Healing, Community, and Humanity:

How Students and Teachers Want to Reinvent Schools Post-COVID

IMAGINING SEPTEMBER

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Three Scenarios for K-12 Schools Post-COVID

With the enormous success of the U.S. vaccination campaign, it seems increasingly clear that nearly every student who wants to will be able to return to school in-person in the fall. The signature question that our education system faces at every level is: *What kinds of schools will students go back to?*

The national discussion seems to be revolving around two possible scenarios for next year and beyond. The first is *status quo ante pandemus*: that is, to try to return schools as they were in February of 2020. This is a natural impulse—after a year of isolation, pods, and masks, it is not surprising that many want to return to school as it was.

A second scenario, *remediating learning loss* has become particularly popular with education policymakers. In this story, test scores and assessment data reveal that students from the last two years have made less progress in standards-aligned content coverage than in prior school years. To address this lost learning, policymakers recommend standardized assessments, summer school, longer school days, and high-dosage tutoring as the remedy.

This narrative was wildly successful in shaping federal policy, and congressional staffers and elected officials used this story to motivate an unprecedented stimulus package for U.S. schools. But early evidence suggests that this story has little salience among teachers, students, and their families. A nationally representative survey of 1,500 K-12 parents conducted by USC found little appetite among parents for summer school, learning pods or tutoring opportunities. After a year of frustrating schooling experiences, it turns out that most folks are not interested in simply increasing the dosage of schooling.

With this backdrop, we set out to talk to students and teachers about their views of this past year and what they needed for next year and beyond. We interviewed 50 teachers, had over 200 teachers interview their students (across elementary, middle, and high school) about the past year, and facilitated ten design meetings with teachers, school leaders, students and parents to imagine new futures for next year.

It turns out that they, too, have quite different views from much of what is being discussed in the national policy conversation. For example, **in all of our data from more than 200 teachers, not once did we hear teachers describe remediating lost learning through assessment and targeted remediation as their top priority for next year**. Students, for their part, did describe some desire to return to aspects of pre-pandemic normalcy—particularly the social aspects of school. But they also argued that schools had serious inequalities and deficiencies before the pandemic, and they had no desire to go back to those same issues.

This view from the ground is less about returning to the status quo or countering learning loss, but about a third scenario, where **we take the tumultuous changes in schooling this year as an opportunity for ongoing reflection and reinvention**. The primary themes in our interviews, focus groups, and design charrettes were an emphasis on **healing**, **community**, and **humane reinvention**. Students and teachers told us that the best things about the pandemic year were when it created opportunities to slow down and build real relationships between teachers and students and their families and when students were given more independence to be in charge of their learning, their bodies, and their development. When we asked them about what problems they hoped policymakers would address about schooling next

year, **students and teachers talked less about COVID and more about long-standing problems with schools**: buildings and classrooms that are uncomfortable to learn in, overstuffed curriculum that limited opportunities for human connection and interest-based exploration, overzealous policing of bodies and behavior, early start times that are out of sync with adolescent biology, and much more.

We should be clear that **we are not trying to set up a false dichotomy between the relational aspects of schooling and the aspects that are focused on academic learning**. What we read our respondents as saying is *if teachers knew them more as human beings, they were trusted more, they were given more control over their selves and their learning, their work was more relevant, and the circumstances in which they learned more equitable, then that would help them learn in meaningful and consequential ways*. We also read them as saying that we should think more broadly about what has been lost this year, what is needed for next year, and how, even before the pandemic, schools need to be reinvented as more equal and humane institutions. **Addressing healing, community and humanity is not peripheral to the academic mission of school, it is a vital part of such a mission**.

Furthermore, since policies are unlikely to work without the commitment of those closest to the action (teachers and students), we think these perspectives should be considered carefully by those working at the policy and system level. For instance, our data suggests that if advocates are going to move forward with a reform like individual tutoring, it needs to be designed in a way that builds meaningful relationships and builds on students' strengths as opposed to simply remedying their deficits. More radically, respondents are saying that policymakers are focused too narrowly on "learning loss" and missing the more significant ways schools could be reinvented to better serve students.

In the pages that follow, we unpack this view from the ground. We detail who we talked with and why, share the themes and ideas that emerged most frequently in our conversations, and describe paths forward for schools and districts in ways that are consistent with the documented needs of teachers and students. In the appendix, we offer a toolkit comprised of four tested design protocols that educators can use to listen to their community and make plans for moving forward:

- *Imagine September*, an interview protocol for students to reflect on the past year and imagine the future;
- *Whose Problems?*, a data visualization of stakeholder concerns to identify how different groups imagine the challenges of the coming year;
- *Amplify, Hospice, and Create*, a protocol to generate specific actions from stakeholder input;
- *Metaphors into Tentpoles*, a visioning exercise to turn stakeholder feedback into a set of principles to guide planning for schools.

We have used these four protocols with teachers, families, students, schools and districts to enable them to identify what has worked well in the pandemic, what can be discarded, and what needs to be created anew. Finally, we consider the question of pacing reform efforts—given that teachers, especially, are exhausted right now. We suggest a way to move to support these shifts without further burning out the people most needed to make them work.

We see this work as particularly timely and critical because if we do nothing, we are headed towards scenarios of returning to an unacceptable status quo or remediating learning loss through strategies with weak community support. Alternatively, listening to those closest to the problem—parents, students, and teachers—can lead to a needed reinvention of schools.

IMAGINING SEPTEMBER

LEARNING FROM STUDENTS ABOUT COVID-19 SCHOOLING to PLAN for a BETTER FUTURE

WHAT WOULD YOU AMPLIFY?

LESS in MORE! FOCUS on ESSENTIALS

VERTICAL ALIGNMENT

INDEPENDENT LEARNING

RECOGNIZE FLEXIBILITY + STUDENT INTEREST

DIFFERENT MODALITIES of CONNECTION

MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

ACCESS

CREATING IDEAL CONDITIONS for ALL to THRIVE

DIVERSITY and BELONGING

SEEDS of KNOWLEDGE

GROWTH and HEALTH

PROCESSING INFO

COMFORT + SAFETY

EMBRACE HUMANITY!

WHAT WOULD YOU HOSPICE?

GRADES

POLICING YOUNG PEOPLES BODIES

7 PERIOD HIGH SCHOOL DAYS

STANDARDIZED TESTS

SEAT TIME REQUIREMENTS → (INDOOR)

7:30 AM

DISCONNECTION FROM REAL WORLD

HW

LESSON PLANS

LEARNING PLANS

CONTROL

TEXTBOOK BEING CURRICULUM

1 PROFILE of GRADUATE

the BODEGA

HEALING

CHURCH + TEMPLE

MOON

the COMIC BOOK STORE

the BIRD
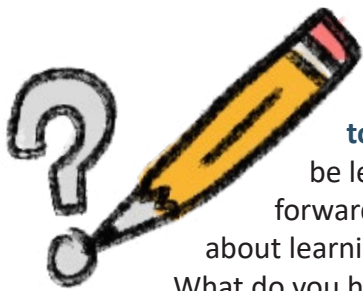
the BOTANICAL GARDEN and the WILDLIFE RESERVE

the BIKE vs CAR

the LEARNING SPA mindful math!

Listening to the Field

To help us understand this moment in U.S. schools, we conducted three kinds of research activities. First, **we invited teachers across the country to talk with their students** about how young people understand what should be learned from this past year, and what adults should do differently moving forward. We encouraged teachers to ask five questions: 1) What have you liked about learning from home? 2) What has been hard about learning from home? 3) What do you hope adults will do (or not do) to make school better next year? 4) What did you lose or miss out on because of the pandemic? 5) What are you most proud of from this past year? **More than 200 teachers from our extended social network interviewed more than 4,000 students** from kindergarteners through seniors and sent us their reflections from those conversions. Second, **we interviewed more than 50 educators from across the country**, at all grade levels, across subjects, in public, private and charter schools (a diverse, though not nationally-representative sample) to ask them to reflect on this past year and to envision what should happen in the future. Third, **we organized ten multi-stakeholder design charrettes** with students, teachers, parents, and school leaders from schools and communities that we admired for their innovative educational work. In our conversations, we sought to better understand how a variety of stakeholders imagine moving forward from this moment. More details on these activities can be found in the appendix.

What We Heard From Students: Lost Connections and Growing Autonomy

Everyone is having a different pandemic. Listening to students, teachers and school leaders talk and write about their pandemic experiences reveals how different each of our journeys has been through the last year and a half.

Academically, many students struggled, but some also thrived. After listening to her students, one teacher wrote about what struck her most: "I think it was the contrasts. Some of the same responses [from my students] would appear as positives and negatives." For some students, home provided more support and fewer diversions; as one wrote, "Hard to get distracted so my grades are pretty fire this year." Of course many students, especially those with limited access to technology or broadband, found learning quite challenging. One teacher wrote: "Remote learning was hard, [students] hated it and never want to do it again."

If any theme unites student experience, it is the **profound sense of loss of social connections to their peers**. They missed clubs, sports, field trips, and transition events. Students in schools with narrow grade bands (like a seventh and eighth grade middle school) missed practically their entire school experience. They miss their friends. A few expressed concerns about regaining their social skills as the world opens back up. One wrote, "Online school has made me more of an introvert, hard to make friends and socialize with people, want to stay in my house and not go outside." Not every student felt the same sense of social loss, and a few suggested how much they enjoyed being away from the social pressures of school. Regardless, one student begged teachers not to get corny when everyone returns: "Please don't be like 'they missed so much social interaction let's give them bunch of awkward conversation starters to create friendships.'"

The second most common theme among students was the **sense of autonomy that they experienced and developed during the pandemic**. Outside of the watchful eye of teachers and sometimes from parents, this generation of students was forced to be more independent than any previous group of U.S. students. Some struggled, but many found a newfound resilience and independence. One student wrote, "I am most proud of how mature, independent, and responsible I have become during this pandemic with handling all my work and emails." One teacher observed with their students that greater independence and autonomy opened the door for students to confront more challenges: "A lot of them felt like they worked harder at home simply because they were working without a teacher in their physical space. We discussed how students so often feel like they rely on teachers to do the hard work for them; to give the nod of approval before they embark on an academic challenge." The self-directed learning skills that students developed during emergency remote schooling are assets that teachers will be able to build upon for years to come.

This **independence was not just academic, but also personal, bodily, and intimate**. As one fifth grader at Yorktown Elementary School in Virginia told President and Dr. Biden: "If we were really tired, we could, like, take a little nap." Another student said, "Sometimes, when Ms. B was, like, paying attention to something else, you could eat, and it was fun." Many other teachers and students reflected on how learning from home allowed students the same freedoms that are associated with well-regarded workplaces: the freedom to wear comfortable clothes, to take breaks when restless, to snack when hungry, and to use the bathroom as needed. One teacher observed "One student likes that he can cuddle his "stuffies" (stuffed animals) at home during Zoom school, since he can only bring them to real school on special occasions." Many students appreciated the later start to the day, and the more frequent use of breaks during and between classes.

An infrequent, but not totally absent theme among our student data was learning loss. Among older students, there were occasional references to "falling behind" and concepts akin to learning loss, but not many--despite our encouragement to directly ask young people about what they lost or missed during the last year. As one teacher noted, "Students realize and are concerned that they may be behind in their learning." When the issue arose, students seemed particularly concerned that next year's teachers might not realize what they missed from this past year. But some students also explicitly rejected the learning loss narrative as well. One teacher wrote that when asked about learning loss, students didn't initially understand the concept of learning loss. After the teacher explained to them what adults meant by the term, the students reacted vociferously: "That's cap.[1] We've been doing the work." For students who have been worked hard under very challenging conditions this year, the learning loss narrative doesn't resonate with their lived experience.

Some students credited their teachers with fostering a sense of support and camaraderie during the pandemic. One student expressed their wish for next year: "I hope teachers approach whatever our return to normal looks like with the same degree of empathy as they have during the pandemic. People are just much more understanding of our lives and pressures." One student observed that this year it felt like teachers were in this with them. Of course, there has been so much suffering, unevenly distributed, through this past year, but this shared experience offers a common ground for rebuilding community.

Overall, we were struck by how different students' accounts were from prevailing narratives. Young people talked about loss in profound ways, but in their telling, **what had been lost was a year of childhood or adolescence, not particular content standards from algebra or social studies**. Similarly, while most media

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[1] "That's cap" means "that's a lie" or "no way."

coverage has focused on what students have missed from not being in school, students saw significant benefits from working from home, particularly the ways in which they could be more relaxed and less "on" at all times.

To put it more provocatively, over the past year at home, students walked out of Plato's cave and saw the light of freedom and autonomy. Even our youngest students recognize how much they enjoy making themselves comfortable while they learn. Schools will need to seriously consider what it means to bring students back into environments that have traditionally curtailed so many of these basic freedoms. As our colleague and Boston Public School teacher Neema Avashia provocatively asks, "When we police students, which of our policies are really about learning, and which of them are about control?"

What We Heard from Teachers: Relationships and Community

Given the wide contrast in student responses, it is not surprising that when we asked teachers to reflect on what they will do differently next year, the answers were similarly divergent. Teachers told us they planned to reduce content coverage, add more youth voice in planning, spend more time building community, rethink grading practices, meet with parents virtually more often, spend more time outside, provide more organized agenda and class resources, create more free work time, use trauma-informed practices and more.


While teacher plans for next year were diverse, **we heard two themes with some consistency: the need to emphasize relationships and community and the desire to build on students' newfound sense of autonomy**. As one teacher wrote, "I need to make so much more space for connecting with students, and for students to learn about each other. I have to stop thinking of community building as one 'unit' at the beginning that I rush through, and how community can play a much larger, systemic, role in my classroom." Creating more space for building relationships or integrated social emotional learning lessons in class were among the most frequent responses from teachers. One teacher suggested that, "Adults need to be compassionate about how young people have managed, celebrate their resilience in managing stress, and work collaboratively with them to figure out how to transition helpful coping skills into their lives moving forward." Young people have suffered greatly during the pandemic, and they will still be grieving from those losses in the fall.

Teachers also recognized the opportunity to build on student autonomy, and proposed offering more academic, personal, and bodily choice and freedom in their classrooms. In many cases, this involved offering more office hours, more diverse assessment options, or more independent work time. One teacher noted that the pandemic offered an opportunity for some student trapped in a cycle of disciplinary action, resistance, and reaction to escape: "For some young people, not having adults constantly redirect them in school or deal with stressful peer dynamics in the building allowed them to focus more on themselves or their academics."

Two competing feelings seem to be shaping teacher perspectives on preparing for next year. **A few teachers very explicitly warned against "returning back to normal," since typical schools often failed to**

meet the needs of many students. Even those teachers who didn't adopt this explicit stance described next year as an opportunity for professional growth and school improvement: taking what was learned from a hard year and building on the best of their innovations. But at the same time, teachers are also incredibly exhausted from a demanding and unrelenting year. **Few school systems will have the wherewithal for major transformations over this summer; teachers and school leaders need to rest**. Yet, there is also a pervasive sense that all of the energy poured into making emergency remote schooling work can be carried forward into building back better. As one high school teacher in Milwaukee told us, "After this year, we know how to change."

What We Did Not Hear From Teachers: Learning Loss and Summer School
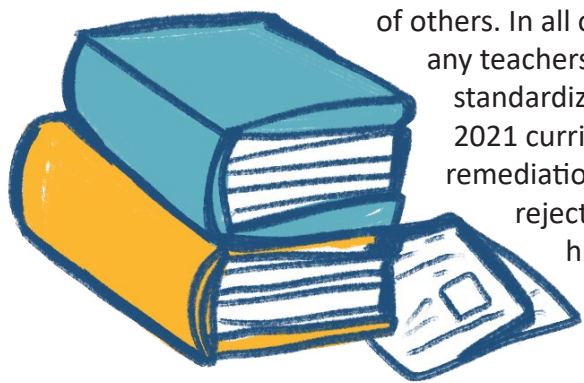
The absence of particular themes in our data was just as telling as the presence of others. In all of our data from more than 200 teachers, we could not find any teachers who declared that their top priority for next year was to use standardized assessments or classroom assessment data to identify 2020-2021 curriculum content knowledge gaps and then provide targeted remediation and tutoring in those areas. Several teachers explicitly rejected this frame. One wrote: "I hope to advocate for a more humane 'recovery' than the 'acceleration academy' focused on 'credit recovery' or boosting standardized test skills that we often offer. Students need healing more than they need test prep." No teachers (or students) in our data advocated for summer school—the words do not appear in our data.

To the extent that teachers did agree with the notion of addressing unfinished learning, it was in describing what they do every year in their classrooms. Every year, diverse students enter classrooms with heterogeneous skill and preparation, and teachers use a variety of differentiation strategies to get students working on shared class material as best they can. The level of heterogeneity of preparation may be somewhat wider this year, but to the extent that teachers feel this needs to be treated differently, they are more concerned with building relationships and making more time for individual check-ins rather than testing and remediating.

Advocates for addressing learning loss through testing and tutoring might do well to reflect on why a messaging campaign that has been tremendously successful in the national press and in Congress has so little salience among students and teachers. One possibility is that learning loss represents only a small part of what students and teachers perceive as key challenges for next year. The most effective responses to the pandemic and the most powerful strategies for next year will connect with how students and teachers perceive their world. We would also urge school and district leaders to avoid one-size-fits-all thinking. To be clear: there may be some students—for example those who are just learning to read—for whom "learning loss" is a critical issue and who need additional and targeted support. But our data suggests that making "learning loss" the singular frame for next year is myopic and misses much of what students and teachers think is most important in moving forward.

The Pandemic as a Window into Longstanding School Inequities

In many ways, the pandemic was simply a window into the pre-existing conditions of dramatic school inequalities. COVID brought more death and suffering to communities with more poverty, more people of color, and more essential workers. School staff found themselves acting as the de facto social safety net for children and their families in poverty-impacted communities, providing food, telecommunications access, basic needs, and negotiating access to health care and mental health care. The resulting recession also affected school communities; we interviewed teachers in one Wisconsin high school where their surveys showed that more than 60% of students considered themselves essential wage earners in their families; not just kids with jobs, but key contributors to their families budget. Teachers have always been aware of stark inequalities in young people's experiences, but they were both exacerbated and revealed anew.

In some respects, when teachers and students discussed what needed to change for next year, they were not responding to the events of the pandemic but rather to ongoing systemic inequities and underinvestment in schools. This pattern emerged for us in the very first conversation we hosted with students. We met with a group of middle school students in a Northeastern city and asked them to write about three pre-reflection questions: "How are you feeling in general right now?", "What do you feel like you missed in your learning this year?" and "What do you need to be successful this year or next year?" After students wrote, we convened them and asked them what they liked about this year, and let them reflect out loud for a bit, and then we asked them what was hard about this year.

After 10 or 15 minutes of reflecting and discussing this pandemic year, we then told students, "lots of adults right now are talking about what they should do differently in schools next year, and there may be some extra money from the government to make changes. What do you hope is different about school next year?"

The answer from the first student to respond was: "a pool."

It was a bit of a surprising answer, and it certainly caught us off-guard after spending 15 minutes talking about the pandemic. But the answer is less surprising if you put yourself in the shoes of an urban middle school student who has always gone to school in a place that doesn't have the amenities that more affluent families take for granted. For this student, the most urgent problems facing their school were not the immediate challenges of COVID, but the inequalities that had plagued students their entire schooling careers.

After the pool recommendation, one student discussed the need for bigger science classrooms to do more projects. Several students, after eating at home for a year, focused on school lunch quality. One said, "I'm not gonna lie, the food is nasty. I mean, it's a blessing that we can eat food, but it's flavorless, and we can't season it ourselves. We have [to sneak in] our own hot sauce and ketchup." Two students in that class debated whether the school needed more police for security, or whether the police presence brought more harm than security, echoing the larger societal debates about the role of policing in schools.

As we interviewed more teachers and heard from more students, these themes continued to appear.

In the Wisconsin high school with many student wage earners, one teacher expressed that a key goal for next year should be to "bring back driver's education." Like the pool suggestion, this idea struck us as discordant until the teacher explained the whole backdrop—that their regional public transportation system was slow and inefficient, and if students could drive themselves to work or help with family driving, they would have more time for school work. One teacher summarized her conversation with students by focusing on "infrastructure improvements in schools [that] need to happen: young people talked about wanting better bathrooms, better school lunches, flexible seating options in classrooms."

Another teacher explained: "Maybe this will sound harsh, but I think it's really important to validate that our educational system was broken many, many years before COVID came along. I think COVID has shined a beautiful magnifying glass on the fact that there are inequities within the system that was built. But this was not something that happened because COVID happened." **For many students and teachers, as severe as the challenges of the pandemic were, the fault lines of society remain a more urgent concern than educational issues directly caused by COVID.**

There were some changes that happened during emergency remote schooling that teachers and students hope will continue into the future. Many schools offered later start times, more breaks and office hours throughout the school days, more flexibility on deadlines, and relaxed requirements around dress code, eating, and bathroom trips. Our colleague Neema Avashia on the Have Your Heard podcast reflected on some of these changes that she hoped schools would keep:

> **Our school days start at a time that is developmentally wildly inappropriate, but remote school has allowed us to change that and to push it and to say, we don't have to make you get up at 5:30 in the morning to take two trains, to get to school in time for a 7:10 breakfast. We don't have to do that. I think there's a way in which this moment has revealed to kids the ways in which our school system is really dehumanizing. Kids talked about being able to go to the bathroom when they want to. Instead of when they're told yes or no by an adult, they talk about being able to eat a snack. Like why are we controlling them? Why are schools places where you can't eat when you're hungry or why you can't go to the bathroom when you need to, or we're telling you what clothes you can and can't wear. I just think that young people have realized [this] during this moment. And I would say I, as a teacher, also have been thinking a lot about, why are our schools set up this way? What is it for?**

The pandemic required changes in many aspects of our lives, and Neema's questions offer a powerful starting point for ongoing reflection. Why are our schools set up the way they are? What purposes do our policies and practices serve? We might add a few additional questions along these lines. **When schools were forced to make changes, which of those changes actually worked better? What priorities did we have for our students when society was at its most vulnerable, and why aren't those always our priorities?**

Engaging Stakeholders for Better Futures

To build on these reflections with teachers and students and to begin the process of designing for a better future, we ran ten design charrettes—an intense, collaborative, design-focused in-person or virtual meeting with a mixture of students, teachers, principals, district administrators and parents. Each charrette had between 6 and 12 participants. We ran three sets of activities in these charrettes. First, we asked our participants to imagine and discuss how different stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and administrators—would identify the most pressing needs. Second, we asked them to reflect on what they wanted to amplify coming out of this year (i.e. what should we hold onto), what they wanted to hospice (let go of), and what new things would need to be created to make them work in a new context. The goal of these exercises was to see where there were similarities and differences, in order to design in ways that met the needs of these different stakeholders. Third, we asked the groups to brainstorm some metaphors of tentpole ideas—ideas that could anchor how we should think about next year and beyond. We report on each of these below.
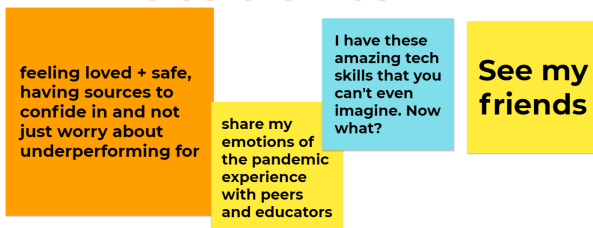
What Problems are Stakeholders Trying To Solve?

After a round of introductions, we invited our charrette participants to consider how different education stakeholders will view the problems and challenges of re-opening differently. Using virtual posters with sticky notes (Jamboard, Miro, etc.), we asked participants to answer four linked questions:

1. What problems are **students** hoping we solve next year?
2. What problems are **families** hoping we solve next year?
3. What problems are **teachers** hoping we solve next year?
4. What problems are **administrators** hoping we solve next year?

What Problems Are Stakeholders Hoping We Solve Next year?

Students

feeling loved + safe, having sources to confide in and not just worry about underperforming for

share my emotions of the pandemic experience with peers and educators

I have these amazing tech skills that you can't even imagine. Now what?

See my friends

Teachers

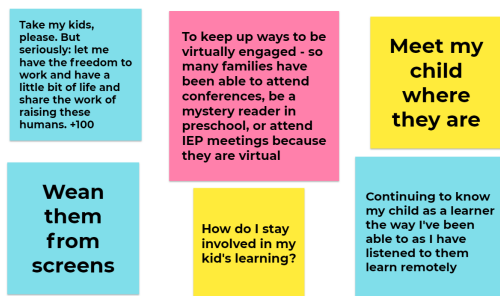More classroom support to lighten the instructional demand

Tests. Can we just solve the incredibly confusing and contradictory messages we get about assessment, tests, and grading?

Building on best of last year, ideally without too many meetings.

Who is addressing my trauma. Because I am having it too. From being evacuated from my town in California to riots and insurrections and global pandemics, I have some serious needs.

Tolerance for low-leverage "administrative" work may be at an all-time low. How can I focus on what really matters?

Families

Take my kids, please. But seriously: let me have the freedom to work and have a little bit of life and share the work of raising these humans. +100

To keep up ways to be virtually engaged - so many families have been able to attend conferences, be a mystery reader in preschool, or attend IEP meetings because they are virtual

Meet my child where they are

Wean them from screens

How do I stay involved in my kid's learning?

Continuing to know my child as a learner the way I've been able to as I have listened to them learn remotely

Admins

Union contracts --- how do we change our agreements about time given what we've learned this year?

How do I help teachers bridge from survival mode to thriving?

How to push for needed change when people remain tired

How do we capitalize on the good learning teachers have done this year and help them keep those parts in their repertoire?

How do I spend all of the stimulus funds?

How do we dismantle white supremacy culture in our schools?

The most important insight from this exercise is that in each charrette, stakeholders had strikingly different responses. All of these stakeholders have the shared goal to see young people learn and thrive, but the challenges that feel most immediate are quite different for each group.

For those who are served by schools, reforging relationships and community were the central concerns. For students, the most urgent and pressing issues about the return to school are social. Since the most keenly felt loss of the pandemic was social, it makes sense that for many young people, reconnecting with friends, finding a new place in the community, and shaking off the feelings of isolation are all critical goals. For parents and family members, many of the goals involved maintaining the new sense of connection that parents experienced with their students' classrooms, teachers, and schools. They also wanted students out of their house and off screens.

Reading our boards with teacher comments, we were struck regularly at how much they evoked feelings of pain and frustration. **This has been an extraordinarily difficult year for educators, and many wondered how they would get the support, rest, and resources they need to be successful in the new year**. The substance of the comments were constructive--addressing issues of management, instruction, community, and other key issues--but a tone of hurt and loss permeated the contributions. For the administrator comments, we noticed that this board typically had the most notes phrased as questions: How do we capitalize on the good learning teachers have done this year? How do I help them bridge from surviving to thriving? While all stakeholders faced hard problems, the challenges of administrators seemed particularly complex. **For those who create the services that school offers, the new year will need to make room for healing and support as educators continue to tackle a difficult situation emerging from the pandemic**.

Part of solving educational problems together as a community is recognizing how each of us views and holds those problems differently. After identifying the challenges that we face in the year ahead, we turned our attention to understanding how the emerging best practices from the pandemic year might help us address those challenges.

Amplify, Hospice, Create

As part of our charrettes, we ran an exercise called "amplify, hospice, and create." The idea was to identify what had gone well and was worth growing (amplify), what could be safely let go of because no one was asking to return to it (hospice)[2], and what new structures, processes, and ideas could be developed that would extend and sustain these ideas when everyone was back in the building (create).

We see this as a pragmatic strategy for gradual reinvention. Amplifying what is already working is just common sense. Hospicing is more difficult—it is always easier to add than subtract, because removing things requires letting go of past practices and can evoke the opposition of those most attached to them. But if you don't accept the short-term pain of subtraction, the longer-term costs will be much greater, because the organization will become increasingly frenetic, fragmented and incoherent. And then "create" is a way to build upon the smaller wins that come out of the amplification phase, developing sustainable ways to do new forms of work.

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[2] The idea of "hospicing" is deliberately meant to evoke the need to retire an existing system. It draws on the work of Margaret Wheatley and the Berkana Institute who discuss the "two loops model of change" where you are retiring an old loop as you welcome in a new loop: Our Theory of Change « The Berkana Institute | Systems Community of Inquiry (syscoi.com).

In Table 1 below, we summarize prominent themes that emerged from our ten design charrettes in column 1. In the remaining columns, we categorize examples of each of these themes into the respective action category to indicate what should be amplified, retired or created in reimagining a return to in-person schooling. We elaborate on several of these examples in the narrative following Table 1.

Table 1: Amplify, Hospice, and Create: Prominent Themes from Ten Charrettes			
Theme	Amplify	Hospice	Create
Trust and Relationships	• Home visits that build relationships between home and school • Advisors, advisories, office hour check-ins • Zoom-style chat to allow introverted student more of an opportunity to thrive • Virtual meetings	• Excluding parents from school concerns • Rush through content; transactional relationships • Single ways of teaching and sharing what students know • Notion that face to face is needed for all meetings	• Share power and collective decision making with families • Organize schooling around smaller, more intimate communities • Create multiple modalities for sharing learning • Powerful in person meetings; virtual meetings for other concerns
Schedule and Time	• Quarters with three classes at a time rather than seven • Teacher load of 65-80 students • Longer breaks between classes	• 7 -8 period day in secondary schools • Teacher load of 160 students • No time between classes	• Quarter schedule with 3 blocks • Teacher load of 65-80 students • Student free periods and ability to use some time in ways consistent with their interests
Depth and Breadth of Curriculum	• "Marie Kondo-ing" the curriculum[3] (i.e. focusing on a smaller set of priority standards)	• Pacing guides; rush through content	• Focus on fewer standards that orient learning around key topics and skills
Student Agency and Relevance	• Relevance and choice to keep remote students engaged	• Standardized curricula, pre-set subjects, absence of student choice	• Students define passions and goals, put in charge of learning to achieve those goals
Competency- and mastery-based learning	• Eliminating system of averaging grades which heavily penalizes students with zeros for incomplete assignments	• Seat time • Assumption that all students need to learn exactly the same things • "Learning loss" as a frame	• Competency- and mastery-based systems that allow students to define interests; move at own pace

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[3] This was a recommendation from our 2020 report. A number of our participants had either been part of the work last year or read the report, so they used the language of Marie Kondoing in our design charrettes this year.

Table 1: Amplify, Hospice, and Create: Prominent Themes from Ten Charrettes			
Theme	**Amplify**	**Hospice**	**Create**
Assessments	• Examination of student work	• Standardized tests • Grades and report cards • Finals week	• Relevance and choice to keep remote students engaged
Social and emotional learning and self-care	• Mindfulness practices, check-ins, emphasis on mental health of adults as well as students	• Rush through content • Attention only to academics	• "Restorative restart" • Ongoing space and time for mental health
Equity	• Feeding students; Ensuring basic needs are met • Meeting each student where they are • Listening more to students; Involving students in co-design of anti-racist practices	• Seeing students only as academic producers • Leveling and tracking; deficit notions of students • Discipline and suspension	• Consistently seeing students holistically • Comprehensive equity audit • Restorative justice approaches to discipline
Treat students like humans	• Less behavioral policing of students' dress and other choices • Let students eat when they are hungry; go to the bathroom when they need to • Outdoor learning • Later start times consistent with adolescent circadian rhythms	• Dress code • "Tasteless" food • Bathroom and hall passes • Learning can only happen in classrooms • Getting up at 5:30 am to ride multiple buses for 7:10 am start	• More student autonomy around personal matters • Involve students in designing menus • Off campus learning- field trips, internships, apprenticeships • Later start times, including a plan for sports that accommodate later start times

Relationships and Trust

As was true in our interviews with teachers, one of the most common amplification themes from our charrettes was growing relationships between home and school. **Virtual schooling made clear what should have always been the case: students' education is a partnership between the family and the school**. Teachers who had been given time to do home visits at the beginning of the year wanted to keep them moving forward. Virtual meetings with parents were another definite keeper; participants said that they were easier to schedule than in-person meetings and increased the number of connections that they were able to have with parents. Teachers also wanted to continue to make use of virtual meetings for some staff meetings; logistically it made it easier for them to get home earlier and be more present with their families.

One small innovation that came up again and again in our discussions was the use of the zoom chat feature. **Allowing students to chat as well as talk was seen as particularly beneficial for shy, quiet, or introverted students, who liked to have a non-verbal way to participate**. Teachers also liked the fact that they could send private individual messages to students as ways to encourage them or check-in on how they were doing. Many participants talked about how they wanted to find some way to keep the chat feature once schools were back in person.
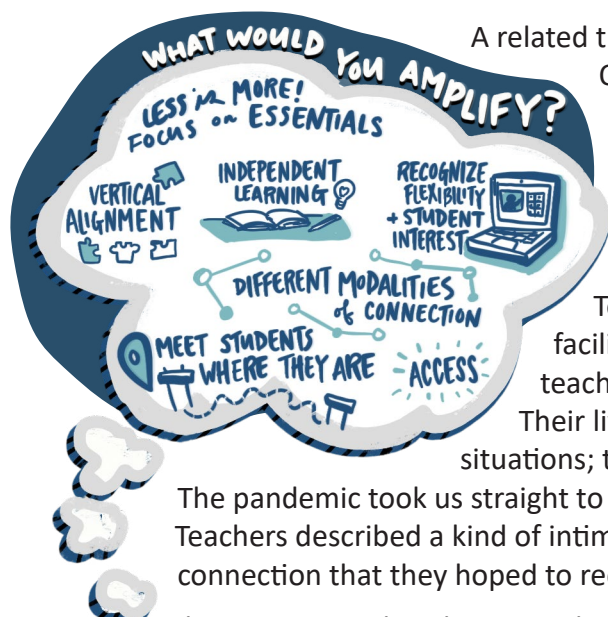
A related theme was more and deeper contact time with students. One school had set up an on-call system during COVID, where every staff member in the building was connected to 10-12 students, who they could be contacted by at any time of day. Others had built in student office hours—chances to check-in individually with students about how they were feeling and what was on their mind. Teachers said that they wanted to keep these structures that facilitated deeper relationships in the years to come. As one teacher said, "We need to *know our students holistically*: Their lived experiences in and out of the classroom; their home situations; their backgrounds; interests; families; and their hopes. The pandemic took us straight to their homes whether we or they wanted to or not." Teachers described a kind of intimacy that came with seeing into students' homes, a level of connection that they hoped to recreate in post-pandemic circumstances.

There are ways that these trends could be accelerated and sustained in the years to come. Parents could be invited as more equal partners into the decision-making, a trend that is on the rise as part of the broader shift towards racial equity. High schools could more intentionally plan to build smaller communities, as opposed to simply adding advisories on top of large, anonymous classes. The popularity of the Zoom chat shows that there are limits to a single mode of pedagogical exchange -- **perhaps the answer here is not simply to find an online way to chat, but an indication that we need to think more broadly about the different ways that students can participate in school**.

Less Breadth, More Depth: Slowing the Schedule and "Marie Kondo-ing" the Curriculum

One bigger shift that some schools had made was to change the schedule. After spring 2020, in which middle and high school students were trying to navigate up to seven classes each with its associated logins, a number of schools had shifted to a quarter schedule where students were taking no more than three classes at a time. Participants reported that this had been a positive shift, allowing more time to investigate those subjects in depth, and, critically, reducing teacher load from 150-160 students at a time to a much more manageable 75 students. Here again is teacher Neema Avashia: "The 'less is more' approach has really worked well for our kids. Taking only 3 classes at a time has allowed kids to better manage their course load. Having longer classes has allowed for relationship building, breaks, and depth in a way that we couldn't have done on the traditional breakneck school schedule." This is a strategy that had already been adopted by some leading schools even before the pandemic, and there is no reason it cannot be continued going forward.

Not only had they taught fewer classes at a time, some schools had taken our recommendation from our 2020 report to "Marie Kondo" the curriculum[4]—spending more time on fewer topics. **Particularly in a year where it was clear that it was not going to be possible to cover everything, some schools had worked to deliberately focus their work on the most critical topics. In our charrettes, schools that had made these shifts wanted to keep them going forward.**

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[4] Readers interested in learning more can access the report here: https://edarxiv.org/gqa2w

With more time, one could imagine a more comprehensive version of this strategy. In the past year, many schools simply trimmed their existing content areas to fit the available time and space. Over a longer period, one could imagine states, districts, and schools doing what British Columbia has done, and focus their work around five big ideas and five key skills per year, and then have teams of teachers work to develop curricula that would allow more depth around those key areas.

Relevance, Engagement, and Personalized Learning

Another theme that emerged from the design charrettes was relevance and engagement. **Participants talked extensively about how in virtual school, since participation in synchronous sessions felt less compulsory to students than in person schooling, it forced educators to focus deeply on student engagement**. Tyler Thigpen, who runs the Forest School outside Atlanta, described the opportunity as follows:

> **Being forced to cut back was a great thing. We have been more focused on engagement than before which has helped us to think about our content differently. We have had to be responsive to student interest in a way that I haven't seen before. We don't really have a captive audience, so it has been important to ensure that it is worth logging onto the Zoom for the students or they will choose not to log on…. Now that students will likely have the choice to come or not, we have to make sure that school is a place that all learners want to come.**

Some schools adopted a more systemic way of increasing engagement—accelerating their work around competency-based or personalized learning. Many educators found that in remote schooling, giving a zero for every assignment not turned in would result in high rates of student failure, if grades were given based on an average of assignments. In a mastery-based system, by contrast, students were evaluated by the quality of work they could do by the end of the year, which allowed for more opportunities for students to demonstrate what they could do.

More ambitiously, to some schools, **personalized learning meant recognizing more of the differences in interests across their learners and adapting the content accordingly**. As MIT Visiting Researcher Dan Coleman described it, we need to shift from the "student fitting the school" to "the school fitting the student." Coleman continues, "Virtual learning has given students a chance to show how quickly they can figure out what they need to know—and how eager they are to help other students learn that new stuff—adapt to these new needs." At Thigpen's Forest School, students are asked to define a series of quests—passions and questions that burn at them—and organize their courses of study accordingly.

The more formal way of sustaining this vision in the longer run is a competency-based or personalized approach to learning. In this approach, students' success is no longer measured by seat time, but rather by what they have learned or accomplished. While some competency-based systems simply allow students to move faster through prescribed content, the more ambitious of these approaches are truly personalized, letting students not only vary the pace but make some choices about the content they are studying. Embracing such a system would be one powerful way of formalizing the student agency that began to emerge during the pandemic.

Social and Emotional Learning, Self Care, and Time to Breathe

Another theme was the importance of social and emotional learning and self-care for both students and adults. As one teacher said, when we asked what to keep, "I also think we should keep running partners [teachers with whom one would go running]. Running partners are extremely important for goal setting and social health." Other teachers and students appreciated that they had spent more time outside this year. Many schools had integrated community-building activities and fun alongside academic learning, which is something that teachers said they would like to keep post-pandemic.

Another shift that occurred during pandemic schooling was around discipline. One principal in our charrettes had hospiced his whole disciplinary apparatus and replaced it with a restorative justice approach, with an emphasis on resolving conflicts in school rather than sending students home via suspensions. In a pandemic where a big part of the challenge was to get everyone to school, the principal said, he wasn't going to use his discretionary power to exclude people from learning. A number of other participants, sparked as much by ongoing equity conversations as the pandemic, were trying to shift in similar directions.

One way to make schools more human that came up repeatedly across our data was moving away from a "squeeze-every-minute-out-of-them" approach to time. **Teachers whose schools had moved to a later start time reported that such a shift was much more aligned to the natural rhythms of students, particularly adolescents**. After a shift to in-person and hybrid learning, schools also created numerous kinds of breaks, which many students reported as a positive development during the pandemic. Schools extended lunches and recess, they lengthened passing times between classes, and they implemented "mask breaks" during longer block periods so that everyone could take a quick walk outside and get some fresh air. The breaks provided time to rest, time to connect, and time to reorient throughout the day.

Students reported that the combination of these choices about time, trust, and human connection came together to produce very different experiences. For students in some large, comprehensive public high schools, the breakneck pace and rush of content was draining— there wasn't even time for lunch, one student said, even during virtual pandemic schooling. She added that this approach made school feel very transactional, as if the school was only interested in what answers you provided and not who you were and what you cared about. That's just the opposite of what I've experienced, said another, who attended a small private school. We have an hour for lunch, we have some free periods where we get to decide what to do with it, and they never stop asking about our identities! While there can be navel-gazing excesses in the other direction, on the whole, our respondents said that creating spaces where students and adults had time and space to connect, reflect, rest, and go deep, were much better off than those who had taken the opposite approach.

Make Schools More Human

Finally, **some of the changes that participants liked best about the pandemic were those that made schools feel a little more human**. One thing that had been striking about remote schooling was that students had more flexibility to take care of basic human needs, like eating when they were hungry, and going to the bathroom when nature called.

Participants wanted to build on these experiences and create a more humane and healthy environment at school. Said one, "We gotta get rid of the terrible food, and the inhumane facilities. No one should have to use the bathrooms at my school." Said another, "Can we stop making kids sit at a desks for 8 hours and having to raise their hands to be acknowledged?" Others wanted to hospice bathroom passes, and noticed that one of the things that students really liked about being at home was that they could eat when they are hungry. A number of participants wanted to shift towards a world where we did less policing of students' bodies, and trusted them more to take care of their core needs.

Another dimension of becoming more human was getting outside. Many of our participants had spent more time outside the walls of schools this year, initially by COVID necessity, but gradually because they found they enjoyed it. One educator in the Northeast said, "Theoretically, there were indoor places we could go if the weather was not cooperating, but we took outdoor ones every day, rain or shine." Several participants said that we should hospice the idea that "learning could only take place in the four walls of the school."

Some schools had expanded into community centers in ways that they hoped to keep—with greater attention to providing meals throughout the day, clothing for students, safe spaces to be while parents worked, and other efforts to meet student needs. The very different circumstances of students' families, particularly during remote schooling, had also primed teachers to become more attuned to what different students needed. With proper support, time and a more manageable teaching load, this was a stance towards students that teachers hoped to continue after the pandemic.

Metaphors as Tentpoles

After a year of living in the highly mundane, albeit critical, world of logistical COVID planning, we asked our participants to think metaphorically about the future of schooling, especially about how schools might launch in the late summer and fall. Metaphors allowed our participants to think imaginatively and creatively about possibilities for next year. Restarting and rebuilding schools for next year requires attending to many details of new schedules, new safety protocols, new community building routines, new events and ceremonies and more. Metaphors can serve as "tentpole" ideas—priorities and structures that help staff, students, and families stay in sync as they work in all of the various granular nooks in schools.

Below, we share three metaphors that we found compelling in our meetings: school as church or temple, places of healing, and family reunion. The three metaphors we offer here are not necessarily the "right" metaphors or tentpoles, but they provide examples of how these kinds of conversations can help communities think about the ways of being that they want to bring about in the new academic year. These metaphors are most helpful if they are not taken literally, and rather help us focus on the key qualities that they evoke.

School as Church and Temple

Several participants turned to religious education settings as one metaphor for inspiring schools next year. We have been through a large-scale, collective trauma this past year, and religious institutions, at their best, are well-suited to responding to existential questions raised by such a calamity. Religious institutions start by acknowledging people's humanity; they welcome people of all ages, and they build community. As one of our participants said, "The 'church' is a building and a place, but it's also the people—we are the church wherever the people are." Another said, "we made sure we're fed and whole before we try to do the learning."

Participants also emphasized the ritual and communal function played by churches, temples, and mosques. There are repeated practices, and there is an opening, middle, and end. There is often music, which is a collective practice that creates a shared experience for the individuals gathered. Individuals are celebrated within the context of the larger whole. Many meetings of these groups end with food and socialization; the ending ritual which gives way for time for community.

We are not suggesting that public schools become religious institutions. Doing so would violate the separation of church and state. Nor are we suggesting that religious institutions are without their flaws. But what we are saying is that a certain vision of church, temple, or mosque is a powerful metaphor for thinking about schools, one that evokes an ambition of tending to the soul as well as the mind, building community, and recognizing our deep common humanity. The routines of religious institutions might offer some suggestions for analogs and practices that would work in schools. After a day of learning and work together, consider how a school community could end the day with shared food and socializing. There may be ways that collaborative art projects, not necessarily hymns but other forms of singing or public art, could build community and shared identity. Are there ways that schools could do these things in a secular way in the year to come?

Schools as Place of Healing

A second metaphor was school as a place of healing. Similarly to the church metaphor, **the idea of healing was responding to the fact that students' needs emerging from the pandemic were deeper than simply lost academic content**. All students have missed out on a piece of childhood or adolescence, and some students have suffered greatly because of the loss or serious illness of family members or other close contacts. Remote schooling was also very tough on some kids, who missed the stability and social connections that come with school.

School as healing might include the following elements, many of which were mentioned above: mental health check-ins for everyone, grief counseling for those who need it, office hours and individual check-ins with students. One teacher said that "seeing into everyone's house" this year had afforded a new level of intimacy which they were hoping to continue. Some school leaders said that secondary teachers who had been resistant to teaching students as opposed to teaching subjects had more experience this year relating to students that they hoped to build upon going forward.

These shifts would likely imply some structural changes as well. One participant said, "we can't keep operating on the scale we are operating on." In other words, if we want to build a healing environment, we need smaller communities, smaller class sizes, smaller teacher loads, and deeper relationships. Another participant said creating an intimate school culture would require a different and more qualitative mode of gathering data—replacing surveys and robocalls with actual conversations with family members and communities.

Schools as Family Reunion

Another intriguing metaphor that design charrette participants raised was that of a family reunion. Reunions bring together people with deep connections whose day to day lives are separated by time and distance. A signature experience for young people at family reunions is getting recognized by their elders for their changes; "My how you have grown!" is an exclamation that honors new maturity. Growth is celebrated but uniformity is not expected. Everyone knows and expects that everyone is different, and, when the family comes together once a year, they want to see who has grown and how.
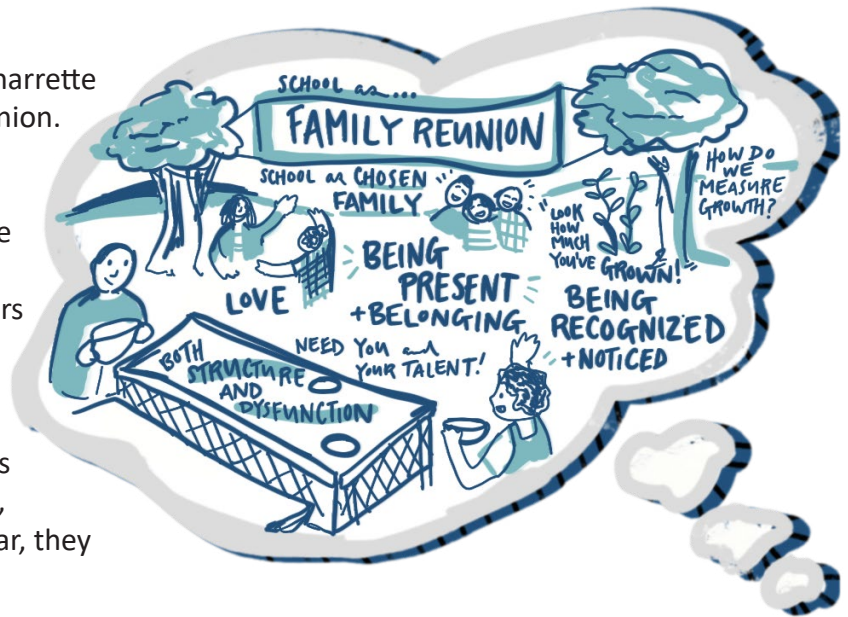
Family reunions are times for recounting individual experiences during periods of separation while also reminiscing about shared experiences from days gone by. Favorite stories are shared and reshared across generations creating a common history. At one participant's family reunion, they take an annual photo on the same porch each year, creating a series that extends through time.

One developer of this idea called a family reunion a structure of "love and dysfunction all rolled up into one." A family reunion is a place where you are known, where it is not always easy, but there is a sense that you share a love that cannot be broken, even when things inevitably get difficult. Participants wondered if schools' could adopt a similar ethos, a sense that this was a community that was in it together, even in the most challenging moments.

Schools using family reunions as a metaphor might consider how to intentionally create these moments for celebrating growth, reminiscing about shared experience, and recounting individual stories of time apart. Family reunions are also fun, or at least they are supposed to be. One participant had a tradition of a family talent show; given all of the special events missed last year, schools might consider kicking off the year by taking some traditional culminating events—field trips, "prom" dances, awards and ceremonies—and bringing them into the very beginning of the year.

The goal of these metaphors is not to replicate their practices exactly, but to think about what analogous moments might look like. Nothing can replace the smile of an Aunty who asks "How did you get so big?", but there may be ways that schools can be intentional about creating the conditions for the same kinds of recognition and celebration.

How to Get from Here to There

When considering how much schools should change next year, proponents of educational innovation are confronted with two paradoxes. First, schools made enormous, frequent, rapid pivots all throughout the past year. As we noted above, in the words of one teacher: "We know how to change." And yet, overall, the pivot to remote learning conserved nearly every core element of school systems: the schedules, class periods, subjects, teaching routines, curriculum and assessments. Teachers completely rebuilt schools,

but in main respects they conserved many of the key features of in-person schooling, what David Tyack and William Tobin called the "grammar" of schooling. The second paradox is that the pandemic showed the tremendous energy and commitment that teachers have for their students, but after a full year of non-stop struggle, change, and after-hours work, teachers are exhausted. **The urgency to address all of the challenges and shortcomings of school revealed by the pandemic is matched by a high water mark of weariness**.

Given these paradoxes, advocates for school change will need to balance urgency with patience. Teachers and students are full of ideas for how to make schools better, and they are tired. **In the months ahead, the best way to advance a change agenda may be through reflection—giving educators, students, and other school stakeholders the chance to celebrate resilience, mourn loss, and imagine how their learning from this past year might lead to better schools in the future**. Not all of those imaginings will come to fruition in September of 2021; too many people are too tired. But there is an energy in recognizing all that educators accomplished, built, and changed, and with some rest, that energy can be harnessed again in the years ahead.

We recommend three guiding principles in the year ahead:

1. **Don't define next year as a return to normal. For too many students, normal schooling wasn't meeting their needs.**

2. **Amplify key ideas from pandemic schooling, and hospice things that don't need to come back. Have the school year start with a few noticeable changes.**

3. **Engage in a year of reflection to celebrate the successes from pandemic schooling, grieve our losses, and harness the energy from the emergency to continue to build back better.**

The past year has been incredibly straining on students and teachers, and like most challenging events, talking about our experiences can be healing and revealing. Teachers and students are eager to debrief how they managed this past year, and the four protocols that we've outlined in this report—the *Imagining September* interview questions, the *Whose Problem* protocol, the *Amplify, Hospice, Create* questions, and the *Metaphors as Tentpoles*—exercise are all ways of helping students, families, and educators to turn their experiences from the past year into concrete plans for improving schools. In the appendix, you can find guides, prompts, and outlines for facilitating all four of these activities in your own community. These conversations will draw attention to parts of schooling that we want to improve and remind educators of the incredible efforts and energy that they put forth in the past year.

The challenge will be to harness that energy—that experience and urgency for change—outside of an emergency setting; to apply that energy not to a pivot during a pandemic, but to the sustained improvement of schools. The past year we learned that everything in schools that looks fixed and hardened is actually contingent and flexible. Grades, curriculum, seat time, schedules, settings, groupings—all of these features can be changed. For all of the suffering and hardship of the past year, some of the changes we made really were for the better, paving the way toward reinventing more humane school communities.
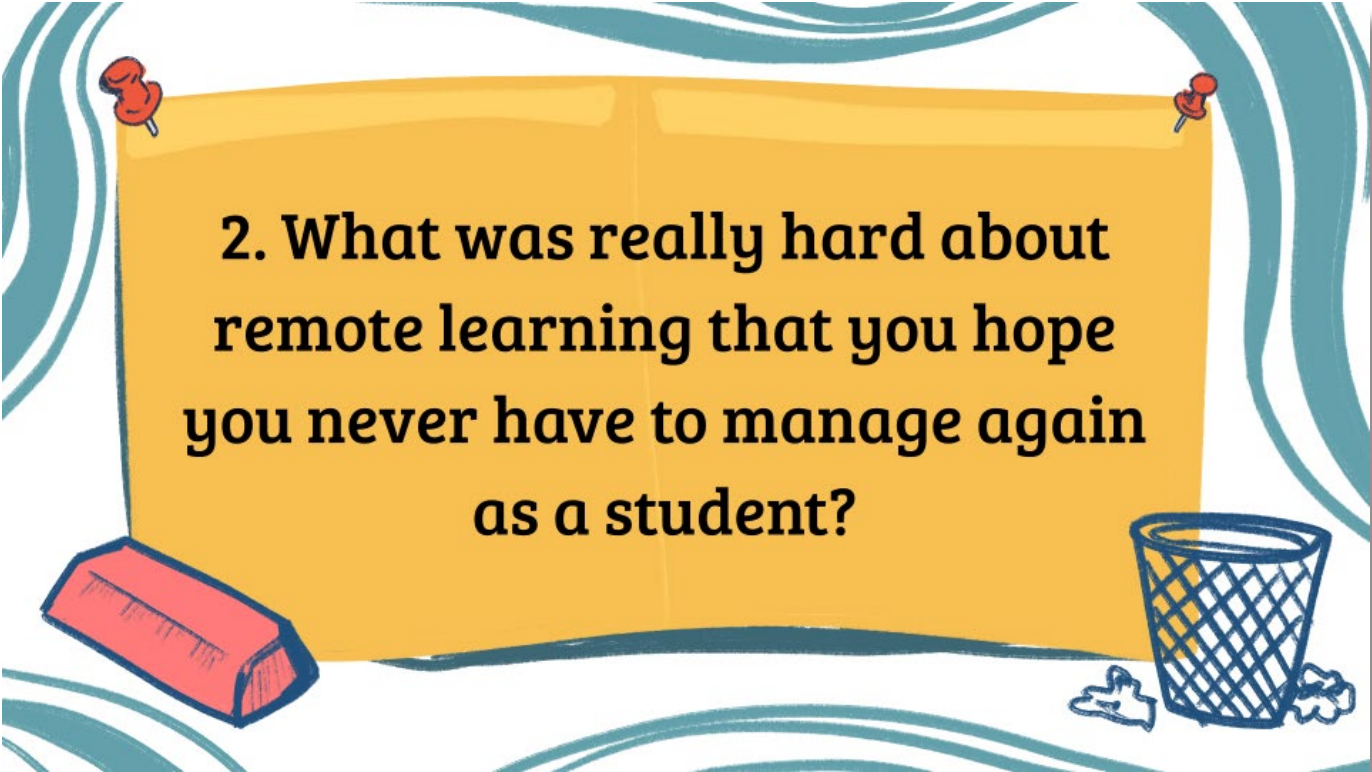
Appendix. A Toolkit for Reinventing and Rehumanizing Schools Post-COVID

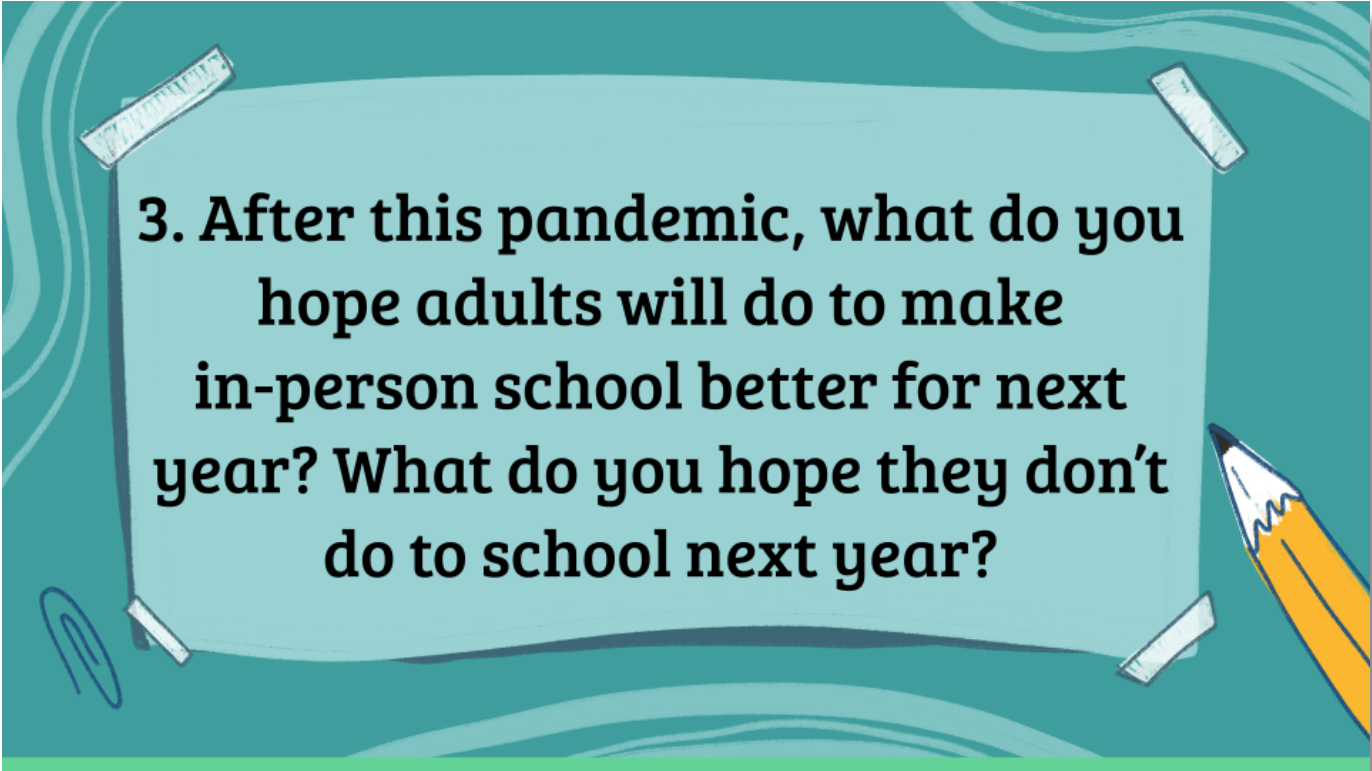## Imagining September Student Interview Protocol

The full interview protocol and activity slides are at bit.ly/imaginingseptember2021. Example slides for secondary school students are below, and at the linked resource there are slides for primary school students and translated into Spanish. Choose three to five of these questions to ask a group of students, and then find a group of adults to share your findings with.
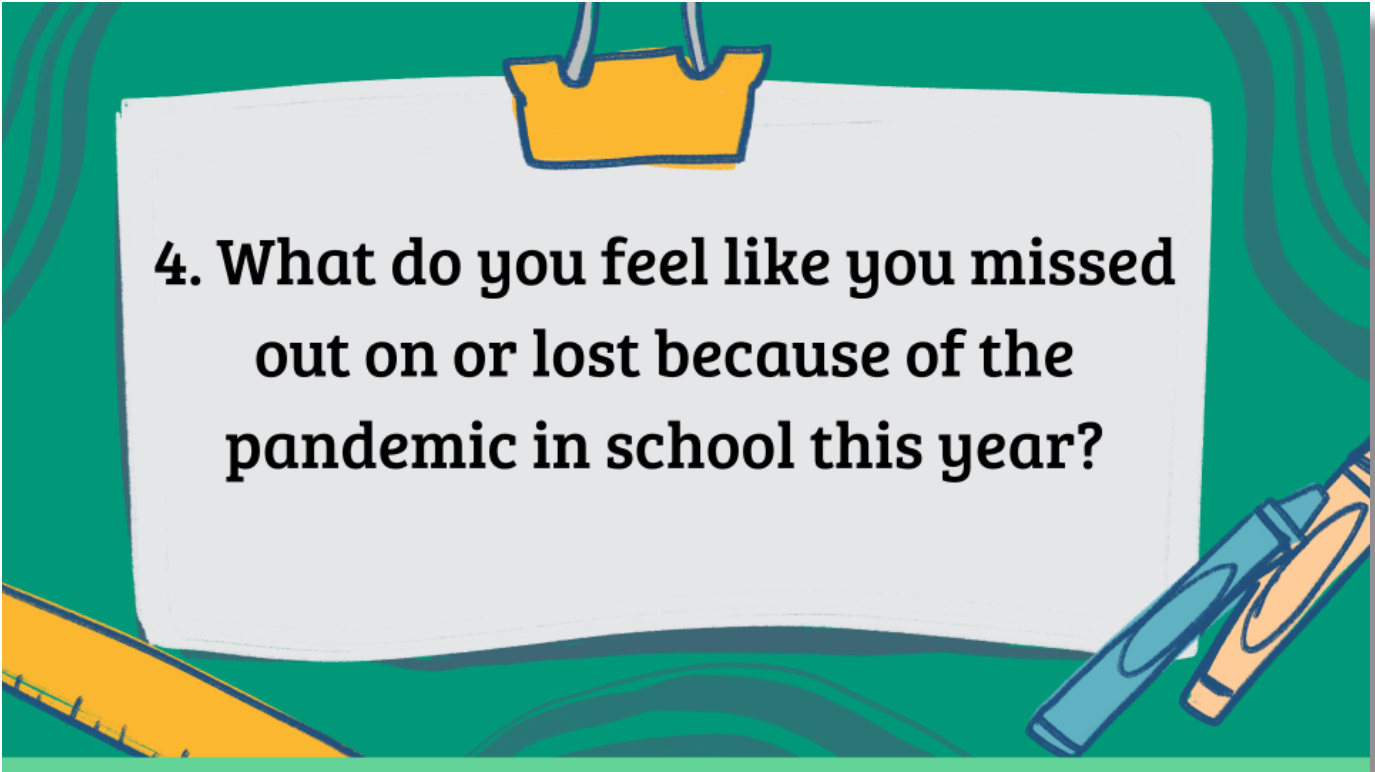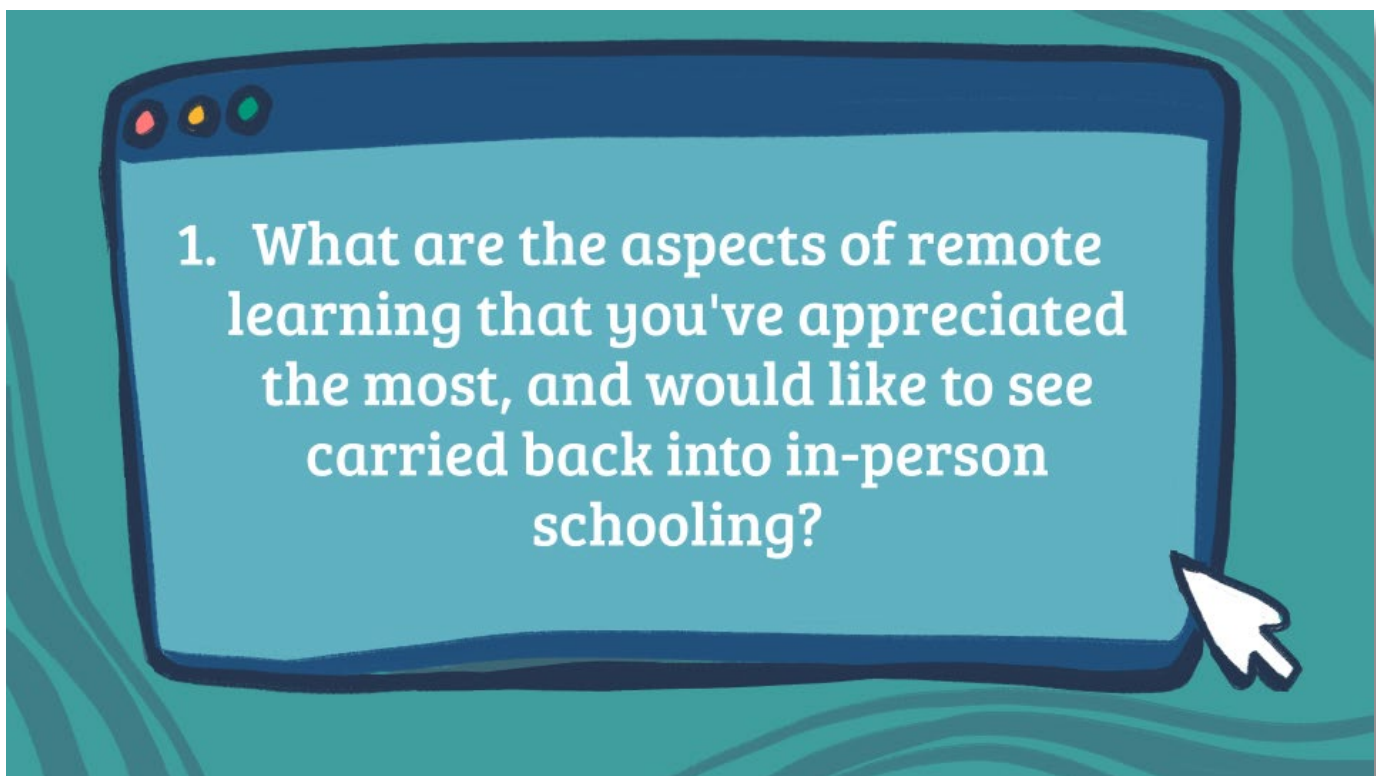
2. What was really hard about remote learning that you hope you never have to manage again as a student?

3. After this pandemic, what do you hope adults will do to make in-person school better for next year? What do you hope they don't do to school next year?

4. What do you feel like you missed out on or lost because of the pandemic in school this year?

5. What are you most proud of this year?

What Problems are Stakeholders Trying to Solve? (AKA Whose Problems)?

For the Whose Problems exercise, you can use posters with sticky notes (for in person facilitation) or use a collaborative whiteboard tool like Miro or Jamboard. Have participants brainstorm responses to the following four questions:

1. What problems are **students** hoping we solve next year?
2. What problems are **families** hoping we solve next year?
3. What problems are **teachers** hoping we solve next year?
4. What problems are **administrators** hoping we solve next year?

We have a sample jamboard that can be duplicated at https://bit.ly/whoseproblems2021. Once participants add their notes to each slide, take some time to read each and to let people move the notes into thematic clusters. As a debrief, ask participants to reflect on:

- Themes found in each poster/slide
- Themes that cut across multiple stakeholders
- Unique answers that seem important
- How this exercise helps frame similarities and differences in how participants view next year

We provide example responses below to provide facilitators a sense of the range of responses:

What Problems Are Families Hoping We Solve Next year?

How can I balance work and my children's scholastic needs?

honor our rights

Not put my kid back into a box: everybody doing the same thing at the same time in the same way

authentic engagment

For those who are ahead or behind, differentiate in ways that match.

Take my kids, please. But seriously: let me have the freedom to work and have a little bit of life and share the work of raising these humans. +100

Consistent schedules so that parents can plan and work

I think families have had a lot of choice this year -- I think there will be pressure to maintain a degree of choice

Meet my child where they are

Keep children engaged in active activities - don't rely so much on technology and screens to keep them in their seats

distribute materials, or use tactile materials that are cheap to get their hands working

Continuing to know my child as a learner the way I've been able to as I have listened to them learn remotely

How do I stay involved in my kid's learning?

Now that I have a better understanding of how mundane my child's classes are, I better understand why they feel disconnected with school. I'm expecting more from school now.

Wean them from screens

Keeping students safe in person while addressing the individual needs of students

keep it easy for me to eavesdrop/sit in on class--without being a pain in the butt to the teacher.

Help parents understand what's happening in the classroom - it's been nice to get a window into what they are doing each day

To feel connected to school and not kept away from the classroom

Keep the accessibility that Zoom has allowed for back to school night, parent conferences, etc.

respect

Hear, interact & partner with teachers more

Can we create a cohesive understanding of home-school (parent-teacher) relations?

Feeling like more of a partner with teachers in the curriculum

To keep up ways to be virtually engaged - so many families have been able to attend conferences, be a mystery reader in preschool, or attend IEP meetings because they are virtual

Having one contact point for the school even in higher grade levels

What Problems Are Teachers Hoping We Solve Next year?

Leadership opportunities

To receive similar supports that they provide to students.

Tests. Can we just solve the incredibly confusing and contradictory messages we get about assessment, tests, and grading?

Teaching just one subject and really knowing the students I'm teaching because I can see them all in person

Tolerance for low-leverage "administrative" work may be at an all-time low. How can I focus on what really matters?

Rest

autonomy

build my students' powers of self-direction--so the reasons my students are digging in have less to do with me

Decentralized curriculum options

Keeping the pieces of freedom from having "Marie-Kondo'd" the curriculum that allow for bringing in student interests

Problem: I kind of hate my job but I love my kids. Make my survival and well-being a priority.

Greater work/life balance

What will happen to any changes in the way that we've graded students? What should grading look like going forward?

How do we make sure that students who are behind get caught up?

Building on best of last year, ideally without too many meetings.

Problem: I am making this work, but no one is listening to how hard I am working, and how much I need support.

More classroom support to lighten the instructional demand

One teacher in our charrettes said, "my admin has been too busy to micromanage me this year"

Feel greater appreciation

Stronger and more consistent support structures

Who is addressing my trauma. Because I am having it too. From being evacuated from my town in California to riots and insurrections and global pandemics, I have some serious needs.

How can I focus on students' social emotional well-being?

For schools that moved to smaller class sizes, advisories, and lower teacher loads, keep that in place.

Safety Safety Safety

What Problems Are Admins Hoping We Solve Next year?

ACCOUNTABILITY!

Clear messaging from senior/executive leadership.

Realistic goals.

Union contracts --- how do we change our agreements about time given what we've learned this year?

more authonomy

How do I spend all of the stimulus funds?

COVID has changed the way our buildings work and the degree to which our buildings work for us. How do we fix facilities that aren't up to the the new socially distanced normality?

How do we dismantle white supremacy culture in our schools?

The pandemic will make our test scores look really look. People will want those test scores to be higher, and they'll want me to make it happen.

Juggling too many roles.

Effective PD that teachers are excited about.

To receive the same kinds of supports that they are told to provide to teachers.

How do I help teachers bridge from survival mode to thriving?

How do we go from holding people and just getting them through this to helping them to thrive?

What's a more sustainable model for doing this whole "school thing?"

How do we use spaces in the schools/community in creative ways to aid learning and keep everyone healthy?

Burnout --- how do we lead in a way that is sustainable given the heroic demands on school leaders?

How to not simply let things slip into the way things were

My teachers are really tired, and pretty fried from reinventing school. But I really don't want to go back to the before times, so I need them to keep reinventing school.

How do we capitalize on the good learning teachers have done this year and help them keep those parts in their repertoire?

Don't go back to normal, but don't have teachers revolt. Can I take my teachers to the Caribbean for a week?

How to utilize this moment to really rethinking what teaching and learning looks like, without pushing our staff too far...

Consistent and high quality leadership supports (coaching, etc)

How to push for needed change when people remain tired

How do I keep the teachers who are done? How can I tell them it will get better?

How do you balance the short-term and long-term strategies in addressing learning loss?

A clear path to remove problematic staff.

How to rethink practices so that they align with a trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning

Amplify / Hospice / Create

> **The Amplify / Hospice / Create activity involves having a group of stakeholders reflect on three questions:**
>
> - **What has gone well this year? What are some things we might want to amplify going forward?**
> - **What should we "hospice"? What can we let go? What do we not want to return to when we come back to post-pandemic school?**
> - **What can we create in the next year which will help us amplify the good and hospice what we should leave behind.**

We tested two different participation strategies. The first was a simple zoom chat exercise where we posed the three questions using a "waterfall" format. In the waterfall format, we posted one question, and asked people to type responses in the chat box but NOT to hit send until an agreed upon time (usually, about 5 minutes after starting). Then, everyone hits send at the same time and the responses all flow at the same time, like a waterfall.

We then encourage participants to review the responses, identifying common themes and important outliers. This discussion portion was often generative, as participants built on each other's ideas, extending them and helping them grow.

As an alternate facilitation approach, we also prepopulated a shared document (Google Doc) with a table similar to the Amplify / Hospice / Create table presented in the main text. We did this in groups of 6-10; if you have a larger group, we would suggest splitting them into groups of this size, and giving them each a separate break out space (virtual or in-person) and a separate shared document to work in. Then the larger group can come back together, look at each other's slides, and note commonalities or differences.

Metaphors as Tentpoles

We conducted this exercise in two parts, an individual brainstorm and a small group design exercise. The instructions for the individual brainstorm are as follows:

Metaphors for School Next Year

In this session, we're trying to develop "tentpole ideas" for schools next-year; design concepts that provide some organizational priority and clarity.

Metaphors are one way to start imagining models for school next year, so let's brainstorm some. Open a link below, turn off your video, turn your sound down if you like, and then follow the instructions for 10 minutes:

Working alone and quietly for 10 minutes, write down at least 7 possible metaphors for school next year. Then, pick 1-2 of the most promising metaphors, and add 5-10 bullets of key ideas or design elements that would be needed to bring these ideas to life. Put the key words of each change in bold.

Once participants finished, we had each participant share a metaphor that they began to develop. We then, as a group, chose three metaphors to discuss and develop in further depth. We invited small groups to proceed with these prompts:

Start with one big idea from the previous list, and then develop it in more detail.
To record your idea

- ****Narrate a story -- Diary Entry from a student point of view**
- **Make a list of design criteria and outcomes.**
- **Draw a picture, snap a photo and copy and paste into the doc**

When participants finished, we shared and discussed their responses.

Methodological Note

This report was written at the midpoint of our research to provide a timely resource for educators in the field. We conducted three kinds of research and data collection exercises.

1. **Student interviews:** We invited teachers to interview their students using the Imagining September questions found at bit.ly/imaginingseptember2021. We field tested the questions with a group of middle school students in Boston. The research opportunity was made available to teachers through Twitter and various educator networks, so the sample of teachers should be considered a convenience sample. Respondents represent all grades levels and from schools around the country, and even a few international schools, with an overrepresentation of teachers from Boston and the surrounding metro area where our own networks are densest. The respondents are diverse, but not a nationally representative sample. We conducted data analysis on the first 200 teachers to respond to the survey, reviewing their answers to three questions: What was consistent in the responses? What stood out to you? What will you do differently next year? We used an emic, grounded theory approach to identify key themes in the data, which we report on here.

2. **Design charrettes:** We invited ten groups of educators to participate in a design charrette planning exercise to inform the reopening of schools next year. Three groups were purposively sampled groups of educators and students from what we identified as high performing schools and school systems. We invited one group of educators in an urban school in Wisconsin to test the protocol with a single school community. Six groups participated in The Deeper Learning Dozen, a convening of schools and districts pursuing an action research agenda around deeper learning. In each charrette, we slightly modified and tuned the practices and protocols. We report the final versions in this document. Again, we used an emic, grounded theory approach to identify key themes in the data, which we report here.

3. **Teacher interviews:** A research team at the MIT Teaching Systems Lab interviewed 50 teachers from around the country to learn about their experience teaching during COVID. At the time of this writing, 20 interviews had been transcribed. We reviewed these transcripts, and we invited the researchers who conducted the interviews to review our findings and give feedback. More extensive research analysis from these interviews will be reported in future conversations, but initial themes from these conversations have informed our work and analysis.

The educators participating in our research studies may not be representative of all educators. The cross-cutting themes that we report on above represent important design hypotheses for how we can reflect on last year and build back better schools in the new year.