



INSTITUTE FOR
THE FUTURE
OF LEARNING

Three Truths *for the future* of Education

A CALL TO ACTION — WE NEED YOU!



**We are living through an inflection point—
a wake-up call, a call that has the potential
to bring about a fundamental reordering and
rebuilding of the entire education system.**

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is reasonable to expect that all children should have free access to a system of learning that is grounded in the latest research for how human beings learn, grow, and thrive, and one that mirrors, honors, and nurtures all children—a flexible system that prepares children with the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind to navigate and thrive in our unpredictable world.

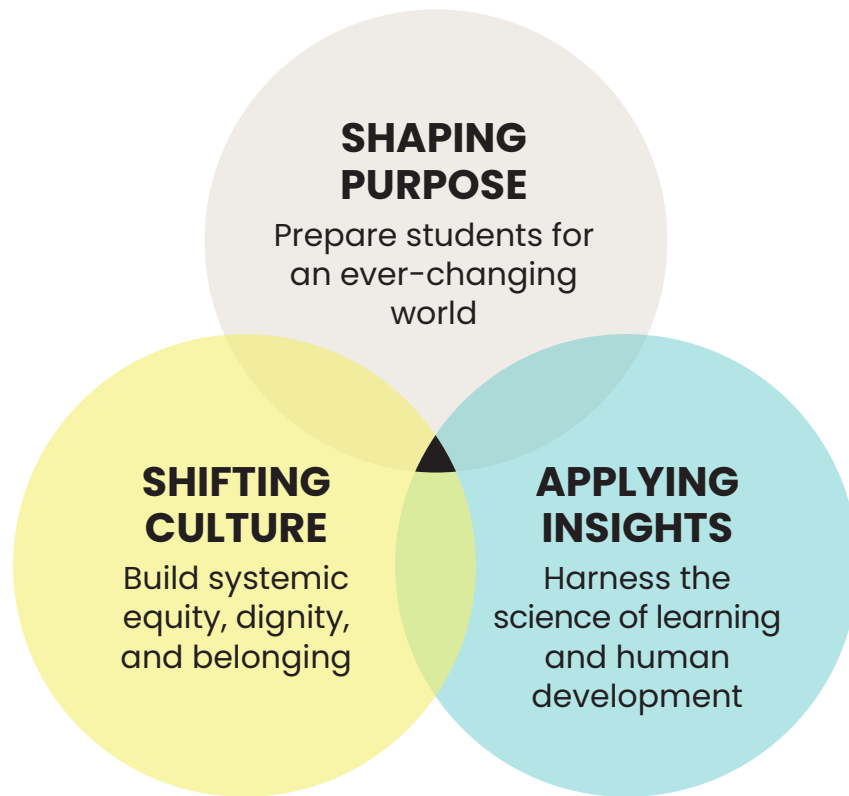


It is also reasonable to expect that all adults within that system of learning are provided the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive as the mission driven professionals they are. We cannot change the heart of the system without enabling the hearts and minds of those who give their all every single day to make the education system work.

What is it going to take to truly change and rebuild our system of learning for the future? A future where the children and adults, who design, facilitate, and support their learning, are thriving?

We need to face and embrace the truths before us and come together to do the work that is in our heads and hearts to do. The Three Truths framework provides a succinct and clear way to think through the enormous challenges that the education system faces today.

The Three Truths Framework



TRUTH # 1

The education system needs to prepare all children with the skills, knowledge, and/or habits of mind to thrive amidst an ever-changing world.

What are the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that will enable our children to not just survive but thrive amidst an ever-changing world? There is a growing consensus that skills such as complex problem-solving, systems thinking, self-efficacy, creativity, and collaboration should be front and center in a modern-day curriculum.¹ But very few schools have made the shift to center these skills, and the pace of change in our world is accelerating at such a pace, our human capabilities are struggling to keep up.



Technological change is exponential while human adaptation is linear.² The recent explosion of ChatGPT is just one example of the exponential rate of technological change: It took Twitter two years to reach one million users, Facebook seven months, and ChatGPT just five days.³

Today's education system, for the most part, seeks to prepare children for a predictable, certain world. It still largely advocates the importance of passing a series of standardized tests that will lead to college, which leads to a series of middle-class jobs and a relatively stable life. We know this is no longer true. Even if a child does follow the rules of the system and excels within it, there is no guarantee of a job or even that college is the best path in the first place.

1 Julie Wilson, *The Human Side of Changing Education: How to Lead Change with Clarity, Conviction, and Courage* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin, A SAGE Company, 2018).

2 Heather McGowan and Chris Shipley, *The Adaptation Advantage: Let Go, Learn Fast, and Thrive in the Future of Work* (Wiley, 2020).

3 Heather Bucholtz, "ChatGPT Sprints to One Million Users," Statista, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/chart/29174/time-to-one-million-users/>.

***We are kept from our goal not by obstacles
but by a clear path to a lesser goal.***

—Robert Brault

Learned helplessness and a reliance on outdated institutions are not the stated outcomes of education, but, too often, are the result. The compliance and control inherent in many of the system’s structures actively restrict administrators and teachers from doing the work they know needs to be done. We need to move away from the consumption and test-based recall of static knowledge and commit to a renewed system of education that aligns pedagogy, structures, processes, and budgets in support of much more meaningful aims.

Schools and school districts such as Lindsay Unified School District and Da Vinci Schools in California, Bullitt County Public Schools in Kentucky, Northern Cass School District in North Dakota, and Kettle Moraine School District in Wisconsin are leading great work. We need more of these.⁴

4 NGLC, “Exploring Portrait of a Graduate in Practice across the U.S.: How Students Develop the Skills & Competencies in a Portrait of a Graduate,” Next Generation Learning Challenges, 2023. <https://www.nextgenlearning.org/portrait-of-a-graduate-in-practice>.



TRUTH # 2

The education system perpetuates inequitable ways of thinking, being, and doing.

There isn't a community, city, state, country, or region in the world that isn't struggling with **systemic inequity** and its impact on how schools are designed and managed. Deeply rooted inequities persist across not only curricular and pedagogical domains, such as what we choose to teach and how it is taught, but also how we assess learning, admission practices, school funding, sports, how we integrate schools into communities, and even how buildings are designed. The depth and pervasiveness of inequities can seem overwhelming. Meeting ourselves and each other where we are while still pushing forward is the challenge of our time. Deep and horrific issues of fairness are difficult to face. How do we begin to address the gulf of where we are now compared to where we need to be?

For too long, education writ large has upheld a narrow, socially constructed model of "excellence." This model of education was accepted and rarely questioned. Previous diversity efforts too often tinkered on the periphery but did little to address the systemic inequity and often made things worse, not better.



The work of addressing systemic inequity requires painful and necessary conversations with everyone in the school community; it requires each of us to not only understand our role in being part of the solution but to take action; it requires the dismantling and rebuilding of the system as we know it.

At the core of this work lies **relationships**—with ourselves and our identity and with each other. We have to ask ourselves the tough questions and be okay with discomfort. Solutions require deep reflection, the ability to make mistakes, learning from those mistakes, and changing our practices, habits, processes, and structures. It requires a level of emotional maturity that many of us need to develop further. We must face the uncomfortable truths while understanding deeply that, as human beings, we all crave belonging and worthiness. Everyone is worthy of dignity.



We must intentionally build school structures and cultures that foster dignity and belonging for all children and adults alike, that honor diversity of knowing and being, and that enable us all to see and leverage difference as the asset that it is. Districts such as those in Kentucky and Vermont are leading great work.⁵ We need more.

⁵ Jennifer Poon and Paul Leather, *Road Signs from a New Path Forward*. Center for Innovation Moving Forward, April 2023. https://fbcfbdb7-de72-4e6a-a29b-9d96161f3cd7.usfiles.com/ugd/fbcfbd_af17b75e988745e2bc5cb5ec17141fe7.pdf.

TRUTH # 3

The education system does not practice the best of what the science of learning and human development has revealed.

How are new **skills, knowledge, and habits of mind** best learned? Not by six or seven hours of lectures, or a schedule crammed with advanced placement courses or extracurricular activities. There is no shortage of research of how human beings learn, develop, grow, and thrive, and yet much of it is not reflected in many of today's schools.

Here are a few examples of how education today tends to ignore what we know to be true about how we learn:

ACADEMIC LEARNING IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO OUR EMOTIONS.

We continue to treat **emotion** and **cognition** as two separate buckets with cognition repeatedly prioritized over emotions or mental well-being. "We expect students who feel unsafe in the classroom to be able to learn and then identify them as 'deficient' academically if they don't. We don't allow a student to miss algebra class for a counseling session because algebra is 'more important,' even if the student is in distress. We acknowledge the emotional toll of the pandemic on staff, yet we don't make any substantive changes in practice."⁶

QUALITY SLEEP PLAYS A FUNDAMENTAL ROLE IN LEARNING, yet most children today are chronically tired. "When schools fail to understand how **memory** works and the role that REM sleep plays in the consolidation process, they create schedules that start too early in the morning, extend sports events too late in the evening, and they miss opportunities to educate parents and caregivers (and students themselves!) about the importance of uninterrupted sleep for academic success."⁷

⁶ Margaret A. Lee, 2021. Personal communication.

⁷ Margaret A. Lee, 2021.

LEARNING REQUIRES MULTIPLE AND VARIED APPLICATIONS IN ORDER TO LEARN DEEPLY. We have the opportunity to move beyond superficial coverage of content and into **deep meaning-making** that is transferable and durable. We need to stop organizing curriculum by topic and instead focus on the deeper concepts of each discipline. Learning that is disconnected is easily forgotten. Many curricular resources need to be revised to ensure that students are attending to the deeper structural patterns of each area of study.⁸



We used to think that academic learning was a separate entity from emotions, relationships, cultural context, physical health, views of oneself in the world, and the learning environment. We now know these are completely intertwined and inseparable.

School districts such as Frederick County Public Schools in Maryland and Delta County Joint School District in Colorado are leading great work. We need more of these.⁹

⁸ Julie Stern et al., *Learning that Transfers: Designing Curriculum for a Changing World*. (Thousand Oaks: Corwin, A SAGE Company, 2021.)

⁹ FCPS: Frederick County Public Schools. "FCPS Named Innovative District by The International Center for Leadership in Education." May 16, 2023. <https://www.fcps.org/about/news/1766848/fcps-named-innovative-district-by-the-international-center-for-leadership-in-education>; Delta County Joint School District 50J. Home Page, (n.d.). Accessed on June 13, 2023. <https://www.deltaschools.com/en-US#0>.

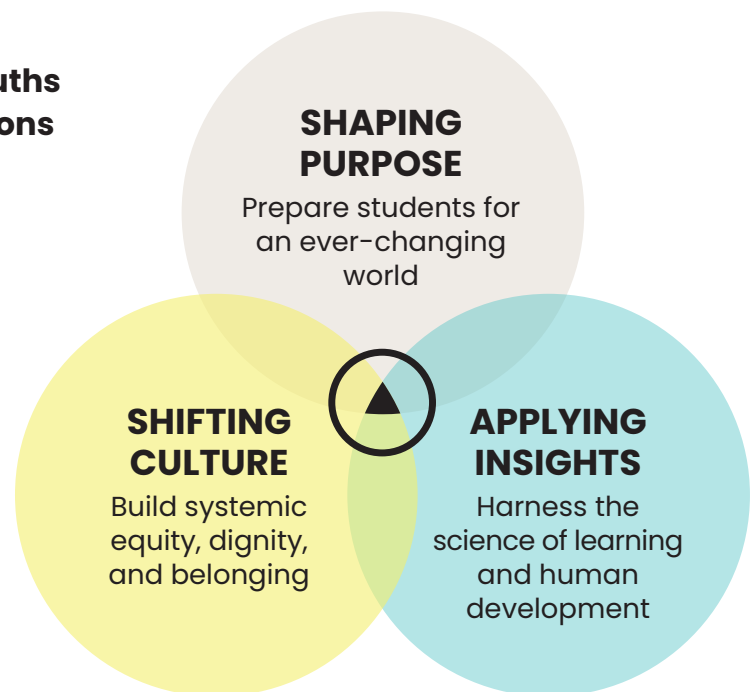
BUILDING A NEW SYSTEM

How might these truths enable us to lead meaningful and sustainable changes and build something better? These truths provide the lens or filter through which the most important decisions should be made. Moreover, the **intersection** of all Three Truths is where truly powerful decisions lie.

The Three Truths framework provides a succinct and clear way to think through the enormous challenges that school leaders and teachers face today. What are the most impactful decisions? **Figure 2** shows the high priority district and school level decisions that lie at the intersection of each of the Three Truths, and **Figure 3** provides a planning tool for your own work and/or that of your team.

FIGURE 2
The Intersection of the Three Truths and District/School Level Decisions

- What’s worth learning?
- How is it best learned?
- How do we know it has been learned?
- How can we support teachers to do this?
- How do I (and we) lead the change?





As you review the previous questions, what are your answers?

Given your school or district’s **current** practices, what are the answers? What would you **like** the answers to be?

Too often, the well-intended statements in a school’s or district’s strategic plan are not translated in a tactical way, i.e., a way that transforms practice, systems, and structures to meet the aims of the plan. **Figure 3** is a planning tool to help you and your team translate those strategic plan priorities into transformative action.

Use this tool to identify currently aligned practices and brainstorm priorities.

Your school or district is probably not starting from zero—there are likely pockets of aligned practice happening in your school or district. Find them, shine a light on them, and grow them. Notice which questions hold the most energy for you and where you most want to focus. Ask the same questions of your colleagues or your team.

FIGURE 3: Planning Tool
 Translating the Three Truths and School/District Level Decisions into Action

	Prepare Students for an Ever-Changing World	Build Systemic Equity, Dignity & Belonging	Harness the Science of Learning & Human Development
<p>CURRICULUM What's worth learning?</p>			
<p>PEDAGOGY How is it best learned?</p>			
<p>ASSESSMENT How do we know it has been learned?</p>			
<p>TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT How can we unleash teacher talent in support of this learning?</p>			
<p>CHANGE LEADERSHIP How do I and we lead the change?</p>			

A CALL TO ACTION—WE NEED YOU

How might each of us take this forward? How might you lead meaningful change either inside or outside the system? There is no cookie-cutter solution, but there are incredible examples of transformative work underway.

In addition to the examples previously noted above, organizations such as The Open System Institute, Next Generation Learning Challenges, Transcend, Battelle for Kids, the Mastery Transcript Consortium, and the Center for Innovation in Education are leading the way in igniting, facilitating, and supporting a fundamental reordering of the system. These organizations show us what is possible, and we need many more people and organizations inside and outside of the system to lead the work that is in their heart to lead.

The reality is we need hundreds of thousands of people working to change the status quo. **There is no singular intervention that will move us from a century-plus, old, stagnant bureaucracy to a flexible, responsive system that unleashes human potential. There is no single policy, new school model, AI tool, charismatic leader, test, or piece of research that will precipitate the level of change that we need. It will take many, many people working at all levels inside and outside of the institution if we are to see real sustainable change within this decade.**



We need educators, administrators, students, business leaders, policymakers, researchers, parents, grandparents, and all enthusiasts of lifelong, life-wide learning to do the work that is in their hearts to rebuild teaching and learning for the modern era.



These Three Truths provide change makers with a framework or lens to actively design and build a new system of education. If this resonates with you, know that your work matters, and we need you to do it. May we all be part of not just a rising consensus of what needs to change but also a rising tide of hundreds of thousands of people doing something about it with humility, with heart, and with faith.

This publication is amended from an original 2022 publication by Julie Jungalwala and Julie Stern.



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With heartfelt thanks to Ann Koufman-Frederick, Ewan McIntosh, and Denis Stewart for their incredibly helpful feedback on earlier drafts, to Diane Walters for her superlative editing skills, and to Dolores Cavanagh whose design expertise made it beautiful.

