

THE REIMAGINE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS FORUM

MAY 20, 2020

National Design Alliance to Reimagine America's Schools
In association with and funded by Schmidt Futures



Introduction

Fifteen years ago, the Reimagine America's Schools team at the National Design Alliance began to focus on a national imperative: how do we **guide civic and education leaders to design schools for 2050, rather than the 1950's**? Our work is built on a transformational vision for schools that supports new ways of teaching and learning, schools that support next-generation learning skills, including personalized, project-based STEM, STEAM, and Maker-centered programs.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Eric Schmidt, former Executive Chair of Google and founder of the Schmidt Futures foundation, has quickly emerged as a leading voice in the reimagine process nationally. New York Governor Cuomo has enlisted him to lead his state's Reimagine Task Force and the National Design Alliance is leading the national effort to Reimagine America's Schools in association with and funded by Schmidt Futures.

Our experiences with the COVID-19 crisis reveal that an entirely new vision for schools and school design is necessary. In fact, it is now becoming clear that it would be tragic to build another generation of schools based on the last century's model. In the midst of this crisis, State, City leaders, and educators are saying, "We can't go back to what was; we can't simply re-open our cities and schools...we must reimagine".

Our goal is to reimagine a future for education, and the institutions we call school. It is unlikely that any school leader will ever consider designing a school in the same way we have in the past. But, what will that change look like? Where will/should learning take place? Most importantly, how will we redesign and reconfigure the 100,000 existing public schools to meet new demands and challenges? We believe five defining issues will drive change in education and school design:

- **Equity:** The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneous cultural rupture over widespread and systemic racial inequities across the institutional landscape of America. We must examine what role schools will play in closing the opportunity gap that exists in communities and neighborhoods, and how cities and schools can work more collaboratively to achieve transformational outcomes.
- **Technology:** After an extended period of technology-based home learning, how might this change the way we think about learning and where that learning takes place? And how do we assure that all students have access to technology regardless of means?
- **Crisis Preparedness/Resiliency:** During COVID-19, as with other periods of crisis and disaster, schools often become ad hoc centers for supporting a wide range of community needs. With the increase of challenges facing our communities, how can schools and cities work together to create more resilient communities?
- **Social Connection:** Social distancing is a necessary part of the current COVID-19 recovery strategy, but we are also reminded that children of all ages need social connections to thrive. What role will schools play to adapt and support this need in our new educational environment?
- **Economic Recovery:** With the current health and cultural crises, the US faces a massive economic challenge, requiring investment in infrastructure as part of the comprehensive economic recovery strategy. What role will schools and school construction play in this recovery?

A Unique Opportunity for Change: The Next 5 Years

For the moment, educators and school leaders are focused on the immediate task of opening schools within two months. This is an enormous challenge. Nevertheless, the pandemic requires us to rethink the brick-and-mortar environment in fundamental ways. Every school year, 56 million children and adults use our nation's school facilities. Schools actually represent the second largest sector when it comes to our nation's public infrastructure.

Local governments and states will invest about \$250 billion in the next 5 years on school construction, and with the potential investments in infrastructure from the federal government, those numbers could be even larger. Sadly, there is a high risk that in the effort to move quickly, these investments might bypass any opportunity to address changes learned through the pandemic, as well as any social and cultural revelations made along the way. In the coming months, Reimagine America's Schools will develop strategies and guidelines, spearheading a new path towards a greater future for American public education.

Creating the New Agenda: Where Do We Go From Here?

To initiate the process, Reimagine America's Schools assembled a cross-disciplinary forum to address the challenges and opportunities from our experiences during the pandemic, and how we might reconsider the design of schools for the future. The discussion was convened by the National Design Alliance's CEO Ron Bogle, Hon. AIA, and moderated by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus from Metris Arts Consulting on May 20, 2020. Below is a list of participants, and the key questions that were raised. The dialogue included:

- Ashley Arhart, Design Principal, BCG | Platinion Smart Environments Practice Group, Seattle, Washington
- Gregg Behr, Executive Director of The Grable Foundation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Ron Bogle, Hon. AIA, President & CEO, National Design Alliance
- Dan Coleman, Visiting Researcher in the Innovation practice at MIT Teaching Systems Lab and Principal, Big Sky Blue, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Maurice Cox, Commissioner of Planning and Development for the City of Chicago
- Julie Critz, Superintendent of Schools in Alexandria Public Schools, in Alexandria, Minnesota
- Ashley Flores, Senior Director of the Child Poverty Action Lab, Dallas, Texas
- Kumar Garg, Managing Director and Head of Partnership, Schmidt Futures, Washington, DC
- The Honorable Sly James, former Mayor of Kansas City, Missouri
- Mark Lund, Principal at Glover Middle School in Spokane, Washington, Spokane Public Schools
- Kristen Watkins, Director Personalized Learning, Dallas Independent School District, Dallas, Texas
- John Weekes, Architect, Past Chair of the AIA Committee on Architecture for Education, Portland, Oregon

Summary of Forum

Five themes emerged during the event: First, how we can learn from the abrupt transition from the traditional physical environment to digital learning. Second, the pandemic exposed a deeply entrenched inequality which is embedded in the very DNA of public education, especially surrounding access to technology. Third, given their pre-existing relationship with parents, public schools emerged as “anchor” institutions in their communities, from acting as feeding centers to providing invaluable information. Access to food, health, Wi-Fi and information became a paramount concern.

Fourth, in a blended future of digital learning and classrooms, how will we encourage the core values of a successful student/ teacher relationship? Lastly, how do we sustain creative leadership post pandemic to reform public education? There will be an enormous temptation to snap back to normal, yet this crisis has created a new opportunity to redefine education and the physical environment. Tenacity and creative leadership will be essential if we are to sustain the push for reform in the years ahead.

The National Distance Learning Experiment: What are we learning?

Since last March, the COVID-19 pandemic forced public education to shift from on-site learning to online education; a true national experience. The shift exposed structural inequities, including lack of access, equipment, training and support for parents and caregivers.

Questions were raised about how online learning would respond to the needs of special education students, STEAM learning, connected learning and students whose passions and energy thrive in a Maker space setting, or who are charting technical career paths and need hands-on instruction.

Julie Critz: We can move faster than we think we can, or than we thought we could in the past. Traditionally, education has been a pretty slow-moving organization. And, when we work to implement something, we spend a lot of time researching, planning, training – we dabble a little bit, we pilot – and, in this particular circumstance, the way it worked in Minnesota, our governor said, ‘You have eight days’... Access has been our key thing, and many parents say ‘I don’t know how to do this, so I can’t help my child do it’. So, we are designing some things that can – where we can – provide support to parents as well.

Dan Coleman: My team has been interviewing teachers all over the country, and one fascinating thing we’ve heard is how hard it is to reach kids when they’re in a grid of little boxes on your screen. I haven’t heard any teacher say that it’s going really well. At best, it’s fairly decent. Mostly, it’s closer to catastrophic.

But if you listen closely, there are these glimmers of how school could be better--the virtual kind and even the in-person. A few teachers have talked about this incredible chance they’ve had to work with their students one at a time. To spend a half-hour straight with just one kid, working through just one problem, following their train of thinking from beginning to end. The kind of change these teachers were able to make happen with their students--we want to keep that as we choose what this new normal will look like.

Ashley Arhart: Technology is not neutral. Technology can actually be very profoundly positive or very profoundly negative, depending on how it’s deployed.

Equity, Poverty & Structural Inequalities

Equity, poverty and race were a defining issue for all the participants. The last three months of on-line learning only highlighted the deeply entrenched inequality of American public education. This forum was conducted 5 days before George Floyd was killed by police while in custody in Minneapolis.

Ashley Flores: I also think of how the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities. Some communities are very proximate to the resources that they need – testing, healthcare and grocery stores – and other communities are very far from those resources. I think what that means for the future is we have to really apply more of a place-based lens to our economic development activities as we're thinking about a school community model.

Sly James: We'll spend the last 75 years of a person's lifetime making up for the mistakes we make in the first five. If we do not address and recognize the impact of the first five years of a person's life on what they do from that point forward, in terms of learning and education, we will suffer as a result.

John Weekes: Inequity is absolutely an issue, both through the lens of race and economic ability. Race is well known and not to be avoided. Economic ability was a concern about the have and have nots. But the Mayor makes a good point, the middle is now at risk. What do we do about that? Looking forward, what does school-making look like?

Gregg Behr: As we wrestle with the future of learning, and the future of education, there are some things that will nonetheless remain timeless and classic. To me, that's the role of caring adults and relationships in kids' lives. None of this will matter, unless we seriously engage parents, families and caregivers about where learning needs to go, such that they understand it, they expect it, and they demand that. And it's especially true for parents, families and caregivers of black and brown children, of our rural learners, of our learners with special needs, of those who have been traditionally marginalized from public education in this country.

What is the role of schools in our future?

A public school building is more than a cluster of classrooms. School facilities often serve multiple purposes in a community. How can design serve the needs of a community and foster the social infrastructure that sustains the? More than a few participants highlighted the critical role that schools played in terms of access to food, crisis information and broadband during the pandemic. For many people, schools truly became "anchor" institutions.

Ashley Flores: The pandemic has exposed just how central schools are to the fabric of a community. They're the conduit of information back and forth to families, and the pandemic has really exposed schools as the anchor public institution, which is a good thing.

Mark Lund: How do we stretch this thing out so that the building is a community hub and reposition the school as the heart of a future ecosystem, whose mission is to develop responsible citizens and position buildings to support our communities in doing that? I think it's an essential question.

Sly James: Having a school district serve as an individual ecosystem doesn't do much for me. It just perpetuates the same nonsense and stereotypes that have been out there from the beginning, where the 'haves' get better, and the 'have-nots' get nothing.

Maurice Cox: We're talking about providing tens of thousands of meals to children and putting them in places that could be accessed by families. I was fascinated by that challenge. And then, of course, you have to think about the health of the child and their readiness to go to school, but for this time we had to actually think of the health of the entire family.

Kristen Watkins: What I'm hearing from educators is they're not only trying to teach content and new content; they're also trying to stay two steps ahead of their families in the sense of when people reach out to ask 'where can I be tested for COVID-19?' Or 'when can I pick up food?' ... trying to figure out how we can support all of the systems for our communities.

What is the role of technology in transforming education?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced public education to fundamentally alter the learning process. Going forward we will have to create a new blend of digital learning and the physical environment. How we use both learning spaces for best outcomes is a question that will need to be answered.

Ashley Arhart: When you think about the space where education takes place, and how it might provide a more integral role in ensuring the success of our students and teachers, what that might begin to look like. A physical environment that hears, sees and actually understands what's going on within it. And imagine if that had everyone who's occupying those spaces best interests at its artificial heart. If you could understand that (and use digital tools to) synthesize that information, and then put it in the hands of a nurturing educator to ensure that they were responding appropriately and making whatever accommodations are necessary for a given student to be their most successful, I think that's a possibility of these technologies.

Julie Critz: One more question that I have, or a challenge I think we need to figure out is how distance learning can accommodate the more application-based or the career and technical education side of high school, or schools in general. Many students who thrive in that environment and who are used to the hands-on support of the teacher and demonstrating their learning, are struggling right now. And, in visiting with one of our current Tech-Ed teachers, he said, "This welding class, this robotics class..." any number of courses that he's teaching, "...kids are choosing that, they're interested and passionate, but it's also how they learn best".

Dan Coleman: Before we start building, or rebuilding, we need to ask fundamental questions about what makes school buildings special: What kind of learning can we do when we gather together that we just can't do virtually? How do we tease out the functions that only school buildings can serve, and disentangle them from all the other stuff we're just used to using schools for? How do we take this moment of catastrophe--the way it clears away all our habits and routines and the motions we're used to going through--and make sure we start designing deliberately?

How do we sustain change and avoid falling back on old solutions?

There was an agreement about the critical need for innovative leadership to sustain change, given the complexity of the task and challenge to change large, complex educational organizations.

Ron Bogle: Our fear is that there may be a temptation for cities and schools to fall back on old solutions and more comfortable ways of doing things. Not only will that handicap generations of students and teachers, it would trap us in the system that is now determined to be a failing system.

Dan Coleman: If we don't come out of these months of pandemic with some sharp ideas about how to make school better, then we should be ashamed. As ashamed as Noah after the flood, if he'd spent those awful 40 days and nights huddled with his children and the animals, and then left the ark knowing nothing he didn't know before. About what was wrong with the world he'd left, and what a better one might look like--what it means to be a family and part of a community; about who we let in and who we leave out.

Gregg Behr: The leadership differential really worries me going forward. And that's not necessarily bound to rich or poor, rural or urban – it's a leadership differential. I think one of our challenges is how do we make it easier for those districts that weren't experimenting with (redesigning their school) cultures, whether it be through Maker frameworks or other things, such that they can leapfrog forward in ways that are constructive and helpful.

Julie Critz: I would start with the leadership differential challenge that we heard from Gregg. I think there are so many pieces of this that go beyond strictly teaching, learning and academics that are all part of our education system involving the community. So, I'll go back to the leadership issue.

Kristen Watkins: I'm scared that we're going to jump too quickly to come up with prototypes or think of solutions, when we haven't really captured what's really happening. Do we know what just really happened?

Maurice Cox: I've been impressed by this forced experiment of distance learning that millions of young people and educators have had to go through that would have never ever happened without this crisis. Never let a crisis, an unfortunate crisis, go to waste is certainly a good take away. I would hope that it would be impossible to go back to normal, back to the status quo after such an audacious experiment.

Kumar Garg: I was looking at some of the writing that happened around the 1919 pandemic from a hundred years ago. The following decade, the way people built workplaces, building design – everything had this big arc of transformation. And if you had lived through the pandemic, you would not have thought the next decade would have completely changed the physical buildings that people lived in. I think we're just in the second inning of this long story.

Ashley Arhart: We're sensorial creatures. There are no pheromones coming through my screen. As a creative professional, one of the things I've learned about what I need in terms of human contact is the energy in the room ... which is as much a biochemical sort of stimulation as it is an intellectual one. I think what we're talking about is a wholesale reimagining of everything ... we should be ashamed of ourselves if we don't figure out how to leverage this tragedy. If we can't recover from it in a way that creates additional resiliency in all aspects of our life, that would be a tragedy, which is why I'm so excited to be having these conversations.