REIMAGINE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS PRESENTS

DESIGNING FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION

DECEMBER 1, 2020

reimagine
America's Schools
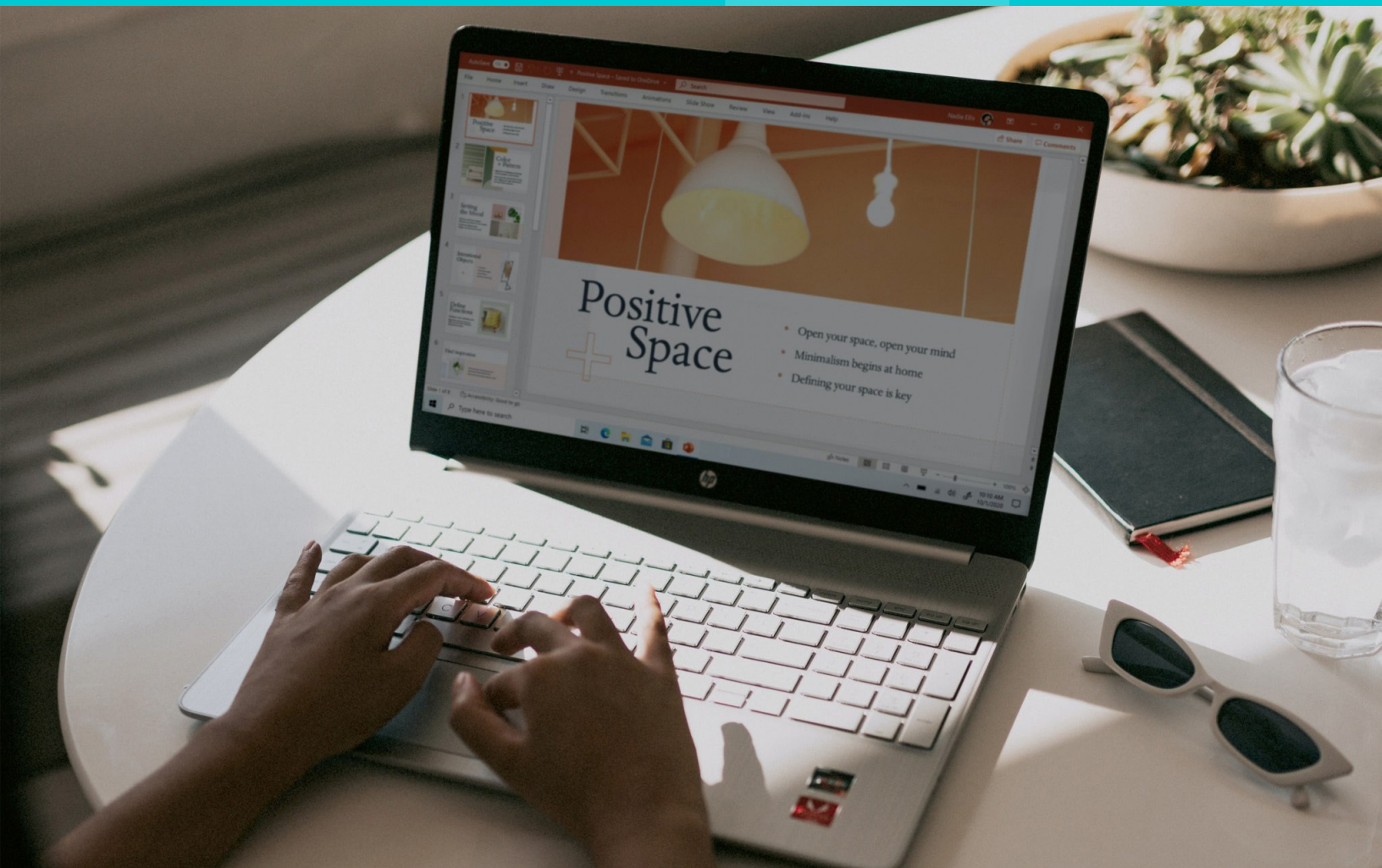
Co-Moderators:

Ron Bogle

Founder & CEO,
National Design Alliance

Team Leader,
Reimagine America's Schools

Joshua Elder

Director of Grants
Management,
Siegel Family Endowment

Panelists:

Steven Bingler

Founder and CEO,
Concordia

Kyle Conley

Chief Impact Officer/Educator,
Citizen Schools

Imani Day

Architect,
Gensler/NOMA

Dan Foreman

Associate Director of
Professional Learning,
Digital Promise

Patricia Joseph

Designer,
Cuningham Group
Architecture, Inc.

"Equity cannot be optional"

Can the design of a school actually support greater equity and inclusion? Can designers work with educators, funders, technologists, and students to create more inviting, fair, just and equitable places for learning?

Most K-12 schools and institutions approach the issues of equity and inclusion in terms of policy, funding, programs and standards. Rarely is the design of the environment or the process of design considered as a strategy for improving equity and inclusion. This is especially true in our public schools.

Reimagine America's Schools in association with the Siegel Family Endowment convened a panel of designers, educators, and technologists on December 1, 2020 to explore the practical and tangible ways that the learning environment can be designed to create a more equitable and inclusive space for students, families, teachers and staff. We assembled a diverse and distinguished panel of thought leaders, which led to a deep and engaging conversation.

From the outset it was clear that the Covid-19 pandemic and the new and impassioned call for racial justice have laid bare the deep structural inequities that permeate American society - including in public education. Imani Day captured the tone of the meeting best when she stated, "Equity cannot be optional" and as architects and designers "it is imperative that you push through and make sure that equity is at the forefront of your priorities, no matter how optional the surrounding group may make it seem."

There was a clear recognition that the condition of a particular school is often indicative of the condition of the larger community and its ability to survive and prosper. Too often everyone accepts as a given the poor conditions of school infrastructure in low income communities when it's clear that these conditions are unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

There is a great need for architects to "design with empathy" so that the resulting learning spaces fully reflect the needs of the community. This can only occur when architects recognize and appreciate community concerns through an authentic engagement process that allows for non-traditional voices to be heard, including those of teachers, students and the community. Such an engagement must involve more than a community meeting and design presentation. Inclusion relies on ongoing engagement and work with the community, whose knowledge and expertise must be tapped throughout the design process. Thus, leading to a design that truly meets community needs and reflects their values.

Designers also need to step back from the assumption that they always know best and recognize what might be described as their own "edifice complex" in building facilities. Steven Bingler noted that it is "hard for us as architects and urban designers to admit we don't know sometimes."

Joshua Elder, the Director of Grants Management at the Siegel Family Endowment, in a short follow up commentary on the discussion, wrote "humility is a key skill for the designers and architects charged with creating tomorrow's learning environments ...often, the most effective interventions are informed by a willingness to truly listen to voices from the community". Equity in design can best be achieved, then, through an inclusive and authentic process that reveals community values and aspirations.

Dan Foreman, rethinking the whole concept of school and letting go of the old notion of control, "all of these old schools were built around control as opposed to learning: this is the front of the classroom. This is where learning occurs. Everybody should look this way. I am in charge and I'm going to control everything that's happening here" Foreman went on "I've been in hundreds of schools in my career now, and I can walk in and know exactly what the culture of the school is, based off of walking through the building and just listening."

There was also an emphasis on the need for flexibility in the design process. Panelists noted the distinction between "soft design" and "hard design", the latter being defined as design required to meet code and ADA requirements. Soft design thinking was critical in creating space that is flexible and can be adapted, whether it is to create quiet zones for children or space for personalized learning.

Imani Day, who is working on rethinking how old public schools in Detroit can be repurposed stated "when you start to think about right-sizing, adaptability, flexibility, thinking about whether the spaces are actual schools or whether they're just spaces where sometimes learning can occur… you can go in different directions and repurpose the space for a library, coworking or housing." She went on. "I've seen that when Detroit public schools can be repurposed to something else, they can be really, really well-supported spaces. They can be, beautiful spaces when you really put the money into it, they can be housing, they can be anything really."

A robust discussion focused on how learning could take place anytime and anywhere, whether it is the hallway, the classroom, or in the community. There is no need to be boxed in by the assumption that learning only takes place in the classroom at a set time each day. A panelist challenged members of the audience to recount the biggest learning experience in their lives and noted as the chat room filled up with commentary that the classroom was never where the most memorable learning ever seemed to take place.

Ultimately, as Steven Bingler said, "if our goal is the most powerful learning possible, then why wouldn't we look at the entire community as the opportunity for that experience?" The school could be seen as a hub for food, transportation, access to technology, and personalized learning, supporting learning opportunities as well as the need to have social and emotional connections that come with in person learning.

The COVID pandemic and passionate demands for equity and inclusion will have a profound impact on how we design the next generation of schools. Equity and inclusion should become new watchwords for the design community and a new and rising generation of architects.

What we have discovered through our conversations during the past year is the outline of new thinking about learning communities. Technology has been a major dynamic and driver in changing public education for many years now but we have seen how technology still falls short in meeting the needs of our most impoverished students. While the massive transfer of personal computers and new efforts to improve internet access in poor communities helped to close the digital equity gap there are still millions of poor and working class students who do not have full access to the digital tools that the well off have always taken for granted. In time the penetration of technology to these communities may, in turn, create new learning hubs that serve all members of the community and create new opportunities that can only be imagined.

Learning, then, can move into the community, and the community in its own way can become the school. The stand alone school facility will always remain very important, but one can see it take on a new role as the central hub connected by smart tech networks to learning centers seeded throughout the community. These small learning centers can be used for apprenticeships, maker spaces, CTE programs and extra out-of-school learning time that will be so necessary for millions of students who have fallen behind because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Teachers, in turn, may move their classroom beyond the four walls and become a more active presence in the community. These new design efforts connecting school to the community can help to support new efforts to improve equity and inclusion and underscore our recognition as architects and designers that equity cannot be optional.