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Imagining September:

ONLINE DESIGN CHARRETTES FOR FALL 2020 PLANNING WITH STUDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

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Executive Summary

In May 2020, we conducted four online design charrettes with school and district leaders, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders to translate design-based practices for leading school change into an online context. In this report, we present two meeting protocols: one for multi-stakeholder meetings and one primarily for students. To accompany these protocols, we have sample agenda, online workbooks, and sample notes and exercises from our discussion to help school and district leaders facilitate these kinds of meetings in their own local contexts.

The goal of these meetings was to identify shared values and priorities for reopening schools, to build stakeholder engagement, to seed stakeholder leadership and involvement, and to develop new ideas and structures for reopening schools. In particular, we were interested in "tentpole" ideas, structures and routines that could define a reopening plan and provide an organizational frame for the hundreds of smaller curricular, programmatic, and logistical decisions that will need to be made next year. In a linked report-- "Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools during Covid-19"--we have published "storyboards" for a variety of school reopening ideas and structures inspired by the participants in our charrettes.

Re-opening schools in the fall will be a community-wide effort, requiring leadership, innovation, and experimentation from all parts of school systems. Including diverse stakeholders early in the process of imagining September will bring forth a community's best ideas and invite people through the system to join the work of retooling schools for the challenging year ahead.



Introduction

The work of reopening schools in September is complex and uncertain. As school leaders tackle the work of redesigning systems, they face the challenge of balancing two sets of competing tensions. First, schools need a few key shared principles and structures and many small decisions, experiments, and adaptations. Second, while some of those decisions should be made by administrators to reduce the decision-making burden for faculty, many of those small decisions should be made by people closest to the problem.

School leaders need two major kinds of tools for this work of balancing overarching structures with lots of small decisions: checklists and tentpoles. In recent weeks, technical assistance organizations in education support and reform have generated a number of very useful checklists for thinking through all of the different elements of re-opening schools. We provide an Appendix of a few of these lists at the end. Checklists are good tools for making lots of small decisions centrally or communicating to stakeholders all of the small decisions that need to be made locally. Tentpoles are big ideas, principles, and structures--held in common throughout an organization--that create a shared space for smaller decisions and smaller experiments. This report is primarily about standing up tentpoles.

The key principles and common structures that will organize and define school reopening plans need to be collaboratively developed. Diverse stakeholders need to have a hand in shaping these tentpole ideas and structures so that they believe in them, take ownership for them, and use them to conduct local experiments and make local adaptations in the service of a common set of goals. The way to develop these tentpole ideas, therefore, is through a process of collaborative, multi-stakeholder design. This report proceeds in four parts. We start with a framing section that highlights prior research on leading organizations through periods of complexity and uncertainty. Then, we describe two kinds of experiments in online collaborative planning, what we call online design charrettes. The first model of charrette involves co-design with students--the only people in the American educational system who have lived through and studied during a global pandemic. The second model of charrette involves co-design with a broader set of stakeholders. In each model, we provide guidance, protocols, online resources and workbooks, and example outputs.

We end with a set of design principles that emerged from our four conversations. In a second publication, "Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools during Covid-19," we describe some of the key ideas that have emerged from this work.

Leading Schools through Uncertainty: Co-Design for Shared Structures and Local Adaptation

The defining characteristic of the forthcoming school year is uncertainty. What will the spread of COVID-19 look like in August of 2020? What will we understand about virus transmission in school contexts? Will parents trust schools? What will federal and state guidance look like, and how will that guidance change? What resources will schools have available to address new challenges? How effective will teaching and learning be in school buildings adhering to new health and safety guidelines? How effective will remote teaching and learning be after the hard lessons of this past spring?

The answers to many of these questions remain in a fog, and the consequences of this uncertainty are far-reaching to every tiny corner of education systems: How should we schedule? How should we eat? How should we sit? How should we modify curriculum from our day care centers through our vocational programs? From this fog, a first-order question emerges: how do we lead schools through periods of uncertainty?

Researchers who study management and leadership in highly complex and uncertain situations argue that the <u>right organizational form</u> for these circumstances is one that is <u>modular and adaptive</u>. When you don't know exactly what is going to work, you want to let people close to the ground innovate, iterate, and make sensible adaptations as they gather evidence about what helps or hinders learning. You keep what works, and seek to spread it, and you abandon what doesn't work. Most of these experiments should happen in "local" settings: a single classroom, lesson plan, extracurricular club project, or other small division of complex school systems. Yet part of leadership's role is to connect those innovations so what develops benefits from shared learning and gains coherence over time.

Good design often involves holding <u>competing ideas in tension</u>, and the most salient tension in designing for uncertainty is that local experimentation requires common, steadfast principles. Iterative, local experimentation can culminate in more robust, effective systems <u>only if people have a set of shared</u> <u>principles that allow everyone to travel in the same direction</u>. In the absence of that common direction, local innovation will produce incoherence.

Shared, basic structures are also important for creating a foundation where experimentation can happen. Some of the hard lessons from remote learning this spring, for instance, happened in schools that allowed expansive experimentation with technology platforms. When individual teachers chose which technologies to use with their individual classes, confusion reigned among parents and students. Picking a common technology platform and developing a common interface across grades and subjects, for example, makes it possible for students and parents to focus on the content of the work rather than navigating websites and tracking lost passwords. Common structures enable organizational learning; if districts mandate common schedules for every school, it is more possible to learn across schools than it would be if every school developed its own schedule. At the same time, people will resent what they perceive as constraints imposed from above, whereas they tend to "own what they create," so any common requirements should be few in number, and developed through a process that involves considerable input from those affected by it.

Schools that succeed in reinventing themselves for a year of hybrid learning will have a small number of steadfast key principles and common structures that support lots of local experimentation. Collaborative, multi-stakeholder design helps with both sides of the balance. Participatory co-design will build a shared commitment to common principles and structures. It will also empower leaders and innovators throughout the system to experiment and test how these principles can be enacted in different corners of the system.

Checklists and Tentpoles:

Balancing Small Decisions and Big Structures

Re-opening schools during a pandemic requires that institutions make a bewildering array of decisions. What are our shared norms of student chat during video conferences? How many students will be allowed on buses? How do we re-teach missed lessons from last year? Where will we put hand sanitizing stations? What will happen to students who show symptoms during school? What sports can still be played? What should our grading policies be if a second wave requires full school closures again?

Here we find another design tension: While schools need to make dozens or hundreds of changing, it can only communicate a few key ideas to all stakeholders. Teachers, parents, and students will not closely read a new handbook detailing the 142 new changes and practices for 2020-2021; they will only be able attend to a small number of key organizational ideas.

Our online design charrettes were focused on identifying key principles and organizational structures that could help organize a school response. We certainly allowed participants to discuss and design specific details of a reopening plan--as the specific parts of a reopening plan can help illustrate the whole--but as facilitators we tried to steer the conversation and reflection towards "tentpole ideas" and designs that could organize a whole-school response. For example, here are three tentpole ideas that emerged in our design meetings:

Advisories

Organize students into groups of 1 adult and 8-12 students, and have this adult responsible for streamlining communication and instruction with this smaller group of students. Reorganize a comprehensive middle or high school around many smaller "one-room schoolhouses"





Building Time For Electives and Extracurriculars:

Resist the temptation to use school time to double-down on test-prep and remediation, and ensure that at least 50% of the precious use of in-school time is spent on electives, extracurriculars, and the parts of school that foster motivation and relationships.

Microschools

Encourage parents to form "Microschools" with 3-5 other families. During remote learning, parents can take turns providing supervision and support, and these groups can be the basis of play groups and friendship networks. Schools might allow microschool communities to have students attend in-person days on the same schedules.



Each of these ideas is big enough to organize substantial parts of a school reopening plan. A school committed to making advisories the tentpole of a fall 2020 school plan could organize instruction, communication, transportation, classroom assignment, recess activities, in-person school day assignment and many other facets of a school-redesign around the principle that advisory groups could form the central unit of re-imagined remote or hybrid schooling. If school communities make a shared commitment to one or two of these tentpole ideas, then all of the other small decisions to be made can align with these key principles and structures.

The two design charette protocols that follow are designed to surface a wide range of ideas, some of which may be good ideas for small programmatic changes and others of which may be important enough to become tentpoles to organize a school redesign. For those familiar with design thinking models, our charrette protocols cover the first half of a design thinking cycle: understanding stakeholders, identifying shared needs and challenges, and imagining potential solutions. At the end of this document, we make some further suggestions about prototyping, testing, evaluating, and refining new ideas that emerge from the charettes.

Fall Planning with Students

Key Links: <u>Pre-Work Template</u> <u>Workshop Slide Template</u>

There is exactly one generation of American students who have participated in remote learning during extended school closures: the students enrolled in our courses and classrooms this past year. Adults have all kinds of wisdom and expertise in teaching and education, but none of us have experience as learners during a pandemic. Our students have an intimate perspective on what works and what doesn't during remote learning. School leaders who want to mount effective approaches for next year need to incorporate student perspectives in their planning. Active outreach to a wide range of students--not just the most active student leaders--is the best way to bring diverse voices and perspectives into the planning process.

With Neema Avashia, a Civics teacher from the McCormick Middle School in Boston, we developed one protocol for an hour long online design meeting with students. We asked students three questions to prepare for the session:

- 1. What are the best experiences—the things you love most--in school?
- 2. What do you need from school to be successful? and
- 3. What parts of school would be OK to do without in September?

Students brainstormed answers to these questions and placed initial ideas in categories ranging from safety, community, schoolwork, courses, schedules, and extracurriculars (<u>Pre-Work Template Here</u>).

The next day, we gathered for an Imagining September Power Hour (<u>Workshop Slides Here</u>) a 60 minute zoom conversation mapping out possible futures for next year. We invited two current high school students to come back as guest facilitators to help facilitate discussion and provide our younger students with a broader perspective.

We promised students that we'd take their ideas seriously and share them widely with decision makers in the district and beyond. And as we have experienced so many times with young people, when you promise to take their ideas seriously, they respond seriously, and they pour forth their honest truths and their best insights.

In our too-short hour, students came up with terrific, actionable plans for getting the best possible start to the year. Students could record virtual tours for incoming 6th graders. The precious first hours spent on campus should be focused on forging relationships and building the trust that sustains online communications. Students should each get one adult mentor who can help streamline and sort through the barrage of communications and assignments from different subject teachers, tutors, and specialists. Schools should explore gaming environments, like Minecraft or Fortnite, where some students might gather for online meetings or where "rec leagues" could form for students and teachers to team up and socialize.



Students also came up with ideas that at first sounded off-the-wall. One young woman suggested that she wanted to be able "click one button to get help from a teacher." In school, students can raise their hands and an adult comes right by their side. What could that look like online? We're not sure exactly sure where that button could go or what it could do. Could it be a browser toolbar link, preinstalled on student chromebooks, that took students to a chat room or video conference room staffed by teachers or volunteers 18 hours a day? Could it fire off a text message to an on-duty staff member asking them to check in? Even if the solution isn't obvious, deeply understanding student needs is the first step towards fulfilling them.

As the summer unfolds, schools should consider hiring a team of students and staff to conduct these focus groups throughout the vacation period. We found it particularly powerful to have a sketch artist on the team, to capture student thinking, and create documentation that invites consideration and reflection.

There will be so many new routines and practices to be created this fall; school leadership teams will need all of the help they can get from students, staff, and families to create these new experiences. Online design meetings are a natural way to identify student leaders who can help bring new clubs, new rituals, new teaching practices, and new routines to life. Students are more likely to commit to the hard work of blended remote learning if they know that these new models were built by students, faculty, and school leaders together.

Fall Planning with Multi-Stakeholder Design Charrettes

Key Links: Online Workbook Template

Students have a unique voice in planning for the fall, and they deserve their own space to share their perspectives on fall planning. But many other stakeholders also should be included in fall designs—parents, teachers, IT staff, department heads, principals and others. There is simply too much work to be done for the fall for everything to be centrally planned and executed from the district office or principal's office. Stakeholder design meetings can invite diverse perspectives, create a shared set of values and priorities for planning the school year, empower community members to take leadership roles in developing new practices, plans, and resources for the fall.

In the last decade, many educators have participated in workshops that use design-based methods to identify challenges, surface values, and imagine and prototype solutions. These meetings are typically held in physical settings, using whiteboards, chart paper, and sticky notes to make group thinking visible. These workshops can help schools set priorities, imagine new programs and strategies, and encourage stakeholders to commit to the work of continuous improvement.

These kinds of meetings may not happen in-person for some time, so we brought together three groups of education stakeholders: parents, teachers, mayors, superintendents, principals, and students to test a set of online protocols for fall planning meetings to Imagine September.

Preparing for Design Charrettes

In advance of each meeting we:

- Invited a diverse set of stakeholders with different perspectives and institutional positions for a 2-3 hour working meeting
- 2. Prepared an "online workbook" (<u>template here</u>) to help facilitate the meeting, create a shared discussion space, and to create a record of the event
- 3. Arranged for a sketch artist or other notetaker to help record the events of the meeting.
- 4. Asked participants to do a short writing assignment as pre-work: write a diary entry from the point of view of a student sometime during the first month of the next school year.

The new schedule is weird, and a bunch of my friends don't really like it, but I think they will get used to it. They really don't know how good things are in our school compared to living in a refugee camp like we did when I was ten. Because of the second wave that hit us in August, our school started September with a 40% capacity face to face schedule. I was given Monday, half of Wednesday and a half-day flex on either Thursday or Friday for my in-school times. The rest is virtual. It's actually pretty cool. This will actually help me with my capstone project which I started last year. It was tough but I wanted to explore how my community dealt with food insecurity but bring my perspective as a Syrian-Canadian to it. This will help with my actual job and volunteer job at the foodbank.

My first semester English and History 12 teachers were pretty receptive to me integrating this experience into their classes, and told me that they were team teaching and had some ideas about how I could use my personal experience as well as my current job to fulfill some of their course outcomes. Pretty cool. I know this year will be tough, especially because of physical distancing. At least for now we can't have any more that 40% of the students in the school at any one time. I think it will just force us to make the best of the face to face timer we have with each other.

Fictional journal entry from the perspective of a Syrian refugee student in a Canadian high school.

During Design Charrettes

During each meeting, we guided participants through five exercises:

- 1. We had participants introduce themselves, and share one priority that they feel is vitally important in planning for next year. Participants shared these priorities through their diary entries, or just through their thoughts and reflections. These introductions ensured that everyone could share one "top-of-mind" idea or concern at the beginning of each session.
- 2. We had participants list their top five values that they hope schools will prioritize next year. We asked participants to delineate whether they thought these were new values (N) or established (E) values. Then we asked participants to "boost" 3-5 values that they also agreed would be important, by adding a +1 to other participant's contributions. We then invited folks to look for patterns, identify lone entries that seemed important, and to discuss what kinds of values should guide the process for planning in the fall.

	0	0	
Alfred	Generosity	Ν	+1, TT
"	Curiosity	Ν	SP
"	Agency	Ν	+1
"	Belonging	Ν	
u	Empathy	Ν	NH
Lauren	Passion	Ν	+1, JM
u	Confidence	Ν	
u	Accountability	E/N	
u	Equality	E	
u	Empathy	Ν	+1, AS

Values, marked as New or Established, from two participants, with "boosts" from fellow participants.



Values from an entire charrette group entered into a word cloud.

3. We then asked participants to list their top five challenges, problems or opportunities for rethinking in the next year. Again, we had participants "boost" other issues that they felt were important, and then we discussed.

Kevin	Fear of change	NH, McD
u	Too many voices for change, decreasing opportunities to execute effectively	LO
u	Many stakeholders want to see something different	KF
"	Increased opportunities for developing independent learners	KF
u	Decreased opportunities for in person socialization for all students	
Sumbul	Meeting needs of youngest learners and vulnerable students	SPTT, McD, KF, KB
u	Impacts on service delivery for students with disabilities	KF
		0.01/5
"	Family Engagement	SPKF
<i>u</i>	Family Engagement Learning loss	NH

Problems from two participants, with "boosts" from fellow participants.



Challenges from an entire charrette group entered into a word cloud.

4. We then asked participants to work individually for about 15 minutes to propose a set of metaphors of what school could be next year. (Since this was the mid-point, we also encouraged folks to take a break and meet personal needs during this time). We found that when we asked schools to brainstorm specific ideas for next year, they sometimes became focused on smaller changes in particular grades, disciplines, or dimensions of school. Starting the conversation with a focus on metaphors opened a creative space and helped participants focus on the big picture. When participants finished individual brainstorming, they put their best notes in a shared workbook, and participants upvoted their favorite ideas.

Raised bed gardens school +1+1+1+1+1

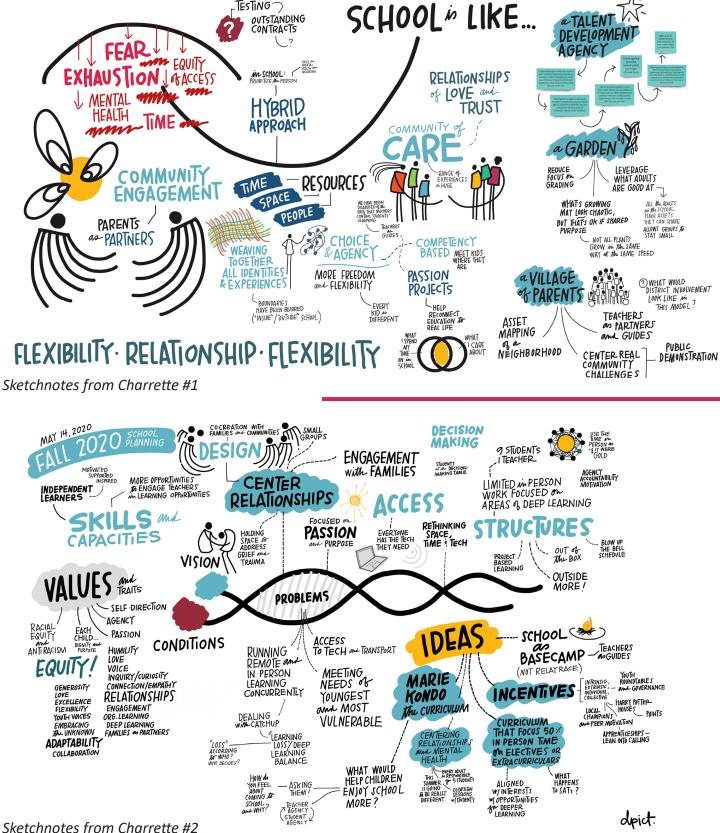
- Tended by adults who help to cultivate the soil of **ideas** that would need to be created and fleshed out for students
- Mostly individual learning when out of school but shepherded by adults
- Planted seeds of ideas for further learning but with some choice of how to show learning individually, in a group, through writing,video,3D modeling
- Nurtured in process by the gardener (teacher) through individual meetings/written feedback

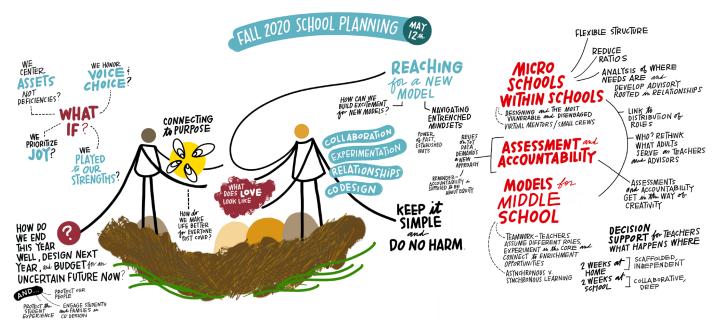
Outdoor event school- blankets on the hill at a concert

- Students working across grades/classes
- Adults working more by skill than by chronological age shepherding and nurturing the learning of multiple ages of students through projects and skills lessons
- Common theme of the event, but playing out differently depending on the vantage point and resources of the learner/listener - multiple entry points and low floor high ceiling types of projects given to students to work on
- Wrapped in a social and emotional blanket of relationship and caring for individual students shown by adult contact points mentoring, teaching, small group, whole group
- Using community partners as guides as well, thinking about who might be available to join in the learning

Participant notes about possible metaphors for next year.

5. Once participants generated some of these metaphors, we put them into small working groups to discuss with colleagues how they could bring these metaphors to life through concrete designs and practices. Participants should consider designing not just for the "average" student, but for a variety of different students, especially those who are marginalized by school systems. After the small group meetings, we gathered back together, shared ideas and designs. We had a pair of visual note-takers working with us, helping track the conversations and visualize new ideas.





Sketchnotes from Charrette #3

6. For school and district leaders running these kinds of meetings, the concluding debrief would be a good time to solicit commitments from participants to continue ongoing design and improvement work, or to take the lead in planning or prototyping new ideas and approaches for next year.

After the Design Charrettes

Immediately following the design charrette, we encourage facilitators to identify three kinds of outputs:

- 1. Promising key values and principles that could guide further development
- 2. Promising key ideas and structures that could serve as tentpoles for ongoing development
- 3. Promising ideas, structures, or routines that could be one component of a comprehensive response, that could be developed and refined by leadership teams or stakeholders

Next Steps: Prototyping and Storyboards

Our design charrette protocols are designed to generate new ideas and plans, and the next step is to take the most promising ideas and find ways to prototype and test them. This prototyping can take make forms. For districts running summer schools or enrichment programs, these could be ideal testbeds to start right away in trying out new ideas. In places where programming is on hiatus, school teams could develop artifacts representing new ideas: sample schedules, lessons, activities, and so forth, and then show or demonstrate them to students, teachers, and parents as a way of soliciting feedback on potential ideas.

One form of prototyping is "storyboarding," generating short vignettes of how different stakeholders might experience a new plan, program, or idea. In a second report, "Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools during Covid-19," we share over 20 storyboards that we developed based on our charrette experiences. These storyboards could be used to kickstart new brainstorming, to evaluate responses to a diverse set of reopening ideas, and ultimately to develop that could be used to spark prototypes of new routines, structures, and programs to support schools in Imagining September.

Charrette Participants

We gratefully acknowledge the ideas, feedback, and contributions from the following participants in our online design charrettes:

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Shawn Rubin	Highlander Institute
Shanna Peebles	Harvard Graduate School of Education (Prior: National Teacher of the Year)
Tyler Thigpen	The Forest School & The Institute of Self Directed Learning
Kristen Ferris	Lincoln Public School parent and K-12 consultant on school district resource strategy
Kevin Bryant	Harvard Graduate School of Education (Prior: Principal, NYC Public Schools)
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Tamir Harper	UrbEd
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Appendix: School reopening checklists

Many states will be publishing similar documents in the weeks ahead. We present these four as examples.

Transcend School Reopening Playbook:

https://www.transcendeducation.org/recovery-to-reinvention-playbook

American Enterprise Institute Blueprint for Back to School:

https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/a-blueprint-for-back-to-school/

National Charter School Institute:

https://nationalcharterschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reopening-Schools-Checklist.pdf

Louisiana School Reopening Checklist:

https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/strong-start-2020/school-reopening-guidelinesand-resources.pdf