

UPDATING AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION:

Keeping the Foundation –
While Preparing for the Future



UPDATING AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION:

KEEPING THE FOUNDATION – WHILE PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE¹

Public schools have long been an essential force in preparing generations of Americans to live well, contribute to community life, and build the country’s social and economic vibrancy. A strong education system has produced a nation of problem-solvers: forward-thinking innovators who have made the most of emerging opportunities, and wisely guided the nation through unpredictable times. As the pace of change increases, and the world becomes more complex, our continued national well-being depends on our education system. We need this system to develop competent and caring citizens who are willing and able to solve pressing social problems. An education system that serves these goals is a public good, an American right, and a collective necessity. These values, aspirations, and imperatives are deeply rooted in American culture, and as our nation moves forward, we must fully embrace them to guide our efforts to improve our system of education.

Just as a home must be updated periodically to maintain its value, our education system is long overdue for a substantial renovation. Five contemporary trends underscore the urgent need for assessing what we must change to meet today’s needs:

- ***The modern world demands more knowledge and skills.*** More than ever before, full participation in social, political, and economic life requires that all Americans be educated well.
- ***We know more about how learning works – and doesn’t.*** An accelerating science of learning provides compelling insight about significant barriers to learning and development in conventional schooling.
- ***We have more information than ever before –and new ways of communicating it, sharing it, and accessing it.*** Technology has fundamentally altered the relationship between people

¹ Version dated April 2016. This evolving document was prepared by the Partnership for the Future of Learning – a self-organized working group with a shared mission to develop and advance a new, richer, and deeper education reform frame. From 2010-2015, we met under the name “New Models Working Group.” The ideas here reflect not only the views of these funders, but those emerging from the field and an increasingly concerned public.



and information. Some aspects of our approach to teaching and learning must change with it.

- ***Changes in wealth, wages, and upward mobility are affecting the learners in our schools.*** Economic inequality is creating unequal childhoods, including growing gaps in the out-of-school resources and supports for learning and development.
- ***Our nation is becoming more diverse, and so are our schools.*** More than half of U.S. schoolchildren are children of color, and a quarter come from immigrant families. These changes challenge us to revisit policies and practices that were built in an earlier, more homogenous era.

To address the demands of this moment, there is significant work to be done. As we revamp and renew one of the most important institutions in American life, the following must become the pillars on which the teaching, content, organization, funding and other components of educational systems rest:

- **Deeper learning** that cultivates academic competence, higher order thinking skills, and commitment to learning, and that readies young people personally and socially for responsible adulthood;
- **Student-centered** approaches to learning that enable educators and learners to work together to ensure that all learners become deeper learners through personalized, experiential learning.
- Resources, conditions, opportunities, and measures of accomplishment that ensure **equitable and inclusive** education for all of the nation's diverse young people;
- Schools that reflect and reinforce the centrality of public education to a **healthy and vibrant democracy** and promote the practice of democratic skills; and
- Systems in which knowledgeable professionals work together with parents, local community members, and policymakers with **trust, respect, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability** to create and sustain schools where ongoing professional learning brings continuous improvement, and to construct standards, curriculum and assessments that reinforce collaborative learning environments.

In what follows, we offer a vision of American education responsive to these values, trends, and pillars. It is an ambitious, but practical, vision of how to build policy and practice over the coming decades. It is a vision grounded in longstanding and widely shared values: we want and need our schools exist to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for young Americans to craft meaningful lives, build a strong economy, steward a vibrant democracy, and foster equity and justice. In outlining these ideals, we hope to fuel a more vibrant, engaged national conversation about what it would mean to put these core principles into action. For our shared values to be routinely reflected in every school across the nation, regardless of where they happen to be located, we must come together as a nation to renovate our most enduring social institution. This is a significant undertaking, and we need many hands to make the work possible: communities, families, young people, educators, the private sector, and government all have roles to play. The changes we make together may unsettle the status quo, but the results in the end will be worth the “dust and noise.” We believe that the nation is ready.

We elaborate these ideas below, beginning with our brief analysis of the shortcomings of both traditional schooling and the approaches to reform that have dominated in recent years. We then elaborate on the core principles (introduced above) for aligning our school systems with our increasing knowledge about learning, teaching, and creating schools where young people grow and thrive. We also offer, for illustrative purposes, some concrete examples of our own efforts to realize this vision in education practice and policy. We end with a call for collective action in the best tradition of American democracy.

Both traditional schooling and current reforms fall short.

There are many good things to be said about U.S. education—especially when one looks at rare, stellar examples of individual schools. Over time, our nation has built an education system that is open to all, and regularly and reliably moves a substantial minority of young people successfully into post-secondary education. These are significant accomplishments, and they met the nation’s economic needs for a prepared workforce in earlier eras. However, in proposing such a substantial renovation of our nation’s approach to schooling, we feel obliged to address briefly and unflinchingly the current problems with the nation’s school system and the shortcomings in recent efforts to improve them.

As the industrial age has given way to the information age, it is no longer adequate to deliver some common experiences to all, while selecting just a few to advance. The values that underlie traditional schooling—individualism, competition, and merit—are remarkably unsuited for what we need today, in a time when our economy requires a workforce with complex skill sets. These values have fostered ubiquitous practices of choosing and sorting of those who “qualify” for elite opportunities, such as further education and high-status, knowledge-based occupations. They support the view that high attainment is a primarily private good, available only to those most deserving.² The overall level of educational attainment right now is simply too low to maintain, much less expand, our nation’s prosperity. If we continue to sort and stratify students, rather than developing a system intent on educating all students well, our economy, and our democracy, will falter badly. Universal education has long been the backbone of strong maturing cultures, and today’s knowledge economy, global interconnectedness, and increasingly complex national life make clear that high-quality schooling can no longer be reserved for a few.

It is also well past time to update the ways we attempt to improve our education system. For more than a century, Americans have operated schools as if they were industrial factories, with teaching and learning practices that harken back to assembly-line and batch-processing manufacturing, and with teachers as line workers, and management that has become increasingly bureaucratic. This underlying factory model has also deeply influenced the ways in which we have approached reform and change. In the past 30 years, for example, federal and state policymakers created standards and accountability policies that compel educators to specify proficiency in basic academics, monitor results with standardized test results, and control quality with rigid and punitive school and teacher evaluations. They have focused on strategies borrowed from business and industry performance metrics - ranking schools according to a narrowly defined “bottom line” and short-term “results” (rather than attending to long-term goals) and providing individual “consumers” with comparison points for choosing schools competing for their “business” (rather than ensuring a supply of high-quality opportunities for all).

These changes have yielded, at best, only modest improvements. Incremental upticks in test scores

² The enduring values of individualism and merit are certainly part of the American ethos, and serve important cultural functions. These values help explain why our society has flourished, and the well-being of the whole is connected to the well-being of each individual. Nevertheless, their dominance in education has become a clear cultural barrier to creating the system of universal education the nation now wants and needs.

or other narrow measures have been observed here and there, but this approach to reform has failed to redress systemic inequities, promote a culture of higher expectations for all, or yield higher levels of readiness among graduates. Reformers have responded to these disappointing results by redoubling efforts that still operate within the logic of the current approach. The Common Core State Standards, for example, provide a more sophisticated specification of academic proficiency, but don't fully redefine what it means to be well-educated in the current era. New tests seek to measure and report more complex learning outcomes and improve the basis for school and teacher accountability, but the logic of sifting, sorting, and ranking remains in place.

Moreover, this approach's inherent lack of fairness is ever more apparent. The uneven distribution of attainment—by race, economic status, or, zip code—limits our growth socially and economically, corrodes our communities by perpetuating inequality over generations. The reality of today's schools contradict the deeply cherished American belief that public education embodies the value of equal opportunity in a system that provides universal access and common experiences, regardless of condition, need, or student interest.

In our tacit acceptance of stark educational disparities, we have gotten out of step not only with our own cherished ideals, but also with other modernized countries, which recognize that human potential is a national resource not to be wasted and establish policies and programs that foster it. The 2013 report of the National Equity and Excellence Commission put it bluntly: "America has become an outlier nation in the way we fund, govern and administer K-12 schools, and also in terms of performance. No other developed nation has inequities nearly as deep or systemic; no other developed nation has, despite some efforts to the contrary, so thoroughly stacked the odds against so many of its children. Sadly, what feels so very un-American turns out to be distinctly American."³

Practically, we need more young people to be well prepared for responsible adulthood, including becoming engaged and contributing members of communities, the economy and political life. Social cohesion requires reducing disparities in life chances between broad classes of people that fuel debilitating social divisions, as recently discussed in our national dialogue on income

³ U.S. Department of Education, *For Each and Every Child—A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence*, Washington, D.C., 2013. p. 15.

inequalities. Moral consistency requires that, as our nation becomes more diverse, that public schools embody our historical and shared commitment to fairness and equal opportunity. We can't afford to continue with the status quo.

A Blueprint for the Schools We Need

To revamp the school system we have into the school system we need for the future, where must we focus our efforts? And how can we ensure that we pursue changes sensibly and systematically, so that they lead to a genuinely improved system? Five ideas – each widely accepted, and none particularly controversial or innovative on their own – can add up to a truly new and better whole when taken together and treated as inter-connected and mutually reinforcing. Implementing and integrating them can move the nation away from both the educational status quo and the currently dominant reform frame. It is no easy task to tackle these five focus areas together. Taken together, they press us to exercise ourselves practically, ethically, and morally to create a school system that can make our diverse democracy socially vibrant, economically prosperous, and politically efficacious.

1. Deeper learning.⁴ To ensure that all students finish secondary education ready for postsecondary learning (formal and informal), a career, and active citizenship, we must update the way we think about what and how students learn in K-12. Effective learning can be likened to a rope, which needs each and every strand in order to be strong and functional. Content knowledge is one strand. To meet the demands of our knowledge-based economy, this strand must entail much more robust academic content than in the past. Application is another strand: learners must use rigorous content to think critically and solve problems, and communicate verbally and in writing. “Academic mindsets” are similarly intertwined in the rope of learning. These vital dispositions, such as confidence in themselves as learners, the belief that abilities grow with effort, and that learning has value and purpose, are essential to learning. Social skills are yet another strand: teamwork, collaboration, and the other social and emotional skills that young people must learn in order to apply their knowledge wisely and usefully. The resulting

⁴ In the scholarly literature, deeper learning (i.e. learning with understanding) is often contrasted to surface learning (i.e. rote learning). See, for example, Chin, C., & Brown, D. E. (2000). Learning in science: A comparison of deep and surface approaches. *Journal of research in science teaching*, 37(2), 109-138.

rich, interwoven braid of knowledge, intellectual and social skills, emotional capabilities and mindsets is a tool that young people can bring to bear to craft their own lives and contribute to the collective good. To weave such ropes, students must have an active role, working together with teachers to engage with and apply rigorous knowledge and develop key skills. In schools, this deeper learning must meet the test of being meaningful, teachable, and measureable; meeting this test will require experiences, tools, relationships with teachers, and connections with culture and community that are far different than our current norms.⁵

2. Student-Centered Pedagogy and Structures. To update our system so that it supports deeper learning, we also have to refresh our approaches to teaching, ensuring that they are in line with the science of learning and research on how young people’s skills are built. Evidence from the learning sciences, for example, suggests that learning is more active than passive and more social than individual; that such learning is cultivated in contexts that look more like apprenticeships than typical classroom instruction; and that assessing such learning looks far more like doing “real work” than like typical tests and involves demonstrating complex combinations of skills, knowledge and dispositions in real world settings. These involve shifts in both the way we usually think about learning (as the accumulation of knowledge) and teaching (as instructional methods that enable students to accumulate knowledge).⁶ These shifts can be likened to the differences between spoon-feeding learners discrete pieces of information versus teaching them to “cook with information.” In the latter, the roles of both teachers and students are changed. Teachers guide students in an ongoing process of creative production, helping them to learn to select information, judge its quality, and use it in varying combinations, for real purposes. New technologies are probably essential to support student-centered, personalized pedagogies cost effectively and at scale, but these technologies are only one set of tools available to use. Central to student-centered pedagogy are trusting human relationships, and environments where student feel well-known and cared about—only educators and a strong peer learning communities can accomplish that. Technology and data can enhance relationships but cannot pretend to substitute

⁵ This conception of deeper learning and its implications for education practice are more fully articulated in the following report from the National Academies of Science: National Research Council. Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2012. Additional resources can be found on the Hewlett Foundation website: <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning>.

⁶ These ideas are well developed in the following synthesis volume: National Research Council. How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2000.

for them.⁷

Moreover, student-centered approaches take into full account, as core understanding, that students learn differently, and at different paces, and have different interests. In order to fairly and effectively respond to the diverse student populations found in US schools, pedagogies must value the knowledge brought by diverse groups of students from experiences in their homes and communities and incorporate this knowledge into the learning process at school. This all requires highly skilled educators who have considerable knowledge and teach with responsiveness and flexibility. It also involves higher expectations about student agency and ownership, and highly prizes tapping into the inherent motivation with which young learners are naturally imbued, but which are too often muted in traditional educational approaches.

3. Equity. For our nation to maintain and expand its ability to progress, we need the talents and skills of all young people to be available to our communities, our workforce, and our democracy. Moreover, a robust commitment to equity also demands inclusiveness (e.g., deliberate steps to connect curriculum and instruction to diverse students' histories, cultures, and communities); and agency (emphasis on empowering under-served students, families, and communities to become equal partners in education reform).

To achieve this, we must make a robust and concrete commitment to including all students in deeper learning in student-centered settings, and a commitment to ensuring that these opportunities are fairly distributed across places, spaces, races, and other lines. In recent years, the value of equity has been intentionally pursued in the reform agenda. Policies have encouraged particular attention to inclusion and equity for students from communities who must overcome historical, concentrated economic disadvantage and/or racial exclusion; maintaining high expectations for all learners and the system itself; and the close monitoring of practices and results, and levying consequences where inequities persist. Yet, there is more to do at the structural level. Opportunities to learn are much like charging stations where students power up to take an active role in their learning. Presently, these charging stations are distributed unevenly.

⁷ Resources regarding the concept of student-centeredness as we define it can be found at the Jobs for the Future's Students at the Center website: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org>. Additional explanation of what we mean by personalization can be found in Susan Sandler, "People vs. 'Personalization': Retaining the human element in the high-tech era of education" Education Week, Vol. 31, Issue 22, Pages 20, 22.

Some communities, for example, are filled with opportunities to learn - time, experiences, relationships with knowledgeable and caring adults – while in others, these opportunities are few and far between. Resources such as funding, materials, and teaching quality are likewise strong in some places, weak or patchy in others.

For American schooling to develop the human potential that is our nation's greatest asset, we must make a far more robust commitment to equity, connecting all communities to strong, reliable schools, augmented with clear standards for student support. To accomplish this, it will require devoting more resources to those areas where there are weak or patchy connections to learning opportunities. A robust view of equity also recognizes and seeks to reduce learning differences stemming from profound disparities in basic—and alterable—factors tied to poverty and other circumstances beyond school. These include physical and mental health, nutrition, environmental stress, and other critical shapers of young people's development. Any practical and just set of standards to establish and monitor education quality must include indicators of capacity and resources that support disadvantaged students and schools—such as the integration of educational and social services to buffer the potential impact of poverty on learning. In short, equity requires ensuring that varied, student-centered approaches to deeper learning are available to all, and that our schools close rather than exacerbate longstanding education inequalities and exclusions.⁸

4. Democracy. Near the founding of our republic, public schools were established as an essential bedrock of democracy. Thomas Jefferson argued that government should educate children to ensure that citizens capable of debating ideas and exercising rational thought would guide our democratic decision making. Jefferson and, later, Horace Mann, asserted that a free, common, and public education was the surest route to preserving individual liberties, providing for the common good, and maintaining an orderly and stable society. Local control by lay, community boards of education was intended to make schools themselves locally responsive democratic institutions – a place in which Americans' democratic traditions of public commentary, checks and balances, and transparency could be exercised. Over time, society has also come to expect

⁸ Resources regarding the concept of student-centeredness as we define it can be found at the Jobs for the Future's Students at the Center website: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org>. Additional explanation of what we mean by personalization can be found in Susan Sandler, "People vs. 'Personalization': Retaining the human element in the high-tech era of education" Education Week, Vol. 31, Issue 22, Pages 20, 22.

schools to support other common goals: to preserve the diverse American culture, support the economy, help with national security, and solve domestic social problems. It is a testament to the centrality of public schools to democracy that, even with these additional expectations, the public school system has held high the goal of upholding democratic values and traditions.

Today, the centrality of the value of democracy points to at least two priorities for remodeling our education system.

First, schools must place a priority on the deeper learning needed for citizens to address increasingly complex social, economic, and political challenges and opportunities. To direct this deeper learning toward the common good, students must have opportunities to practice - getting their hands on the wheel of learning as active and collaborative participants in their own education. Participating as drivers of learning, not merely passengers, is integral to learning itself, and is also the best means to prepare our young people to be active and engaged citizens in an increasingly diverse and complex democracy. Ensuring that public schools equip youth to be citizens and democratic leaders will require structural changes. As one example: the status quo, long shaped by neighborhood segregation and attendance boundaries, and more recently by parental choice policies, has limited the extent to which young people experience the pluralism that characterizes the nation overall. Our current approach tends to isolate students into schools by both economic status and race. In turn, this necessarily limits the extent to which young people are prepared to embrace, participate in, and wisely guide a democracy that includes people from highly diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. A school system charged with supporting democracy will tackle this challenge – and others like it.

A second priority involves ensuring that schools exemplify democracy. It is time for the nation to reclaim public schools as key democratic institutions – a role that has been put at risk by recent reforms. The dominant reform frame has moved schools even further away from their formerly strong status as democratic, social intuitions firmly embedded in the public sphere. Instead, prevailing reforms and public opinion liken schools to businesses and encourage privatization, a trend that is incompatible with the transparency, open enrollment, and broad public accountability associated with education as a public good. Clearly, making education reflective of the strong and vibrant relationship between democracy and schools will require dramatic shifts in education policy and practice. Neither overly bureaucratic public institutions, nor privatized

ones will do. We must craft 21st century strategies and structures that prioritize democratic principles, and engage cities and communities, including grassroots groups, as direct partners in that work.

5. Trust, Judgment and Responsibility. To build learning environments characterized by values of deeper learning, student-centeredness, equity, and democracy, there is much work for educators to do. As they do this difficult work of remodeling and maintaining these environments, our policies and approaches to change must offer them the support structures and space to work effectively – much like the scaffolding around a construction project. Teachers can no longer be seen as line workers along an education assembly line. Instead, we must begin to think of them as skilled masters of a craft, and organize our expectations of them, and our approaches to working with them, accordingly.

In this case, evidence and experience (including international lessons) make clear what that scaffolding must comprise. It must involve an environment characterized by shared responsibility, with mutual accountability for quality, professional judgment, and integrity. It means that the pervasive administrative style, at every level of the system, must be one built on trust and belief in human potential - rather than one focused predominantly on the challenge of compelling compliance. When systems are characterized by a command-and-control, compliance-oriented approach, it disempowers educators, students and families in ways that undermine their ability to develop and implement innovative practices and relationships. Deeper learning requires empowerment and judgment of professional educators in a system that insists on depth of professional knowledge, commitment, and motivation.

Realigning our approach to emphasize trust, judgment and responsibility will shift our energies away from finding the right incentives to motivate educators to improve, and toward thinking of improving teaching and learning as a learning challenge. It will challenge us to find and implement the best ways of increasing the knowledge, capacity, and creativity of the master craftspeople executing this ambitious remodeling project. Thinking of the role of the system as providing scaffolding for this construction job, it becomes clear that teachers require the same learning opportunities and experiences as we expect them to provide young people—deeper learning about teaching, learning and pedagogy that are all possible under conditions of equity,

inclusion, and democratic practice. This approach must take root in robust programs of teacher preparation, in professional apprenticeship opportunities, and in collaborative learning networks for teachers.

We must also update and reorient the way we think about educational leadership. Leaders, vitally important in democratic social institutions, must be oriented to the broad and vital purposes of the institution of public schools in a modern economy and democracy. Leaders can no longer operate like middle managers in business settings, accountable to outsiders for only a narrow set of bottom-line metrics, but not the actual quality and efficacy of what is happening in learning environments. Rather, they must all be seen as increasingly knowledgeable professionals who together create and sustain settings in which both adults and young people engage skillfully and equitably in cultivating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of deeper learning.⁹

Finally, we must remember that scaffolding is not merely support for support's sake, but is intended to allow for safe, effective, and high-quality work. As such, our approach must include continued vigilance about equitable outcomes and safeguards that ensure responsible actions. Communities who have witnessed a lifetime of educational neglect and outdated thinking at the local level must be assured that the trust given to educators will be used wisely and responsibly, for demonstrably and dramatically better results. We must ensure that our renovated system works for all Americans, especially those who are currently ill-served by the system.

Call to Action

Public education is a central social institution, and, as noted above, is essential to advancing our nation's ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world. So it is with considerable humility and respect for our democratic processes that we advance this vision and set of values to guide education reform in the years ahead.

Change will only be possible when philanthropic leaders support others and actively participate as partners in efforts to change the conversation about education reform. We hope to have clearly articulated the vision and values to consider in this ongoing conversation in this concept paper, *Updating American Public Education: Keeping the Foundation – While Preparing for the Future*.

⁹ Linda Darling-Hammond· *Education and the Flat World*· New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.

We believe that philanthropy can and must play a unique role in the national effort to improve our schools. Our comparatively long time horizons can help frame the conversation on the long-term shifts we need. Our “patient capital” can be invested in trying out and lifting up new approaches for the nation to consider as it shapes schooling for the future. Philanthropy’s role is not as the primary actor in educational change—for both practical and philosophical reasons. Practically, while philanthropic resources in the United States are vast by comparison to other countries, they are quite small when compared to the resources needed to fund education and wide scale educational change. More importantly, an informed public is the most primary actor in a democracy.

In support of that democratic process, philanthropy can contribute in several important ways:

- Promoting a public discourse about the fundamental values that will drive the system forward to more effective system designs and more equitable results;
- Contributing to the knowledge base about the conditions under which these values can be enacted in schools;
- Supporting and evaluating innovation in terms of educational designs;
- Convening, supporting, and building the capacity of networks of like-minded public leaders, organizations, and professionals; and
- Funding policy advocacy efforts consistent with these values.
- Evaluating and learning from success.

All of these are important contributions, but perhaps the most fundamental is our role in promoting a more productive public discourse. For schooling to realize this vision and values, we must talk and think differently about the shifts we need in policy and practice. Those of us who are involved in the conversation must embrace a different vocabulary of reform – one that consistently emphasizes the need, the benefits, and the possibility of a public education system that educates all students very, very well. By using such a frame, we do our part to trigger our collective responsibility to create and sustain such a system as a core feature of a vibrant, free democracy upon which both individuals and the collective depend. Our goal in presenting this frame is to spark and facilitate wider discussion of these ideas and to explore further their

implications for education reform. We hope you will join us in beginning, and continuing, a new conversation.

About the Partnership for the Future of Learning

The Partnership for the Future of Learning is a self-organized group with a shared mission to develop and advance a new, richer, and deeper education reform frame. From 2010-2015, we met under the name “New Models Working Group.” As of early 2016, our collaborative includes 10 foundations and over a dozen leaders from major education and social justice organizations –and we are growing. The Partnership is hosted by the National Public Education Support Fund. Learn more about us at <http://www.npesf.org/partnership-for-the-future-of-learning> .

