



RESPONDING

RECOVERING

REINVENTING

*Three Jobs That Matter for School  
Communities Navigating a COVID World*

April 2020



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

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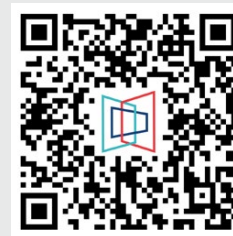
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In a flash, communities across the country have found themselves dealing with the greatest disruption to schooling—and life—in more than a generation. This *learning note* draws from many conversations we’re having with schools, systems, educators, supporters, and families. As we see daily examples of this pandemic’s cruel and inequitable impact, we acknowledge that intellectualizing in the midst of suffering is a privilege and risks insensitivity. However, we know that in the coming weeks and months, school communities will face consequential decisions that will reverberate for decades. We hope this perspective can help our field to collectively forge solutions in the interests of expanding opportunity for ALL young people to thrive.

We believe all school communities will be faced with three core “jobs” over the coming months and years:

### JOB 1 RESPONDING

*Now–Winter 2020*

*This work is about dealing with the immediate emergency, including basic needs, emotional support, and continuity of learning. From day one, educators and administrators have been heroically working to ensure students’ needs are met, executing distance learning, offering trauma support, and communicating with families. Responses range from chaos to coping to truly continuing learning. By necessity, educators have been innovating on so many fronts, and those seeing the greatest success are also reaping benefits from design and implementation choices made in the months and years **before** this crisis. (Read more [here](#))*

### JOB 2 RECOVERING

*Spring 2020–Winter 2021*

In the midst of a crisis, it can be hard to even think about recovery. However, this vital work will be about healing, recouping learning, restoring community, reflecting on what happened, getting ready for what’s ahead, and ultimately making a key choice: how much energy will we devote to resuming school as it was vs. rethinking what it could be? *This choice point may represent one of the most important moments of leverage for altering the trajectory of schooling in America. (Read more [here](#))*

### JOB 3 REINVENTING

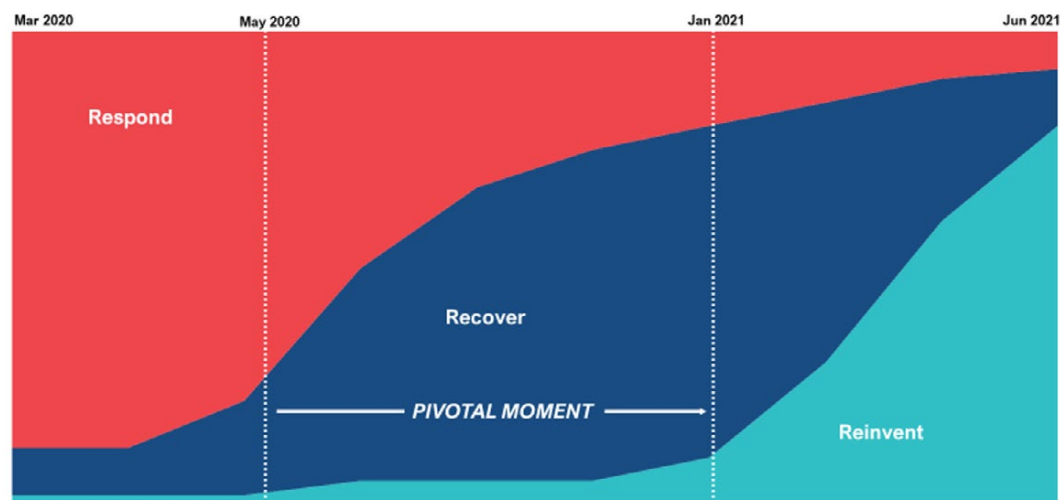
*Fall 2020 Onward*

This work will depend heavily on what school communities choose to do as they recover. *Those that primarily resume school as it was will likely return to similar trajectories. Those who devote energy towards rethinking and reimagining schooling can be on a journey of “community-based R&D,” systematically cultivating better practices, structures, and capabilities towards local visions of extraordinary and equitable learning. (Read more [here](#))*

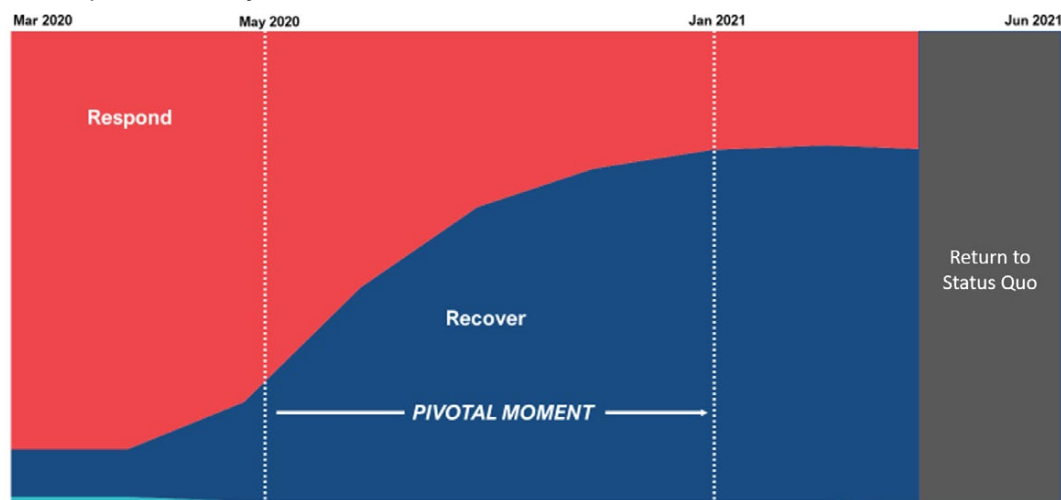
Schools are no strangers to any of these jobs—they’ve had to respond and recover and (in some cases) reinvent in reaction to past crises. However, the magnitude and duration of this disruption presents a tremendous opportunity to profoundly affect the trajectory of schooling. School communities’ abilities to lean into reinvention will depend on the energy, resources, and capacity to do all three jobs well. On the next page, we included a graphical representation of how the coming months could unfold, depending on whether school communities orient to Recovery work as a foundation for Reinvention.

## A Graphical Representation of How The Coming Months Could Unfold

*What's possible if schools use Recovery work as a foundation for Reinvention.*



*What's probable if they don't.*



At Transcend, we are calling on ourselves—alongside many other partners and supporters—to offer resources and capacities that can support schools to take on this work, with particular attention to the task of recovering in ways that orient towards reinventing. We think this will require expert guidance, practical and efficient tools, models that can be borrowed and adapted, and networks that allow schools to share and learn with those that are most relevant to them. Philanthropy has an especially important role to play so schools are not forced to choose between getting vital support for innovation vs. meeting basic needs, especially as many schools will face severe budget cuts. Lastly, system and policy leaders have key roles to play in setting up the structures and incentives that will encourage recovery towards reinvention. (Read more about these roles [here](#))

While our observations throughout this note are not new, we hope this synthesis can be useful for anyone supporting school communities. We welcome your feedback, ideas, and collaboration [here](#).

Yours in partnership,

Transcend's [Team](#) and [Board](#)

## JOB 1 RESPONDING

Now–Winter 2020

It is not an understatement to say that across the country, we are experiencing a collective trauma, with disparate impact across racial and socio-economic lines. We know from a growing body of research that the effects of trauma are profound and long-lasting. These adverse experiences are diverse and complex, for example: children and adults trapped in abusive homes with nowhere to go, families whose breadwinners can no longer provide for basic needs, caregivers who cannot work because there is no childcare, heightened fear of racialized policing, deepening and widening food insecurity, increased risk for people with compromised immune systems, not to mention actual illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths. Amidst all this pain and uncertainty, we are also seeing incredible acts of service and love for community. With little notice and no precedent, school communities all across the country have mobilized themselves to meet a wide range of needs for students and families. To ensure that learning continues, teachers are integrating new tools and skills into their practices. In communities where school food is a vital lifeline, districts are sending school buses on deliveries. Parents and families are creating virtual pop-up homeschools, tending to everything from academics, to arts, to ethics. In this moment, we are seeing collective resilience and creativity on full display.

*“We have seen amazing work from teachers, students, and families and their adjustment to a remote learning model – using Zoom, Google Classrooms....our attendance is higher than it has been all year! Students are advocating like never before. They are appreciating our efforts **and** demanding even more – better lessons, better instructions, no packets, they want live instruction. I feel immensely proud of what we’re doing to make the best of a tough situation.”*

*- School Leader*

Despite these herculean acts, it is evermore apparent that schooling in America isn’t designed for learning to continue in this way. The work of school communities is enormously challenging in any circumstance, but COVID further exposes shortcomings of the industrial design of mainstream schooling. When students have not practiced setting goals or taking charge of their learning, they struggle to self-direct when working remotely. When students work on academic subjects that don’t feel relevant to each other or to real life, it’s harder to stay motivated without a teacher’s oversight. When students are grouped and moved forward by age regardless of what they have or haven’t learned, it is much harder for teachers to meet them where they are. When families are disconnected from students’ learning, it’s harder for them to get involved in moments like this. When school largely focuses on the intellectual side of students’ development, it is challenging to tend to foundational needs like identity affirmation and belonging. When technology is used in peripheral ways, it is all the harder to take advantage of it for flexible learning. The shortcomings of the industrial design of school have always been problematic and inequitable, but in moments that truly stress the system, they are even more acute.

Despite the heroism and dedication of individual educators, school communities as a whole vary in how well they are responding to the crisis—ranging across a spectrum from chaos to coping to truly continuous learning. ***What we’re observing is that a school community’s readiness to respond is partly a function of all they are doing now but even more a function of choices made months and years ago about the foundational design of their learning model.*** Those faring better have already reimagined key aspects of the industrial design and built out the capabilities, community connections, and practices that support students well. For example, Van Ness, an elementary school in Washington, DC, continues to cultivate emotional well-being and connection virtually through their [Strong Start model](#), a set of rituals and routines that prepares students to learn by fostering a sense of safety, belonging, community, and self-efficacy. Design Tech High School in the Bay Area is leveraging their virtual learning environment and student-centered culture to continue providing authentic connection through their advisory structure, cultivating a deep sense of belonging and emotional safety in a time where that is more

needed than ever. Intrinsic, a school in Chicago, has been able to quickly move components of their approach to remote learning that are giving their students access to extracurricular activities, rigorous independent reading activities, personal check-ins with advisors, and space to be in community with other students during Circle time. At Lindsay Unified, a district in California’s Central Valley, buildings closed on a Tuesday; on Wednesday morning, students continued working on their academic and personal goals through rigorous academic playlists and self-directed learning, small group virtual readers’ workshop sessions, and individual check-ins between educators and students. Students, educators, and parents didn’t miss a beat thanks to the investments Lindsay had made in a competency-based learning structure, as well as in the technology infrastructure needed to provide not just devices free of cost to students’ homes, but also connectivity to all families.

The last—and perhaps the scariest—thing to say about this moment of crisis response is that we don’t know when it will be over. Even if we “flatten the curve” and see the number of cases decline, it’s unclear when it will be safe to re-open school buildings. The threat of recurrent viral cycles means that physical school buildings may experience episodic openings and closings, with very little notice. Discontinuous attendance will likely be a major hurdle schools face, as students and their

*“We are still in the thick of figuring out the basic needs of students; my last two days, 95% was waiting for computer shipments to get in, sanitizing them, figuring out logistics for pick up, setting up hand sanitizer and putting social distancing measures in place; organizing with the church to figure out food delivery, trying to figure out how to connect with the kids we can’t get; our social worker has worked 18 hour days trying to figure out the 20 kids we can’t get in touch with, our homeless kids; we’ve got 6 emails with 14 action steps in the last day from the district; hiring, panel interviews... scheduling interviews; we know our budgets are about to be cut, we know we will need to cut people. My band width is hiring and budget, outside of basic needs.”*

- School Leader

families cope with vulnerability to illness. So there is no definitive end to the job of responding to crisis—it may well become the “new normal.”

## A Look at How Schools and Districts are Progressing in Response to the COVID Crisis

**The need for fast and agile responses may be pushing districts to work in new ways.**

The [Center for Research on Public Education](#) (CRPE) is observing some districts:

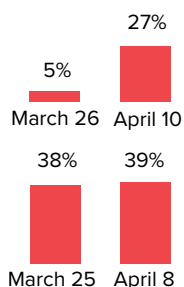


Break down departmental silos and increase collaboration.



Show a new focus on short- and long-term planning.

**While districts are improving their remote learning plans, most teachers are still not interacting with the majority of their students on a daily basis.**



Out of 82 districts surveyed by [CRPE](#), the number offering curriculum, instruction, and progress monitoring remotely increased by 22% from March 26 to April 10.

[EdWeek](#) reports, 39% of surveyed teachers were interacting with the majority of their students daily as of April 8, only a 1% increase from March 25.

**In spite of progress over the last month, large numbers of students are absent from remote learning, and the numbers are larger in higher-poverty communities.**



[EdWeek](#) reports that, on average, 21% of students, or about 1-in-5, are not logging in or making any contact.



This number is 1-in-3 students in districts where more than three-quarters of students are from lower-income families.

## JOB 2 RECOVERING

Spring 2020–Winter 2021

Despite the lack of a definitive “end” to the response work, school communities will face new choice points beyond emergency crisis management. While acknowledging that the profound loss wrought by this crisis can make moving forward hard to even imagine, we are calling this second job “Recovering.” For most communities, recovering will begin in late spring and will persist—in some form—throughout the coming school year. Whether implicitly or explicitly, school communities will face a profound choice during this period of recovery: *“How much energy do we put towards restarting what we were doing pre-pandemic, and how much do we put towards **rethinking and redesigning** aspects of our approach?”* **We believe that this choice represents a significant inflection point in the trajectory of schooling in America.**

As they head into recovery, schools will be contending with new realities. Children will be returning having experienced varying traumas, compounded by lack of consistent access to peers, teachers, and services. Academically, children may be in a range of places—some severely behind (a particular concern for children with learning differences for whom remote learning often requires additional accommodation) and others far ahead, having the privilege of resources and the agency to own and advance their learning. Parents and families will similarly be in very different places. All will have even greater appreciation for teachers, and some will have deeper insights into their children’s experiences, with real questions about the schooling process.

*“I’m not sure we are going to be doing school in the same way going forward,”*  
*Maryland State Superintendent of Schools*  
*Karen Salmon told state lawmakers*  
*–The Baltimore Sun*

Educators and administrators will also have come through [quite a journey](#). Perhaps never before in the history of professional learning have educators grown their repertoires of instructional methods in so short a period of time. Educators, school leaders, and systems have been forced to embark on rapid experimentation. In the process, they have acquired hard-earned innovation muscle, as they have mobilized their crisis response so quickly. This is a valuable asset, and they have an opportunity to sustain the momentum and extend it into the reinvention of their learning models. Some are already seeing unexpected benefits in these new approaches—for example, we’ve heard from one system leader that principals are finding value in coaching teachers remotely, using video and different modes for reflection. Lastly, teachers, students, and parents are gaining even greater appreciation for the importance of relationships and belonging within their learning communities.

As they confront these new realities, schools will feel it necessary to regain stability and continuity. Many will feel pulled to get back on their feet and restart in the same manner as before. Others, however, are already expressing a desire to [use this moment to rethink](#) key aspects of their approaches.



We hypothesize that school communities using this critical period of recovery to rethink and reimagine will need to:

- **Bring together a diverse “recovery coalition”** so key stakeholders are involved and invested. It will be critical to bring diverse perspectives to the table so their unique needs, lessons, and experiences inform the path forward. This can look like convening a “design team” of families, students, educators, and other key community members.
- **Take stock of what happened** and the consequences of choices made. This step involves gathering evidence and making meaning of it, to assess response measures (including prior design choices) and their impact on various groups. This helps communities notice and understand what worked, acknowledge and diagnose what didn’t, and consider implications for what comes next.
- **Tend to trauma and loss** so the school community can be a welcoming and healing space for adults and children, where learning can be recovered and relationships can be cultivated and deepened. Increasingly, models and practices exist to support communities with restoration, mental health, academic intervention, and whole-child well-being. These approaches help schools foster safety and mitigate anxiety by promoting connection and belonging.
- **Prioritize key design choices** that will have the greatest impact – now and over time. In the recovery mode, these design choices will be taken in response to pressing, pragmatic questions and challenges that schools face, such as those listed at right.
- **Plan for implementation and iteration** by finding, borrowing, and adapting solutions from other places and setting up structures to continually assess and adjust over time. Particularly given the possibility of future and/or rolling closures, schools need to have structures in place that enable them to make intentional decisions in fluid situations.

These tasks are not easy—especially with all the pressures school communities are under—but we believe they are doable with the right kinds of support and capacity. In this moment of recovery, the choice to *reinvent* doesn’t mean having all the answers or even prioritizing drastic shifts immediately. It means taking on pressing challenges with an orientation of rethinking old ways to find practical solutions for today and committing to a path of bold, equitable innovation over time.

## Sample Questions to Consider When Prioritizing Design Choices

How might we cultivate the kinds of relationships that hold students emotionally through the kind of massive turmoil we’ve been through and mitigate the effects of trauma?



How can we respond to the increased variability of student knowledge and skills in more personalized ways, so that students who fell behind catch up fast and students who raced ahead can keep learning?



Since buildings may close again at any point, and some teachers and students may not be able to come in due to vulnerability to illness, how can we ensure that continuity of learning does not depend on students or staff being physically present?



How might we partner more deeply and effectively with parents/guardians and other community members, so they can stay plugged in to their children’s learning and play meaningful roles?



With the budget cuts we’re facing, how must we rethink various parts of our model, so students can be as well-served as possible?





## JOB 3 REINVENTING

Fall 2020 Onward

This pandemic has shown the importance of having scientists, creative problem-solvers, compassionate caregivers, effective leaders, critical consumers of information, and civic-minded citizens. How can we make sure our learners are on the path to having the knowledge, skills, and agency needed to prevent, address, and solve the kinds of societal problems presented by challenges like COVID—not just in the future, but quite literally today?

School communities that make the most of the recovery will see gains across three areas that are critical to “reinvent” the paradigm of school in lasting ways:

1. **Stronger [conditions](#) for design and change**, including greater conviction, clarity, coalition, capacity, and a culture of innovation.
2. **A coherent vision for the overall learning environment**, with strong, well-implemented designs for key components of learners’ experiences. These designs will be more holistic, learner-centered, and flexible—making a number of “[leaps](#)” beyond the industrial paradigm.
3. **A network of supportive relationships** with other schools, model- and solution-providers, experts, TA providers, funders, and support organizations who can help make the vision a reality.

Reinvention is not about instantaneous transformation. It entails ongoing cycles of defining vision, borrowing and building model components, testing them out, gathering evidence of what’s working, and learning throughout the process. We call these cycles a “community-driven R&D” process. It can feel overwhelming to embark on a new process, but schools do not have to start from zero – especially if they have momentum from recovery efforts. In addition, a growing number of schools and other entities (including Valor, Summit Learning, Van Ness Elementary, New Classrooms, and EL, as examples) have rigorously developed models with communities and have codified them for others to adopt. These “model providers” are critical players in this moment because they can

help lower the lift required to rethink the nature of school.

Furthermore, though “R&D” can sound daunting, these cycles can be done in bite-sized ways, focused on immediate problems of practice, such as: *How can we catch up learners who are behind in math?* Cycles can grow bigger to include questions such as: *How can we begin to move towards a more competency-based approach?* Ultimately, this series of changes can add up to true transformation of learning environments over time.



## In closing...

We don't yet know exactly how these three jobs will play out, but we do believe that the choices each school community makes — especially when undertaking recovery — will have a major impact on how their trajectory unfolds.

What can supporters do? Much great work is already happening to support schools in their response work. But what will they need to **recover** in ways that set them up to **reinvent** over time? We believe that funders, policy-makers, system leaders, and support organizations can play a pivotal role in this by:

1. Helping school communities navigate the likely crushing financial burdens they will face. This means supporting them not only with emergency relief but also with capacity for recovering in ways that lead them to reinvent, so they don't have to choose between reinventing vs. meeting basic needs. This includes concrete tools, capacity, and expertise to go through the recovery process in ways that allow for reinventing.
2. Helping them cut through the deluge of resources out there, with curated, practical models and solutions that allow them to reinvent in concrete and proven ways.
3. Helping them to connect to other school communities operating in similar contexts to share resources, participate in learning experiences, and understand solutions for the range of complex problems schools and systems are encountering.
4. Investing in the codification and sharing of models and solutions that appear to be working, so schools have more and better options of solutions to adopt, thus lowering the innovation barriers to entry.
5. Reexamining policies to encourage and support sustained innovation towards learner-centered environments, along the lines of these recommendations from the [Aurora Institute](#).

In these challenging times, we're inspired by the ways individuals and organizations across the sector are stepping up and leaning in to ensure that young people continue to learn and grow. Together with many others in the field, Transcend is committed to supporting school communities as they build more equitable, responsive, and holistic learning experiences that can withstand and thrive in volatile times.

*“We’ve been talking a lot about massive disruptions opening new opportunities for systems change.*

*A usual reason given for why transformative systems change can't happen is that you'd have to blow up the existing system to do so Well, consider us blown up.”*

*-Tulaine Montgomery and  
Kim Syman of New Profit*

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