



Conversations with Kids:

WALKING THE ROAD TO REINVENTION

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2021-2022 School Year



Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. We support communities in creating and spreading extraordinary, equitable learning environments.

Inspired by what we are learning from communities across the country, we share insights to fuel progress and innovation for more and more schools.

To learn more about partnering with Transcend, reach out to us or visit our website.

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About the Author

Hello! I'm Jenee Henry Wood and I head learning for Transcend where I work to surface and share insights from our work in school communities across the country. I'm a former middle school social studies special educator where I co-taught in inclusion, resource, and self-contained classrooms. I'm passionate about sharing knowledge and collaborating across the education sector.



Jenee Henry Wood,
Head of Learning

Is your school community moving forward toward 21st century learning or backwards to the industrial model?

Schools are navigating extremely difficult circumstances and many conflicting pushes in this second full pandemic school year. They're being asked not only to educate young people but also to contend with health and safety, mental and emotional trauma, staff shortages, intermittent quarantines, and so many diverse learning and social needs. It's overwhelming and can feel deeply dispiriting, especially in contrast to the calm year we all hoped for (and desperately needed).

And yet, while it's an incredibly trying time, we are seeing so many schools meet this adversity with creativity, know-how, and deep love for young people. I'm so inspired by these communities and am coming to see that this year just might give us the most unique opportunity to reconnect with young people and center their voices in the discussion of what school could be.

We're challenging ourselves and inviting school communities—whenever the moment is right, amidst all that's happening—to start conversations with young people to better understand if our schools are moving toward the future. To support this, we have developed a resource grounded in our Leaps for Equitable 21st-Century Learning, essential shifts in young people's schooling experiences that unlock the infinite potential of every child.

School and system leaders, educators, and caregivers can use this resource to:

1. Listen to your young people. You can...

- Use our conversation guide to talk to one student or a small group of students, OR
- Survey groups of students with our online tool, and receive a confidential report with your results

2. Make meaning of what you hear from students. Determine if your school is moving forward toward more equitable and extraordinary experiences, or backwards to industrial-era learning

We hope this will be a valuable step on a journey to reimagining the purpose and experience of school. We know schools are in very different places; we're sharing this now so it's available whenever you and your school community are ready. Though this year looks very different than we'd hoped, it also represents a unique opportunity to engage students in charting the road ahead. Let's seize this moment to maximize young people's potential and prepare them to see, confront, and tackle society's greatest challenges.

- Jenee Henry Wood & the Transcend Family



"Typically the perspective of the student is overlooked, as if we're not fully conscious of our situation, which is something that just isn't true, especially today. I think in order to be a responsive school system, you need to understand the needs of the community, in this case the student population.

...Asking the right questions is very important to serve [students]."

- **Ali Khatib**, Senior at Salisbury High School in North Carolina

HOW IT *Works*

Step 1:

[GO TO STEP 1](#)

Learn the Leaps

Familiarize yourself with the Leaps for Equitable 21st-Century Learning. The Leaps describe how student experiences must change to be responsive to the demands of the 21st century.

Step 2:

[GO TO STEP 2](#)

Listen to Young People

Use the conversation starter guide for individual and small group discussions, or the online survey for larger groups of students.

Step 3:

[GO TO STEP 3](#)

Reflect on What You've Heard

Reflect on what you've heard from young people. Using the reflection guide consider your school's progress on the Leaps — are you moving forwards or backwards?

Step 1:

Learn the Leaps



At [Transcend](#), we believe learning environments must prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. However, the traditional industrial design of schooling that is still common today too often functions to sort, separate, and rank students in oppressive ways that reproduce inequities. The list below describes ten “leaps” that Transcend’s research and work with school communities reveals as important to move from inequitable, industrial-era learning to learning that is equitable and responsive to the demands and opportunities of the 21st century. At core, these leaps derive from a fundamentally different purpose of education—one that centers on equity, liberation, and human flourishing, so that all young people will not only maximize their own potential but also see, confront, and tackle society’s greatest challenges.

Inequitable, Industrial-Era Learning

Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

Unequal Expectations & Opportunities

The expectations and opportunities learners experience are determined at a young age and are modest for most, high for some, and disproportionately low for others, too often based on factors connected to a learner’s identity and background.

High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities

All learners experience high expectations and have equitable access to many opportunities, enabling them to progress toward their aspirations for themselves, their families, and the community—regardless of the time and support needed.

Narrow Focus

Learners engage in experiences focused primarily on the cognitive dimension of learning.

Whole-Child Focus

Learners engage in experiences that nurture the totality of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors that impact their learning, development, character, and overall health and well-being.

Rote Activities

Learners engage in memorizing and recalling a broad array of content and are assessed primarily on their ability to recall and explain this information.

Rigorous Learning

Learners use critical thinking skills to make deep meaning of diverse, complex ideas and are assessed on their ability to apply, analyze, and use their knowledge in creative ways across contexts.

Irrelevance

Learning is disconnected from young people’s interests and goals, as well as the real professional, personal, and societal challenges and endeavors they encounter in life.

Relevance

Learning explores young peoples’ interests and goals, is connected to their communities, and enables them to understand and tackle real problems in authentic contexts.

Assimilation & Marginalization

Learners from marginalized groups—such as people of color, LGBTQ learners, those living in poverty, multilingual learners, those with a disability, and others—are pushed to either conform to the dominant culture or risk alienation.

Affirmation of Self & Others

Each learner develops a unique, positive sense of self and purpose as well as a deep respect for the identities of others; these diverse identities are celebrated, nurtured, and leveraged in meaningful and anti-oppressive ways to support everyone’s learning.

Reinforcement of the Status Quo

Learners’ experiences are situated within societal structures related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and more that are implicitly accepted, directly perpetuated, or studied in ways that do not motivate massive change efforts.

Social Consciousness & Action

Learners critically examine social problems and work toward a more just world; they develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to continue taking anti-oppressive actions that disrupt and dismantle racism and other inequities.

Isolation

Building strong relationships is not prioritized; learners and adults work together in the same space, but often without knowing one another deeply, and teaching and learning approaches prioritize independent work and competition.

Connection & Community

The environment is relationship-rich: learners are deeply known and respected by a variety of adults and peers; collaborate closely; and form meaningful relationships across lines of difference that nurture empathy, foster belonging, support well-being, and build social capital.

Inflexible Systems

Learners experience rigid structures and policies that batch those of the same age together and engage them in the same content through the same activities at the same pace—holding some learners back from more advanced content and activities and leaving others behind.

Customization

The focus, pace, and sequence of learning, as well as the resources and supports provided, are tailored to each learner’s identity, prior knowledge, development, way of learning, and life experiences, ensuring that all learners have what they need to be successful and those who need more receive more.

Passive Compliance

Learners are expected to passively absorb the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and behaviors modeled and taught by adults and are pushed to comply with rules and routines developed for them through extrinsic rewards and punitive consequences.

Active Self-Direction

Young people are active drivers of their learning; they grapple directly with concepts while receiving adult and peer guidance and support; they have a voice in decisions about how and what they learn, so that the process grows agency and meaningfully builds on their interests and prior knowledge.

Siloed Schooling

Learning is largely confined to school—a physical space with a fixed schedule and teachers who take on all, or most of, the responsibility for educating students—and learning outside of school is far more available to those with substantial economic and social capital.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning

Learning can happen anywhere and at any time for all learners with teachers, families, community members, and other important figures in a young person’s life all playing important educational roles.

Step 2:

Listen to Young People



OPTION 1:

Have a conversation with one student or a small group of students using the *Kid Conversation Starter Guide*.

Use the conversation prompts to learn about how young people are experiencing school. These starter questions will give you insights around whether your school community is moving forwards or backwards on the Leaps for Equitable 21st-Century Learning. We recommend these questions for grades five and above. If using with younger students or children who learn differently, you can tailor these questions for their comprehension. Time may be limited, so we recommend choosing one to two questions from each section.

[CLICK HERE](#)
to go to the
[Conversation](#)
Guide

OPTION 2:

Survey groups of students with our online tool, and receive a confidential report with your results

[CLICK HERE](#)
to learn more
about how the
survey works

If you want to gather information about the experiences of groups of students, this survey tool will help. It was developed to determine whether students' experiences reflect the Leaps for Equitable 21st-Century Learning, as a way to gather first hand accounts of students' experiences. Once your students complete the survey, you will be able to access a summary report, along with supporting resources, that you can use to have conversations within your learning community. If you are interested in a deeper, more customized analysis, please contact us at data@transcendeducation.org



Step 2:

Listen to Young People



Kid Conversation STARTER GUIDE

Use the questions below to learn more about...

...whether learning is meaningful, challenging, and tailored to young people's needs:

- When do you learn the most at school? Tell me about that class or experience.
- Tell me about something you're doing in school that matters a lot to you. Why does it matter? How will you use it today or in the future?
- Tell me about something you're doing in school that is super challenging for you. Are you getting the help that you need to not give up?
- What's something that you've made or built at school that you're very proud of? How come?

LEAPS ILLUMINATED: *Customization, Rigor, Relevance, and High Expectations*

...whether young people are developing a positive sense of self and preparing to take meaningful action against inequity:

- When do you get to be yourself at school? Tell me what that feels like.
- When in school do you get to learn about who you are as a person? What is that like?
- When in school do you learn about people who are different from you? What is that like?
- When in school do you talk about problems happening in the world?
- When in school do you get to do something that makes the world a better place?
- Does school make you feel proud about your neighborhood, home, or where you come from?

LEAPS ILLUMINATED: *Affirmation, Social Consciousness & Action*

...to what extent children have control over what, how, and where they learn:

- When do you get to make choices about what you're doing in school? Tell me about that.
- If you could be learning anything at school, what would it be and why?
- Does your school give you opportunities to learn outside the classroom or the school day?
- What did you like most or least about remote learning during the pandemic? Did you learn anything new about yourself?
- If you had to do remote school again, what would make it better for you?

LEAPS ILLUMINATED: *Anytime/Anywhere Learning, Self-Direction*

...to what degree is school a relationship-rich environment nurturing the totality of factors that impact learning:

- Who loves and cares about you at school? How do you know?
- Can you be yourself at school or do you feel pressure to fit in? How so?
- Does your school help you learn to be happy and healthy? How so?
- When do you learn about things other than math, reading, or science at school?
- Do you learn from people other than teachers at school? How so?

LEAPS ILLUMINATED: *Whole Child, Connection & Community*

Step 2:

Listen to Young People



Student Experience SURVEY

How the Survey Works:

1. Once you click on the link below and complete the form, a Transcend team member will reach out to you to support you in administering the Leaps Student Voice survey.
2. This survey is designed for students grades three and above, and is currently available in English and Spanish.
3. Surveys can be totally anonymous or you can provide a roster through a secure upload link to allow for disaggregation of results by learner characteristics such as race, grade, gender, or any other factor relevant to your context.
4. You will also be provided a link to access your report and conversation resources, along with the opportunity to have a Transcend team member facilitate meaning making.
5. We will not share this data in a way that associates the responses with you or your school/district without your express written consent.

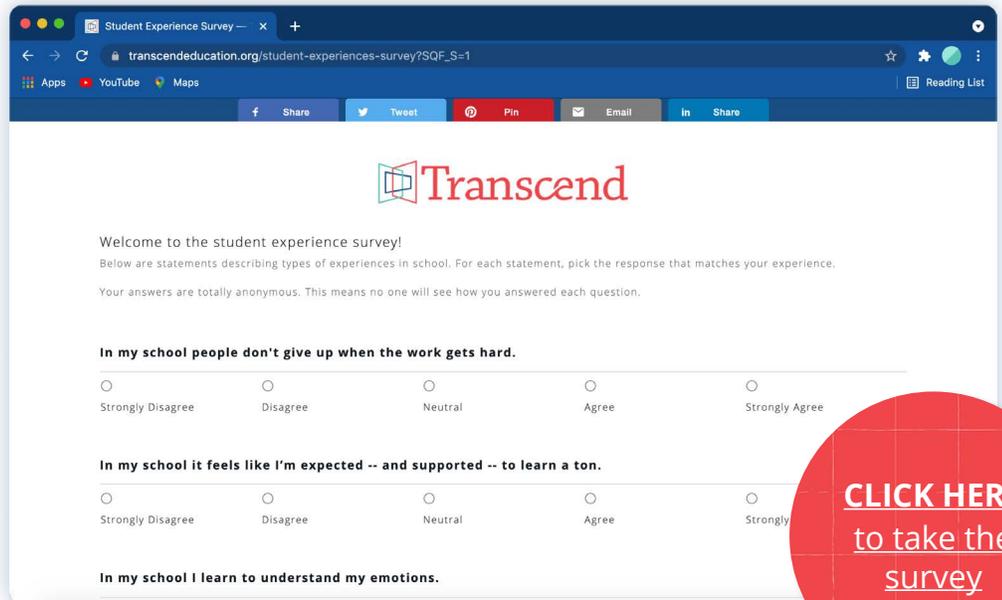


Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Step 3:

Reflect on What You Heard



Adult Reflection GUIDE

What have students revealed about your school community's progress towards 21st-Century Learning — are you moving forward or settling backwards into the industrial model? After your conversations, use the spectra below to reflect on your school community's Leaps progress. Fill in the circle that best represents what you've heard and learned. Dots to the left suggest industrial-era student experiences, dots to the right suggest movement towards 21st century learning, and the middle dot can represent mixed evidence. This reflection tool will help you and your school community brainstorm specific future focus areas grounded in the Leaps.

Consider This:

For each Leap think about what it might take for your school community to make progress toward 21st century learning.

What design choices, resources, or other steps would it take?

Unequal Expectations & Opportunities  **High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities**

Narrow Focus  **Whole-Child Focus**

Rote Activities  **Rigorous Learning**

Irrelevance  **Relevance**

Assimilation & Marginalization  **Affirmation of Self & Others**

Reinforcement of the Status Quo  **Social Consciousness & Action**

Isolation  **Connection & Community**

Inflexible Systems  **Customization**

Passive Compliance  **Active Self Direction**

Siloed Schooling  **Anytime, Anywhere Learning**

Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Follow-Up Probes



Sometimes conversations can fall into the “yes/no” trap. To get as much learning as possible, you’ll want to probe young people with follow-up questions. Below are some of our handy go-tos.

- • • ○ Tell me more about that.
- • • ○ Does your answer change by class or teacher?
- • • ○ What makes you say that?
- • • ○ Can you give me an example?



Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Principles for Listening ○.....

Listen with Intentionality

Focus on what the young person is sharing with you, rather than your opinion about their perspective, needs, and aspirations.

Listen From a Place of Love

Be humble and acknowledge that you are not the expert on a young person's experience.



Trust the Narrator

Respect and honor their worldview. Stay curious about what makes them hold their opinions instead of applying your own lens or drawing hasty conclusions.

Trust the Process

Sometimes the conversation will require you to take detours. Follow the conversation where it leads; it might uncover gems.

Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Pitfalls to Avoid



Below are some common pitfalls that prevent us from having a strong conversation. Often, these are habits that have become part of how we communicate. Consider each of these pitfalls so that you can prepare to have a strong, student-centered conversation.

ASSUMING

Drawing an unsubstantiated conclusion based on prior knowledge, experiences, or stereotypes. *Example: Most kids her age listen to hip-hop, therefore it is the best tool to augment relevance.*

SILVER LINING

Cheering up, downplaying, reassuring; trying to make them feel better or different immediately. *Example: It's not so bad. There's nothing to be upset about. Don't cry, it's not the end of the world. You'll feel better soon. (Notice how we do this to kids all the time!)*

FIXING

Giving solutions, advice, beliefs or opinions. *Example: You should try ... Have you thought of ...? When I was in that situation, I just ...*

INTERROGATING

Asking questions in an evaluative, analytical way. *Example: What did he mean? Why did you do that? What were you thinking? What are you going to do about it?*

DISCOUNTING

Minimizing the person's feelings by blaming, criticizing, disagreeing, or defending someone else. *Example: You are being oversensitive. I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you. You should have known better. Why didn't you think about that before?*

THUNDER-STEALING

Shifting the focus to yourself. *Example: What happened to me was way worse. Now you know how I felt when ___ happened to me. You think you have it bad? Just listen to what happened to me.*

SYMPATHIZING

Feeling sorry for them, showing pity. *Example: Oh, you poor thing. Poor baby. Oh, bless your heart. I'm sorry that happened to you.*

Now What?

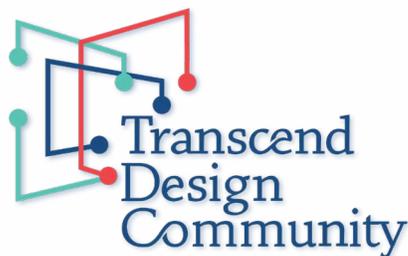


Listening is just the start: How can you walk the road to reinvention together *with* young people?

You've listened to students. You've gotten insights. You've considered whether your schools are making Leaps for Equitable 21-st Century Learning. You may be challenged. Inspired. Provoked. What's next? Here are just a few resources:

Continue this conversation with like-minded education leaders from across the country by joining the Transcend Design Community:

The [Transcend Design Community \(TDC\)](#) is a free, vibrant network of leaders, educators, and designers of innovative schools and learning environments, along with talented individuals and organizations who support them.



Deepen your exploration of school design and reinvention:

- Get to know [contemporary trends](#) that have implications for today's schools
- Engage with our [designing for learning resources](#) that introduce the four key factors that impact learning
- See how school communities across the country are making progress on the Leaps with [this expanded resource](#)
- Read about using a [school design blueprint](#) to accelerate your school design journey

- Explore resources on specific practices that support goals like [mental health](#) and [accelerated learning](#)
- [Sign up for our newsletter](#) to get the latest resources as they come out

If you are interested in exploring ways Transcend can support your school's design journey, please email us at:

hello@transcendeducation.org