

Transform Learning WITH COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN

How can school communities come together to reimagine learning for the 21st century?



Fall 2023

by Jenee Henry Wood &
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Every member of our team contributed to this report at some point along the journey. Thank you. Your ideas, encouragement, and assistance made this more impactful. The following Transcenders deserve special commendation:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Community-Based Design

“The boldness of community-based design is that students help to lead the work. This isn’t just another strategic planning process. Students’ voices matter and they are at the center of the process; this just doesn’t happen in school improvement generally.”

- Dr. Lynn Moody, Former Superintendent of
Rowan-Salisbury Schools

For a long while, many have agreed that the 100-year-old industrial design of same-age, standardized progression in schools is neither effective nor equitable. **But how do we go about changing such an entrenched model?**

We’ve learned that making big and long-lasting changes in the design of schools requires working together as a community: young people, caregivers, teachers, experts, and other important community members coming together to figure out what kinds of learning experiences will help kids succeed in the future. We subscribe to an approach called community-based design.

Community-based design is a local process where young people, educators, administrators, caregivers, and experts come together to collaboratively design better learning experiences and outcomes.

The goals of community-based design are to create powerful school designs that provide extraordinary and equitable learning

This resource is designed to help schools, communities, and systems understand the power of community-based design as a pathway to transforming learning environments and opportunities. Here’s what you’ll find:

1. An overview of community-based design—its aims and how it works
2. Links to tools that will help you engage one of the most important features of the community-based design journey—understanding the experiences of young people in your schools and classrooms
3. Profiles of school communities who have embarked on community-based design journeys, including the results and lessons emerging from their efforts

experiences and better outcomes for all young people, preparing them for this century’s greatest challenges.

Community-based design is an empowering process that harnesses untapped strengths and brings communities together around the shared goal of creating more extraordinary and equitable learning environments for all young people. At a time when so much of the country—including education—is polarized, we need processes that bring communities together more than ever. This work has never been more necessary, and more possible.

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INTRODUCTION:

What is Community-Based Design?

"In the conversations I have with fellow superintendents there is a feeling like there was a big moment during the pandemic when we all recognized that schools needed to change. Well, where is the change?

We are still doing the same thing we've done for 100 years. The pandemic didn't usher in new systems. The only thing that's different is that every child has a device. What keeps me up at night is thinking, "How did we let the biggest opportunity for change in a generation get away from us, when it was the perfect time to rethink everything?"

- Dr. Lynn Moody, Former Superintendent of Rowan-Salisbury Schools

Dr. Moody's words ring differently for each of us. Some education leaders share her frustration with the lack of significant changes to schooling after the pandemic, the most disruptive event to education in our lifetimes. Other leaders saw the urgent need for change in schools but were dealing with the day-to-day challenges of keeping children safe during the pandemic. Now, with ample energy, ideas, and community desire, a growing number of leaders envision a new future for schooling. For a long while, many have agreed that the 100-year-old industrial design of same-age, standardized progression in schools is neither effective nor equitable. **But how do we go about changing such an entrenched model?**

The calls for change are coming from every direction, including—most importantly—from students themselves. Young people want learning that is relevant and engaging, supports their mental well-



being, and provides practical life skills for the world today. In 2022, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona called for a “reset” in American education and vowed to “challenge the protectors of the status quo.” A majority of the American public believes that schools should focus on rethinking how we educate students and creating new ways to teach and learn. Using different words, we at Transcend agree that what young people, Secretary Cardona, and most of the American public are calling for is a change in the fundamental **design of schools: the outcomes and experiences of learning.**

The traditional methods of improving schools often involve discrete projects or interventions, such as introducing a new way to teach reading or providing additional tutors during different parts of the day. These approaches to school improvement assume that the current model of school is the best one available and that by working harder and implementing initiatives more effectively, we will achieve the desired outcomes.

Our partnerships with education leaders and communities across the country have taught us, however, that making schools not just better but extraordinary for young people means thinking differently about *how* we pursue change in school systems. We've learned that making big and long-lasting changes in the design of schools requires working together as a community: young people, caregivers, teachers, experts, and other key community members coming together to figure out what kinds of learning experiences will help kids succeed now and in the future. We subscribe to an approach called "community-based design."

Community-based design is a local process where young people, educators, administrators, caregivers, community leaders, and experts come together to collaboratively design better learning experiences and outcomes.

You might wonder how community-based design differs from the school improvement initiatives or programs we've all encountered. Community-based design takes a comprehensive approach, seeking to help a community redefine the overall purpose, outcomes, and learning experiences of school for young people and educators. The process brings together the true participants of a school (young people) and important stakeholders (e.g., system and school leaders, caregivers, and community leaders) to collaborate on a shared vision.

"Community-based design is such a unique process because it involves students from ideation to implementation. They are at the table coming up with new ideas and they are at the back-end of the process giving feedback."

- Dr. Tamara Willis, Superintendent of Susquehanna Township School District

How is community-based design distinct from other school improvement processes?

Community-based design is a way of building new learning environments with young people. Instead of trying to maximize execution of the traditional 100-year-old model, it uses design cycles and full community participation to create extraordinary and equitable 21st-century learning environments.

Community-based design is not a one-time event where feedback is collected and plans are made in a single night; it's a sustained journey and commitment. It generates durable and long-lasting changes because it involves system leaders and decision-makers tapping into the insights and leadership of young people, educators, and families. This approach is powerful, as it creates solutions that can withstand inevitable changes and turbulence within systems. Through this process, we have witnessed educators rekindling their passion for teaching, caregivers embracing their vital role in shaping their children's learning experiences, and students experiencing that their voices matter.

PART 1:

The Basics of Community-Based Design

The Aims of Community-Based Design: Powerful School Designs Enabling Extraordinary and Equitable Learning

Every child deserves to have extraordinary and equitable experiences and outcomes, regardless of their zip code, their appearance, their identity, or their family's background/situation. The goals of community-based design are to create extraordinary and equitable learning experiences and better outcomes for all young people, preparing them for this century's greatest challenges. **This commitment to fairness and agency—young people shaping what and how they learn—is at the core of community-based design.**

Extraordinary, Equitable Learning



Experiences



Outcomes

Outcome: Extraordinary Experiences - We believe that optimizing the way young people experience their learning journey is an end in and of itself. [The Leaps for Equitable, 21st-Century Learning](#) describe the key ways we believe the student experience must change so that schools can prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. Children, families, and educators have a strong interest in how school looks, works, and feels. Learning experiences—which include activities, interactions, and situations that help people gain knowledge, skills, and understanding—are crucial in shaping students' identities and motivations. Furthermore, a growing research base shows that if learning experiences involve only memorization without understanding, focus only on thinking skills, or are unrelated to young people's interests or goals, they won't lead to the broad and meaningful outcomes we want for all young people.

Outcome: Extraordinary Outcomes - Communities have many different ways of articulating the outcomes that matter most for young people. Based on our work with schools, research into the science of learning and development, and current global trends, we believe a strong set of [Graduate Aims](#) should span three areas of focus:

► **Intellectual prowess:** The knowledge and skills needed to understand, analyze, and apply ideas and information from various disciplines and cultures.



► **Wayfinding:** The ability and assets needed to plan for, manage, and follow through on key decisions about one's life path.



► **Well-being:** The beliefs and behaviors that support one's mental, emotional, and physical wellness.



Who is typically a part of the **COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN JOURNEY?**

Bringing many people together is at the heart of the community-based design process. Teams are assembled to respond to their unique community contexts and needs.

The Design Team:

[8-12 people] Diverse stakeholders advancing the school design vision

- 3-4 school staff and leaders
- 3-4 students with unique lived experiences of school
- 2-3 student caregivers with varying proximity to school
- Planning team members (see below)

Working Groups:

[1-4 people] Small groups taking on specialized work to bring design to life

- 1-2 students with unique lived experiences of school
- 1 instructional design leader
- 1 content leader
- 1 student caregiver

Extended Community Group:

[12+ people, broadest group] Key community members who will give input and play key roles in implementing the design

- People who will experience the design in some way (e.g., young people, teachers, caregivers)
- People who will approve and implement the design (e.g., board members, educators, funders)

The Planning Team:

[2-4 people] A small group driving forward the process

- A senior district leader with decision-making authority (e.g., a superintendent)
- A school principal and 2-3 other key leaders from their campus

Superintendents & Other System Leaders Play Key Roles in a Community-Based Design Process

Each community is unique; however, superintendents and other key system leaders typically:

- Liaise and invest their school boards in the design work
- Gather resources to advance the community's design efforts
- Approve big changes that are essential to the design (e.g., the schedule, facilities use)
- Cultivate and help sustain conditions for innovation and leadership



PART 2:

How Community-Based Design Works

In Community-Based Design, Young People Are Engaged and Empowered

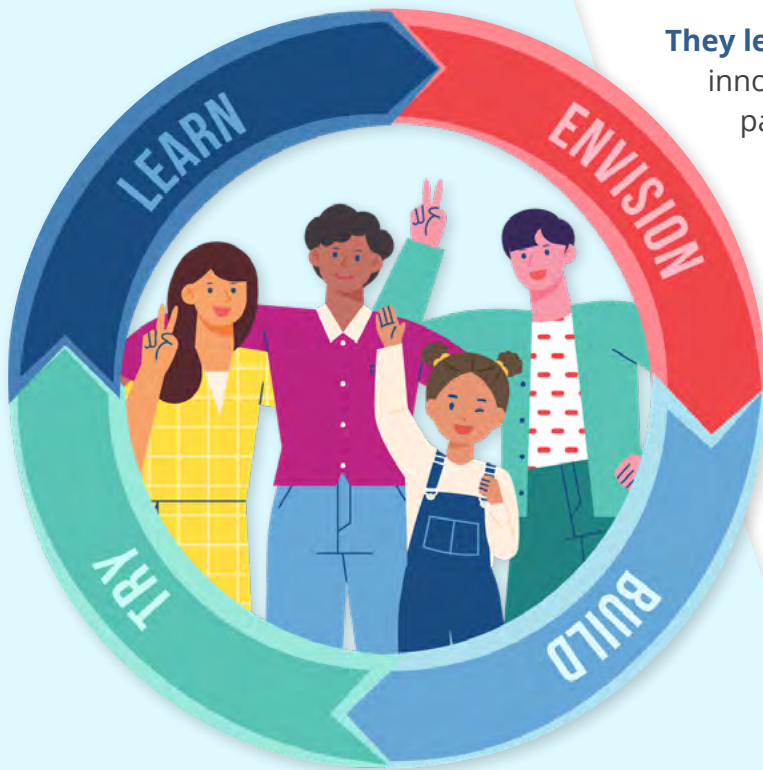
Community-based design processes bring together different groups of stakeholders, each with their own unique roles and purposes. These groups include the planning team, the design team, working groups, and extended community groups [\[see page 7\]](#). What makes community-based design stand out is the composition of the design team: young people themselves have a lasting presence at the table, and their voices are just as influential and significant as those of system administrators, school leaders, and caregivers. Throughout the design journey, young people play a crucial role by giving initial input about their schooling experiences, assisting in designing new experiences for themselves and their peers, and providing feedback on pilot implementations. Young people are at the very core of community-based design.



The Design Cycle

Every community has its own unique design journey, but there are four important activities every design team goes through over time: learning, envisioning, building, and trying. This process helps refine the community's ideas and leads to better implementation, improved experiences for students, and positive outcomes.

In the first six to twelve months, a community begins the design journey by seeking to understand its current situation. If a community decides to start a design journey, they generate new ideas! Students on the design team might suggest using the summer to develop important well-being skills. Student caregivers might express their desire for their children to achieve academic success. Teachers might share their hope for students to be curious and resilient. Everyone on the team has a voice, and together they create a shared vision. They then take each idea through the four phases of the design cycle.



They learn together: They gather knowledge by exploring research, visiting or reading about innovative learning environments, catching up on the latest social science, reflecting on past experiences, and listening to students, caregivers, and “alumni” of other community design journeys to gain insights and wisdom.

They envision together: Using the knowledge they’ve gathered, the community expresses its biggest hopes and dreams and gathers them into a “blueprint,” an organizing document that holds all the key pieces of the design..

They build ideas to bring the vision to life: At this stage, communities gather everything needed to turn their ideas into real experiences that students and educators can engage in. The term “build” does not necessarily imply starting from scratch, as communities most often choose to adopt/adapt existing to adopt or adapt existing learning models developed elsewhere for their own community—more on this below.

Finally, they try out these new learning experiences: They put their ideas into action with real students and educators, collecting data and evidence to understand what works and what needs improvement. This guides the next cycle of the design journey.

In our work with communities, we have witnessed the transformative power of this design process. As the community engages in this journey, their designs and conditions become stronger together, creating a momentum that becomes an essential part of a thriving learning community. By developing more robust designs and cultivating an environment that fosters innovation, communities are better prepared for the critical task of implementation: translating designs into actionable steps. Strong implementation serves as the bridge from well-crafted designs and favorable conditions to the extraordinary, equitable experiences and outcomes our young people truly deserve.

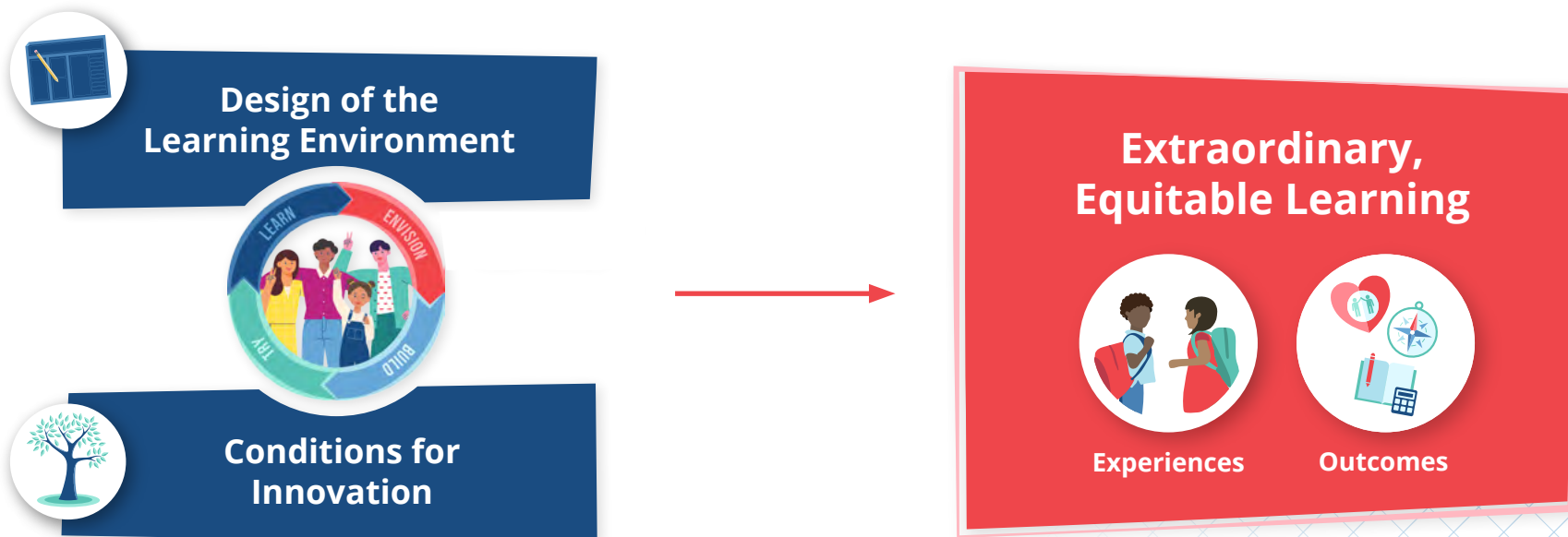
By working together and including many voices, these teams dream boldly and work together towards:

A clear and cohesive design - Ultimately, the design team articulates a new learning environment design that fundamentally changes the experience of school over the long-term. By taking time to do this clear articulation, the community sets itself up to implement a coherent learning environment aligned to its highest

aspirations. This design articulation is captured in what we call a “blueprint” which captures the detailed design choices around all aspects of school including curriculum & assessments, educator roles, schedules, technologies, etc. As the community engages in an ongoing R&D process, the community evolves these design choices and updates the “blueprint” which becomes a “breathing, living” document.

Supportive conditions for innovation and change - The design team and the R&D process also play a critical role in helping to enrich and cultivate [five underlying conditions](#) that support innovation and change. We see these conditions as essential “soil” in which a design journey and a learning environment take root.

In our work, we have seen that when communities grow their underlying conditions, design journeys are more likely to be successfully initiated and sustained over the long term. It is crucial to emphasize that these five conditions aren’t prerequisites to embark on a design journey. Instead, they serve as a framework for aligning on strengths and areas of improvement among various stakeholders and to inform the pace and intensity of change.



PART 3:

You *Can* Do This Work, and You're Not Alone

At this point, you might find yourself wondering how schools and systems can successfully manage all of this while fulfilling their daily responsibility of serving real-life young people!

We believe that most communities won't successfully undertake this work on an island. There are two key factors that speeds up community-based design progress: adoptable learning models (programs that fundamentally reshape the educational experience); and the ecosystem that leaders cultivate around them. Let's take a look at each:

1. Adopting learning models

Communities will decide whether they are ready to create new learning experiences or embrace and modify proven innovations used in other communities. Our experience shows that almost all communities will benefit from adapting existing learning models and integrating them harmoniously to establish a strong overall learning environment. We've developed the [Innovative Models Exchange](#), a free platform where you can search for and share compelling innovations that fundamentally reshape the educational experience. The Exchange includes details on each model's design and the resources and supports available to help implement it.

2. Ecosystems of support

The second factor that speeds up community design is the local

support system that leaders can enlist. The most effective leaders of community-based design processes know how to harness the power of their surrounding ecosystem. They engage with local funders, establish connections with technical support providers, and possess a profound understanding of how to navigate (and even influence) the policies and regulations that either facilitate or hinder innovation. System leaders play a pivotal role as enthusiastic advocates throughout the community-based design journey, securing resources and building the necessary buy-in to sustain years-long design journeys.

Every school system is part of larger networks that can greatly influence school redesign. Local philanthropists and business leaders can provide crucial resources such as funding and skilled human capital. Beloved religious or civic leaders and experts from healthcare, housing, or other sectors can act as important advisors, connectors, and advocates for the community-based design process. In some cases, it will take some advocacy to shift policies and regulations so they are more conducive to innovation, such as more funding to develop new designs or making it easier for kids to learn outside the school building.



HOW TO GET STARTED:

Understand the Experience of Young People in Your System

A community-based design journey starts with deeply understanding how young people experience school every day. We usually try to make changes based on what adults think matter most; instead, we believe that we must truly understand what young people really want and need from school. Understanding school through their eyes is the most important step in designing learning environments that will truly prepare young people to thrive in and transform the world.

Real, enduring, and inventive solutions are emerging from the very communities where they are most needed.

Now, more than ever, we need processes that unite communities to address difficult problems. Community-based design is a solution that is committed to the sustained engagement and interaction between young people, educators, caregivers, and system leaders all in pursuit of extraordinary and equitable outcomes and experiences for young people.

The solutions we need in education won't come from silver bullets or one perfect policy change, no matter how well-intended. Instead, real, enduring, and inventive solutions are the product of communities on intentional and sustained journeys towards extraordinary and equitable learning.

Communities across the country want and need profound change in the design of school; let's roll up our sleeves and get to it.

Here's how to get started:

1. **Learn from other communities:** Read the community profiles [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about how and why others are pursuing community-based design.
2. **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.
3. **Listen to young people:** Use the [conversation starter guide](#) for individual and small-group discussions, or the online survey for larger groups of students.
4. **Reflect on what you've heard:** Reflect on what you've heard from young people. Using the [reflection guide](#) consider your school community's progress on the Leaps—are you moving forwards or backwards?
5. **Explore the Innovative Models Exchange:** Once you have a better understanding of which Leaps matter most for your community, use this free tool as a source of inspiring learning models and support to help you implement them.
6. **Connect with like-minded people:** Engage in one or multiple of the following communities—[Transcend Community](#), the [Learner-Centered Collaborative](#), Digital Promise's [League of Innovative Schools](#), [Education Reimagined](#)'s Communities of Practice.
7. **Reach out to Transcend if you want more hands-on help/support:** Please email hello@transcendeducation.org

ABOUT

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](#).



Hello! I'm Jenee Henry Wood, Chief Learning Officer at Transcend. I work to share insights from our work in school communities across the country. I'm a former middle school social studies special educator, having worked in inclusion, resource, and self-contained classrooms. I'm passionate about sharing learning and collaborating across the education sector.

