools in the Zone experienced double-digit academic gains; four zone schools far exceeded state growth targets and were removed from the state "underperforming" list that even as that list doubled in size due to the pandemic. The zone ensured in 2021-22 aligned resources to ensure high quality curriculum, strong PD on prioritized instructional delivery strategies, principal support aligned to focused 90-day school action plans, and data-informed adaptation to address learning gaps.

Another UVA-PLE partner district, Henry County Schools, has been laser-focused on planning, assessing, and monitoring student performance with rigor and on ensuring learning gaps uncovered could be filled as quickly as possible. Under the leadership of Mary Elizabeth Davis, the district significantly boosted availability of instructional resources and direct teacher support in usage of the resources to ensure students are on track to success. The district experienced tremendous growth in Algebra I during 2021-22, where students' performance outplace all other metropolitan Atlanta districts and outpaced its own pre-pandemic performance with 8% more students Proficient or Above Level.

Leveraging high quality, culturally rich curriculum also provides a foundation for schools to explore how to increase opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery in a more student-centered authentic learning environment. Many superintendents we interviewed advocated for this future and were in the beginning stages of advancing. Such an environment, which AASA suggests is central to the future of learning, at its best cultivates critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Doing this well may require teachers and school leaders to receive interactive professional learning time to learn from promising student-centered practices from their colleagues showing evidence of impact.

Acceleration over Remediation

Leaders acknowledge that strong tier one instruction systems are not enough to advance the outcomes students deserve, but going back to traditional models of remediation is not the answer. Instead, they have focused on more innovative ways to complement core instruction to accelerate more equitable and excellent outcomes. Dallas ISD, like many districts across the country, reinvented summer school and after-school approaches to ensure a results-oriented focus on accelerating student learning and readiness for grade-level instruction. Dallas' deep focus on execution resulted in all increases in achievement in all 46 priority schools this year and reading scores across economically disadvantaged, Black, and emergent bilingual students often matched and sometimes exceeded pre-pandemic levels.

Tennessee, recognizing the magnitude of pandemic learning loss, started a statewide intensive tutoring initiative to complement a push towards a stronger early elementary tier one focus on curriculum that emphasizes the "science of reading". Students in elementary, middle, and high school grade bands are already performing at or above pre-pandemic levels of proficiency. Success is attributed to a handful of strategies implemented to accelerate learning, namely literacy materials aligned with the science of reading, high quality professional development, and frequent formative assessment screeners.

Other district leaders are creatively finding opportunities to accelerate learning. In Long Beach, California, prior to the pandemic, if a student failed English I, the student would typically have to retake the course the next year. They learned they can accelerate students who failed freshman year to get back on track. This was accomplished by providing enough teacher support and access to quality resources to provide students opportunity to successfully double down on English I and II simultaneously, recouping the credit they missed their freshman year and getting back on track to graduate. Additionally, while many districts did away with virtual learning upon returning to face-to-face teaching, many of the district leaders we interviewed including Cleveland and Ector County saw value in

continuing to leverage anytime anywhere learning through virtual/hybrid methods to expand access to highly effective teachers and advanced coursework.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District recognized its previous focus the past decade, including on improving curriculum and assessment structures, would not raise the ceiling enough on possible outcomes for its students. Thus, the district focused on four interlocking design elements: a shift to competency-based grading structures, "anytime, anywhere" learning, a concentration on the whole human, and the creation of additional agency and voice in what and how students learn. Each school employs a remote learning strategy aligned to the "anytime, anywhere" learning culture. Students in all grade levels (all from 100% economically disadvantaged families) are increasingly provided opportunities to work on cognitively complex tasks and to demonstrate their learning in authentic ways to advance measurable knowledge and transferable skills.

Supporting Academic Acceleration through Investments in Student Wellbeing

Most of the districts that UVA-PLE observes making strong academic progress are also looking out for the well-being of their students and staff, often in new ways never attempted pre-pandemic. However, while there is much research to support what seems to work academically, huge gaps exist when it comes to understanding what high-leverage strategies will help to ensure students are healthy and ready to learn. We need system leaders innovating in this space. Though the public health crisis, COVID-19, has plateaued, we are still faced with a clear and present mental health crisis. While there is extreme polarization regarding educators' role in advancing student support and wellbeing, it is essential for systems to build capabilities more responsive to their students' realities.

Across the districts interviewed a consistent shift has been made to hire more mental health-focused counselors, particularly in secondary, where counseling historically tends to focus on meeting graduation requirements. While mental health counselors provide an important layer of support for students, the adults within the organization

also benefit from coaching, development, and options for their own self-care. The pandemic has resulted in incredible spending that often seems uncoordinated and lacking monitoring for impact. To address this issue, there is an impetus for districts to commit to identifying their greatest student wellbeing needs standing in the way of enhancing students' readiness to learn and committing, alongside their community partners, to specific opportunities to address these needs and learn from their efforts.

Superintendent Corey Miklus of the Seaford School District (Delaware) led his team pre-pandemic to redesign schools to promote the type of rigorous instructional focus described earlier and to eliminate school boundaries previously driven by socio-economic indicators. Through his team's hard work and UVA-PLE support, they witnessed incredible growth from having the lowest elementary proficiency scores in the state of Delaware to performing above the state average. He recognizes that next-level change will require different investments. Seaford built teams of support to address the mental health issues, hiring additional social workers and deans of social-emotional learning and providing teachers with social wellbeing curricular resources. Now, the team is measuring and adapting based on their learning.

Social emotional learning curriculums as a standalone strategy will not likely be as effective as those woven into coherent academic strategies. Adopting an instructional framework that promotes relationship-oriented instructional strategies has the promise to increase engagement and connectedness while better unearthing the social, cognitive, mental health, and trauma-based needs that the school system must attend to addressing. Eric Gordon and his team in Cleveland recognized they could not solve these complex issues internally. Thus, the district reached out to a team of external practitioners and asked them with urgency to organize the most promising and implementable strategies from research and practice on advancing student wellbeing and ensuring students are more ready for academic acceleration. The district is now piloting alongside community organizations enhanced [strategies receiving national attention.](#) This type of bold willingness to act, measure, and learn is too often missing from our approach

to this emergent area of focus.

Leaders acknowledge strong tier one instruction systems are not enough to advance the outcomes students deserve, but going back to traditional models of remediation is not the answer.

The Way Forward

Academic acceleration at scale will require more willingness to pilot and willingness to focus on measuring whether preferred solutions are actually leading to different results. The Districts challenged with accelerating learning and student wellbeing may have more success by considering how to have the two work in concert with each other and how to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Creatively source and invest in new systems to promote student learning

- Invest in understanding bright spots of classrooms, schools, or zones delivering heightened student results and in replicating and expanding those systems and practices

- Maximize digital assets to provide students opportunities to accelerate and deepen learning in and out of the traditional classroom

- Seek collaboration and support with external content

experts to address the complexity of student and adult needs within the context of your community

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Invest in high quality professional development for teachers and support staff aligned to high quality curriculum and assessments while eliminating less strategic development

- Create pathways for strongest performing teachers and leaders to expand their impact

- Create synergy between academic and student support teams allowing time for the two to plan and identify promising practices together to improve student readiness to learn

Spotlight: Scott Muri

Before Scott Muri's start 3 years ago, Ector County was the lowest-performing district in all of Texas with 21 out of the total 43 schools rated as "F" schools. Consequently, the Commissioner of Education was about to take it over. Muri and his team created an intensive strategic plan to revamp this district. Now, more than half of the schools are rated "A" or "B" and zero are rated "F".

Human Capital investments are central to the strategic plan and accelerating student outcomes. After starting the first day of school three years ago with 18% of teaching positions unfilled, the district raised average teacher pay over $13,000 and leveraged a state-wide opportunity and partnership with Public Impact, an education nonprofit, to better compensate

Dr. Scott Muri

and extend the number of students engaged with the most effective teachers. Ector County raised the bar of qualifications to serve in principal and teacher leader roles vital to advancing school academic collaboration and coaching, making strategic replacements and reconstituting staff in a couple of schools. The district is investing in teachers obtaining National Board Certification, moving from 0 certified to 46 now nearing the end of the process. Due to these and other investments, most schools did not have any teacher openings to start this year.

Redesigning systems to enhance learning is also central to the strategic plan. To support teacher effectiveness, the district switched multiple subjects to a rigorous curriculum rated exemplary by national clearinghouses and then redesigned teacher professional development offerings to support curriculum implementation and increase personalization to teacher needs. The district has complemented these efforts to improve core instructional delivery with strong efforts towards personalized learning for students. As an example, the district leveraged the crisis of the pandemic where they lost access to in-person tutors to invest in a fully virtual tutoring model. In 2021-22, over 6,000 students participated in virtual tutoring programs. The district determines the size of contracts to vendors based on their delivery of academic results. Taken together, these instructional and human capital investments have contributed to many middle schools with math and reading scores that exceed pre-pandemic levels and a 7-point increase in college, career, and military readiness indicators. Ector County under Muri's leadership has also invested in expanding pre-K and has seen kindergarten readiness rise 14% even during the pandemic.

03

Creative Staffing

The Why

Amidst rising shortages, district leaders are grappling with attracting, filling, and retaining critical positions. The last two years have forced district leaders to be more creative in staffing decisions. While government supported ESSER dollars allowed have allowed leaders to leverage monetary incentives towards rethinking staffing, districts will need to make harder choices before the funding expires towards highest leverage usage of positions and resources.

Our K12 staffing models are largely the same they were decades ago despite rapidly changing workforce demands. Schools and districts with the greatest inequities in outcomes often have the hardest time attracting and retaining teacher and leader talent despite research suggesting their quality is the most important determinant of student success. To explore new frontiers, systems leaders must grapple with how to diversify and modernize strategies for staffing, recruitment, and pipeline building.

People, our greatest resource, leave organizations, when they don't feel valued. Creating value is possible anywhere through access to high quality professional development and support, incentivizing our best and brightest to serve our historically marginalized populations, and providing a more engaging, growth-oriented, and care-centered employee experience.

The Work

Strategies to grow talent pipelines matching student needs

Districts are embracing ingenuity to develop pipeline-building strategies designed more around leveraging local assets and less on exerting efforts to attract talent outside the region. Grow your own initiatives seem to be paying off higher dividends. Scott Muri and the leadership team in Ector County Independent School District advance a district-owned and operated educator preparation program, currently enrolling 36 candidates, that focuses on what the district identified as the "most important skills effective educators bring to their classrooms". The district also plans to employ another 18 Teacher Residents during 2022-23 and has launched a "para to teacher" program. Perhaps most interesting, the district identifies students starting in middle school who may want to become teachers. They cultivate the love of teaching throughout high school and then, through a partnership with local universities, the district offers the "Teach in Three" program. 91 students are currently enrolled in this program for graduating students to be back in classrooms teaching after three years at no cost to the student. Taken together, these innovative strategies cultivate talent which reflects the student population and in turn helps those same students see their opportunities.

Other leaders have also turned to diversified strategies to recruit staff. Leslie Torres Rodriguez and her team in Hartford Public Schools attacked retention by focusing on incentive programs while renegotiating employee contracts. Leveraging ESSR dollars for the initial investment, the district can now increase reimbursable amounts for continuing education and significantly raise the Stipend for team mentors. The district also is now heavily marketing a new teacher referral program to fill openings. Staff receive $1,500 when they recommend a candidate that is hired and makes it through the 90-day probationary period. The district says there is no better marketing than their current employees. Both Hartford and Ector County also introduced strategies with local universities for promising support staff to become teachers.

Attracting teachers to the most underserved schools can be daunting. Overdue adjusted funding formulas that recognize added costs for exceptional education, language learning, and trauma-informed care have started to push additional resources and staff to these campuses in many contexts but even when that happens often these vacancies are the hardest to fill. We encourage leaders to raise the pay to all teachers in historically under-resourced buildings. We particularly encourage pay raises for high-performing and hard-to-staff positions and a willingness to make courageous decisions to reduce total school buildings, administrators, or teacher positions to create resources for higher pay. Districts too often layer on new change strategies and positions into the existing infrastructure without advancing the hard conversations and decisions on outdated or less essential positions that stand in the way of ensuring essential staffing in underserved schools.

Rob Anderson and his leadership team looked hard at substitute coverage data metrics. Needing to address the 40-50% coverage rate, the team took a lesson from Uber and implemented surge pricing on days with higher staff call outs, mainly Fridays or days before or after a long holiday weekend. As a result, the coverage rate rose to 90%. Surge pricing, pay-for-performance, pay-for-placement models may better respond to reality than traditional models.

Strategies to Invest in Talent

Finding talent is only part of the equation. Leaders increasingly must cultivate an engaging, growth-oriented, and care-centered employee experience by making your highest need schools the best place to grow, inclusive of more support and more ways to invest in skillset or access higher education programs. Michael Hinojosa's team in Dallas moved to a pay for performance model, paying top

dollar for the districts brightest and best to go to historically the toughest places, and coupled this with investments in differentiated, high-quality (and ultimately high-rated) development that enhances teacher experience and impact.

Many are leveraging partnerships with local universities to grow their own talent. David Hoffert and his leadership team in Warsaw Community Schools jumped into action when the state department of education took away structures for teachers to obtain master's degrees. The district created unique partnerships with universities where qualified district personnel taught courses and maintained the program integrity. In return the universities agreed to offer a more cost-effective degree program, which for the past two years, came at no cost to the teachers thanks to ESSR funding. Moving forward, general funds and partnerships with other districts will be used to sustain the program.

As students and staff returned to buildings, so did the impacts of isolation and world events. The adults within the schools and districts offices are left trying to not only address impacts from lost instructional time, but they are also faced with managing trauma. Establishing well-designed avenues for staff support is paramount. For example, Rosanna Mucetti in Napa Valley Unified focused on the importance of tending to the emotional well-being of adults within the organization to better drive student results. A key strategy for their team is empowering building leaders with permission to advance creative strategies to advance staff and student well-being and amplifying strategies with evidence of increasing social connectivity. Freeing building leaders to dig deep into and invest in new ideas around the relational aspect of school culture with adults may play a critical role in many contexts to accelerate results sustainably.

To explore new frontiers, systems leaders must grapple with how to diversify and modernize strategies for staffing, recruitment, and pipeline building.

The Way Forward

Certainly, staffing shortages present major challenges contributing potentially to a vicious cycle of burnout and emotional fatigue. To create instead encouraging cycles, leaders across the country are exploring how to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Diversify recruitment strategies to grow pool of applicants outside of traditional channels

- Challenge traditional pay structures to offer higher compensation rates, specifically to draw high performing teachers and leaders to the hardest-to-staff positions

- Create new ladders of opportunity that simplify pathways for community members to fill the district's positions of the future

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Unearth and invest in ideas for how to strategically grow their own human capital

- Find new ways to mentor and certify paraprofessionals, create leadership opportunities for strong teachers, and identify potential future workforce within student interests

- Explore how to eliminate outdated or uninspired infrastructure to invest in creating resource rich school buildings

- Cultivate an engaging, growth centered employee experience in part by partnering with community and university programs in new manners

Spotlight: Jill Baker

Jill Baker became superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District in 2020. The district is comprised of 69,000 students, and while they too have faced challenges with staffing, she and her team are focused on expanding diversity within their staff. This in turn has played a significant role in mitigating previously persistent staffing challenges within their schools.

A set of strategies have been employed to diversify their workforce, which have already shown to increase the diversity of their staff in double digit increments (and in turn reduce total vacancies). First, the district better understood current reality through in-depth analysis of where staff members who are people of color reside in the district and where there are trends in which schools do not have representative educators who are of the same race as their students (which research suggests negatively impacts students). Second, the district created new funding streams to create specialty contracts and forged new institutional relationships that both help them hire promising talent even prior to an exact vacancy being identified. Finally, the district is clear that they are dissatisfied with the current academic results and that investing in better results will require a more inclusive culture with shared ownership of solving challenges. This insistence on creating school cultures striving together towards greater excellence for their students also helps attract and retain staff.

As a result of these investments, the Long Beach Unified School District subsequently attracted almost 400 additional certified educators, counselors, and social workers from outside to come to their district since the pandemic began while also better retaining staff in their early years in the district. Thus, a district right before the pandemic identified by a McKinsey study as one of the fastest growing in the world is poised to further meet the needs of its students, especially those who have been historically marginalized.

Jill Baker

Equitable Resource Reallocation

Whether site-based or district based, school budgeting formulas have historically created inequities in per pupil funding. More and more districts are beginning to peel back this process and deeply examine whether historic practices are sufficient to create equitable outcomes.

Resource allocation is an area where K-12 leaders need more innovation and attribution. Creative and courageous moves are necessary if systems truly want to pursue academic acceleration, innovative secondary models, and creative staffing. Though large-scale change and more fundamental rethinking is needed at the federal and state levels, there are district leaders digging into the significant work within their control and starting to move the needle with pilots of innovation and strategic abandonment. When resources are working at optimal levels, organizations take bold moves to stop funding initiatives out of alignment with priorities. Instead, staff are energized by investments that grow capabilities essential for the future and help them experience a clear path to achieving their goals.

The Work

When Superintendent Leslie Torres Rodriguez started in Hartford Public Schools, she was faced with school closures and consolidation as the way to free dollars. However, what she uncovered in her pursuit of understanding root causes was that the current district budgeting formula allowed unintentional inequities by devoting far fewer resources to support her multilingual, differently abled, and at-risk students with chronic absenteeism than essential. She championed her district departments and outside stakeholders to recreate an equity-centered formula by focusing on the end-user experience through transparency, flexibility, and engagement.

Complex districts need coherence, aligning dollars to strategic priorities. Instead of basing school resources strictly on student enrollment, districts are opting for a more layered approach to allow more dollars to follow the most vulnerable students. In Ector County, Scott Muri and his team added a weighted funding formula based on poverty, special education, and English language learners solely out of general funds. Title I funds are now being used for innovation in alignment to the strategic plan. This shift would not have been achieved without opening the minds of the district and campus leaders and challenging them to rethink the opportunities provided by Title funds. Addressing inequitable funding takes time, data, and stakeholder buy-in. Districts committed to equitable funding models can better advance transformational long-term outcomes by developing external partnerships and holding these partners accountable to their role in advancing student access to life changing opportunities. Rob Anderson, Superintendent of Boulder County School District, took a hard look at the widespread and long-lived partnerships that were both community based, and vendor driven. Together with his leadership team they evaluated each partnership, using data to determine which ones aligned with the district's strategic plan. In the end, many partnerships had to be dissolved and new ones were formed if there was a clear path showing how it worked in service of student needs and district priorities. As a result of equity-centered investments in leadership development, community-based student support partnerships, and stronger curriculum and professional development, the district's growth in 2021-22 outpaced the state and Boulder's two most historically underserved schools (both UVA-PLE partner schools) are now outpacing their pre-pandemic academic outcomes across most measures.

Resource allocation is an area where K-12 leaders need more innovation and attribution. Creative and courageous moves need to be made if systems truly want to pursue academic acceleration, innovative secondary models, and creative staffing.

The Way Forward

Systemic reform is needed in state, local, and district funding practices. Notwithstanding incredible inequities stemming from state and broader policies beyond the control of local school districts that need to be addressed, there are untapped opportunities at the local level to innovate, champion, and propel forward that are not widespread. These opportunities include how to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

■ Reimagine what funding would look like if aligned to most critical, challenging whether the current allocations work in service of strategic goals, equity, and excellence

■ Create space to challenge predominant practices and inspire proposals that may attract governmental or philanthropic resources to the district

■ Invest in pilots and learning from out of the box ideas that inspire promise

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

■ Take a hard look at the current funding formula leveraging strong resources on effective and equitable resource allocation

■ Navigate the internal and external politics surrounding strategic abandonment to create investment streams for a more inspired future

■ Build staff efficacy and motivation to achieve mission-critical opportunities

Spotlight: Dr. Lamar Goree

Dr. Lamar Goree has been the superintendent of the Caddo Parish Public Schools district in Caddo Parish, Louisiana since 2013. The district serves approximately 37,000 students across 58 schools which includes 3 charter agreements.

As superintendent, Dr. Goree and his team's equitable resource allocation has been quite notable. Caddo Parish has re-allocated resources centrally to align with strategic priorities that address inequities. For instance, the district now aligns all literacy resources and professional development with a clear literacy strategy to ensure all students have access to tier one resources and effective instructional delivery. To address staffing pipeline

Dr. Lamar Goree

challenges, Caddo Parish has invested heavily in in-house certification, the Caddo Teaching Academy, reducing investments in less strategic professional development and placing graduates into hard-to-staff schools that in ten years ago had as many 70% of their teachers comprised of long-term substitutes (now have over 90% Certified staff). Caddo Parish has made other extremely selective and strategic partnerships including with Volunteers for America, who brought Communities in Schools into the district. Communities in Schools provides access to the kind of external resources and support that generally occur outside of the school day to district families though they are provided within the normal school timeframe.

This partnership spurred Goree's innovative idea of a one-stop shop for families, combining many previous one-off investments into a higher leverage usage of funds. The school district partnered with the district attorney's office as well as Volunteers for Youth Justice to create a one-stop shop in a vacant school building. The district and the county each put in $300,000, in addition to the $100,000 the mayor's office provided, to completely renovate and ultimately utilize the empty space proximal to the bus line as a place where families can go to receive food stamps, child support services, mental support agencies, and more, all under one roof. Additionally, within this one-stop shop, they are also working closely with juvenile judges, since truancy has spiked post Covid-19, to help ensure that these families get their students to school. Taken together, these investments promote student success by collectively and strategically delivering supports that enhance conditions for students to be prepared to learn.

These investments alongside incentive pay to be in Transformation Zone Schools and attraction of outside grants contributed to the attainment of Title 1 Blue Ribbon status in schools previously on the state accountability clock, increased average student growth that well outpaces the state, and student graduation rates at the highest in district history.

Systems Leadership Matters

Leaders rising to meet the urgent needs of students and unparalleled opportunity to shift practice are not merely taking a fresh approach to very complex challenges. We identified four primary leadership behaviors of teams successfully defying a business-as-usual approach and creating systems that will lead to a more promising future for our students:

1. **They ignite their teams towards embracing disruptive change and advancing a compelling picture of a future state.** While celebrating their stakeholders' heroic efforts throughout the pandemic, leaders also create significant dissatisfaction with the status quo and with existing inequities. This help stakeholders see there is no option but to shift practice. They also engender significant hope for their ability to provide an excellent education experience for each student, enlisting a guiding coalition across boundaries to create an inspiring picture for student experiences and outcomes. They leverage the disruption of the last couple of years to their advantage, highlighting where previously unimaginable shifts have come to fruition. These leaders do not throw out all previous practices which would contribute to the sense among educators that change is a constant pendulum swing. Rather, they ground their vision for the future in a strong understanding of the current state including where there are existing strong assets in the organization to bring to bear. By naming and building on existing strengths, stakeholders are more motivated to embrace co-creating what is next.

2. **They identify and prioritize clear opportunities that address critical stakeholder needs and take high-leverage, strategic risks that accelerate progress towards meeting those needs.** A better understanding of stakeholders' greatest needs equipped leadership teams to achieve a compelling vision. Rather than determining the district's focus at cabinet and board meetings alone, leaders invite teams across the organization to name what type of risks or evolution must be pursued to achieve greater outcomes particularly for underserved students. Leaders have too often felt the need to solve problems in a "hurry up and get it done" manner to meet funding deadlines, staffing shortfalls, and COVID re-entry timelines. While this crisis response resulted in some overdue innovation, strategic and sustained attention to future-oriented opportunities is required to systemically address unmet needs. Leaders successfully advancing transformation often encourage teams to engage in small experiments and risks aligned to where there is the greatest hunger and need. They realize many risks will not pan out, some may be wild ideas, and some may involve redesign to emphasize core principles such as the science of reading, data-informed assessment cycles, student connection, and staff motivation. These leaders are using strategic risk-taking and increased engagement around a common vision to define clear, forward-looking opportunities to pursue across the organization or in learning labs designed to pilot the shifts. These leaders leverage every vehicle possible to communicate these opportunities and spotlight students, teachers, and staff achieving promising results using these strategies

3. **They insist on teams working differently across silos to redesign systems, staffing, and resource allocation to align with their desired future state.** Igniting teams around clear, prioritized opportunities will not work without shifts in the organizational design needed in pursuit of those opportunities. Successful leaders are not layering pursuit of priorities on top of existing systems and job designs, but instead recognize their already stretched teams need to engage in new ways of working. They match the strategy for bold opportunities to the situation, leveraging core change teams to enlist others across organizational, power, and identity boundaries to pursue a shared purpose and create a new story. They keep a focus on agility and insist on collaborating across silos, as the solutions to the messy challenges require collective ownership versus each

department conquering their own priorities – which often results in incoherence. These leaders foster curiosity about what dramatically different outcomes will take, including how to rethink outdated processes, how to motivate and build capacity of staff differently, and how to engage stakeholders who may be misaligned with the vision. These leaders tackle ambiguity and confusion by being clear about what is tight in job and process designs and where there is encouragement to design differently and co-create the path to the future. These leaders tackle compliance and inertia by centering meetings, PLCs, and development on a shared purpose that inspires stakeholders and connects the need for action and problem-solving to aspirational goals.

4. **They invest in people and support systems to learn, adapt, and execute towards achievement of a different state, developing both core and new capabilities across the organization.** One consistent practice that stood out in the most promising stories is an investment in people that builds critical capabilities, increases respect, and builds ladders of opportunity to grow contributions. Growing talent and relationships with local stakeholders is essential and requires outside-the-box solutions, especially given that many existing approaches for identifying and developing talent are not working. Improvement cycles can contribute to new forms of investment, but too often focus on rigid processes or narrow goals. Fundamental reinvention requires support systems that incentivize measuring, learning, and adapting toward clear, student-centered long-term outcomes and key leading indicators of practice shifts. Yes, staff who are not on board with the desired state or who are not showing progress need to be held accountable – while the ultimate goal is reinvention that builds buy-in across the organization and emphasizes

a spirit of inclusivity to produce broad organizational ownership for the change initiative. Promoting this collective ownership and learning helps system leaders understand the on-ground reality, meet the interests of the many, and avoid being distracted by the loudest voices resisting changes. Doing this well requires staff to experience more investments in professional development and creative problem-solving opportunities that grow their efficacy and less time engaged in required activities that may not align to organizational priorities or their expressed interests for growth.

We hope these draft insights ignite a sense of possibilities and reflection on the type of change leadership and execution critical to your context. We look forward to learning more from each of you on what successfully exploring new frontiers of systems transformation will take.

For those serious about advancing new frontiers, UVA-PLE provides unparalleled leadership development experiences and systems change support via our Core Partnership. We would love to partner to ignite and equip your system and school teams to advance lasting transformation.

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100 Darden Boulevard
Charlottesville, VA 22903
USA

+1-434-924-8719
uvaple@darden.virginia.edu
www.darden.virginia.edu/uva-ple