

# pioneering

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## A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Executive Director

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education   
reimagined

● connect. share. discover. lead. ●

# pioneering

Dear Pioneers,

Since our last issue, we hosted our final two meetings of the year. The first explored the potential of hosting a nationwide gathering of learner-centered pioneers, and the second sought to elevate the challenges and opportunities of increasing the number of educators prepared to work in learner-centered environments.

In every meeting we have hosted this year, we have been continuously reminded of the power in bringing learner-centered people together. There is no question that conversations among people in a common paradigm are able to progress more quickly and go deeper than conversations across paradigms.

Regardless of who we bring together, our approach has always been to fill the room with people operating in a common, learner-centered paradigm to allow for deep exploration on topics of common interest. We find it important to have people build a shared sense of alignment in the room before beginning the creation process. To do so, we begin each meeting by building connection at a personal level, so we can reach beyond people's titles and hear what people are committed to. We then create shared reference points from the lived experiences of practitioners and learners. This foundation allows the group to really dig into the subject at hand. It can sometimes feel slow to start, but the conversations always reach a depth that leaves our community hungry for more.

Overall, our goal is to illuminate the field of learner-centered education so that the people in it can see each other regardless of the barriers between them. As each light bulb goes off, we are encouraged by the shared understanding that no amount of improving the current system will lead to all kids having a great education, only transformation will. Despite stakeholders having this "ah-ha" moment, old divides and lack of common language often prevent them from seeing each other as one in the same when it comes to their learner-centered practice.

We are thrilled to see so many leaders experimenting in bringing learner-centered environments and ecosystems to their communities. And now, we want them to clearly see each other as partners in bringing their shared learner-centered visions to life.

Warm wishes,  
**Kelly Young**



## CREDITS

**Executive Editor:**  
Kelly Young

**Creative Director:**  
Monica Snellings

**Senior Editor:**  
Demi Edwards

**Senior Writer:**  
Paul Haluszczak

**Senior Designer:**  
Jillian Kornswieg

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1133 19th Street NW, Suite 410  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 830-2310

**Connect. Share. Discover. Lead.**  
We seek to accelerate the growth of the movement dedicated to transforming education in America. We invite those excited and interested by the possibility of learner-centered education to discover more, join a growing movement, and begin a journey to make this a reality in diverse communities across the country.





# VIRTUAL LEARNING ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL

New Hampshire

“I’ve come to appreciate the capacity of every learner to excel when you let them approach a subject through their interests at a pace and style that suits them.”

— BETTE BRAMANTE, ENGLISH TEACHER

**AS THE LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION MOVEMENT HAS GROWN**, the mediums through which it operates have grown right along with it. And, in this case, that includes the virtual.

Recognizing the need for a paradigm shift, the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) has developed an online learning experience with the learner at the center. How could a virtual learning space accomplish this? How is this any different from your run-of-the-mill online learning environment? By functioning as a catalyst for learners to investigate their learning in limitless ways.

With the opportunity to explore Flexible Learning Pathways, a VLACS learner can complete “a middle school program, earn a high school diploma, or earn an associate degree” through VLACS’s **personalized, relevant, and contextualized** design. Combining “courses, projects, experiences, and teams,” these individualized learning journeys are designed to support learners in their **competency** development and set them up for incredible **open-walled** opportunities. Within each pathway is a rich learning experience filled with voice and choice.

Imagine a group of learners interested in exploring the environmental impact local residents are having in their hometowns. A learner on the Jersey Shore might want to investigate the steps being taken to eliminate waste from the ocean, while a California native discovers the ins and outs of water conservation. From coast to coast, each learner, exploring and discovering in tandem with their peers, creates a **socially embedded** environment of support and co-learning. Their learning connects at an intimate level, while also bringing to the forefront the big picture of the issues facing the country and world at-large.

At VLACS, learners are exposed to a learning experience that ventures beyond a simple connection to community resources. The online environment allows learners to connect with opportunities a world away, regardless of their circumstances. From these projects and experiences, learners discover their passions and improve their technical abilities through a wide range of online courses. If the learner in California realizes she needs to have a strong understanding of mathematics—to prove the need for more efficient water usage in her hometown—she can explore the competencies needed to get her there.

As online learning continues to grow as a viable source for the development of lifelong learners, it will take the innovative ideas of learning environments like VLACS to bring learner-centered experiences to life in the virtual realm.

## LEARN MORE

[Why VLACS?](#)

[Flexible Learning Pathways](#)

[N.H. Online Charter School Growing By Leaps And Bounds](#)



## FACTS & FIGURES

**Public, non-profit, Virtual Charter**

**Grades 6-12**

**Total Staff: 214**

**300 Full-Time Learners**

**13,000 Part-Time Learners**

**2.6% Dropout Rate, FT Learners**

## CONNECT

[Website](#)

[VLACS](#)

**Social Media**

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)







## INSIGHTS

**At Education Reimagined**, we are always discussing the importance of collecting stories from education stakeholders who have experienced an “ah-ha” moment when the paradigm shift from school-centered to learner-centered education happens.

To kickoff our intention to collect these stories en masse, each member of the Education Reimagined team will be sharing their personal story with experiencing the paradigm shift. With our stories, we hope to spark confidence in others to reflect and share theirs with the learner-centered community. Together, we can expose the unique roads we’ve traveled and unearth what is common amongst them all.

Our first story comes from **Education Reimagined’s Paul Haluszczak**. Want to share your story? Let us know! ([email](#))

# The Paradigm Shift: From Hopelessly Lost To Fearlessly Focused

by Paul Haluszczak

For many, myself included, the “ah-ha” moment wasn’t a “moment” at all. Rather, it was a long, continuous buildup of frustrations—witnessing the lacking results of education “reform” and its unfulfilled promises of changing the face of education for the better. Over the course of my academic career, unbeknownst to me, I was an active member of Outcomes-Based Education, Common Core, No Child Left Behind, and Marzano. Funny thing was, I never noticed anything changing in my educational experience other than an increasing lack of internal motivation and an outwardly expressed frustration by my teachers.

### PRIVILEGES ABOUND, OWNERSHIP UNFOUND

Before digging in too far, it’s worth mentioning I was the type of learner the traditional system was built for—the logical-mathematical type, attuned to following authority without resistance, growing up in a white, upper-middle class household. Regardless of the system I was being taught under, I had a high probability of becoming a productive member of society and not experiencing any negative impacts from the faults and glitches of the underlying design. Whatever learning I couldn’t access in school, I could rely on the experiences of my college-educated mother and father to fill in the holes.

This is an important qualifier to present. Even though I had every resource at my disposal, I still found myself at the age of 22, college degree in hand, disenchanted by what little value



Paul Haluszczak

I saw in my academic pursuits and achievements. If it wasn't for my extracurricular involvement, I would have been left with zero self-direction. I would have been sitting in my parents house, twiddling my thumbs waiting for another adult to come along and tell me what to do next. After all, that was exactly what I was conditioned to do.

Fun fact: that society doesn't exist anymore.

### REWIND THE TAPE

I began taking off my "school-is-fun" blinders around the age of 13 after spending a couple of weeks learning about atmospheric science. I was more excited during those few weeks of lecture than my antsy four-year-old self was on the first day of Kindergarten. But, of course, the lessons ended, and we moved onto a new, teacher-chosen topic in who knows what.

I couldn't take it anymore. Every time some minor component in my learning journey sparked my interest, it was immediately quelled by the limits of time and curriculum.

As my middle school years ended and high school began, I allowed the honeymoon phase of entering yet another traditional learning environment fade away before choosing to cope with the system by treating it like a game. All I was there for was to earn that diploma and get the heck out of dodge.

It might go without saying, but I was really good at the game—memorize, test, forget, move on to the next shindig with an inflated GPA attached to my transcript. I had a 4.6 GPA in a 4.0 system. What in the world does that tell anyone about my ability? The answer was irrelevant. I won the game and was ready for the mind-altering experience of college.

### NO MORE FUN AND GAMES

Remember that exciting time I had learning about the atmosphere? That little moment in my life was all I had to go on in deciding where I wanted to go to college. I was going to be a meteorologist. So, after visiting various institutions, I landed on Iowa State University—at the time, the top public meteorology program in the country.

How long did I last? Six weeks.

In just six weeks, I was already signing paperwork to transfer back in state (Missouri), go "undeclared," and save some money along the way. I never knew how truly lost I was until this point. Getting good grades and standardized test scores made me honestly believe my future was crystal clear—when in reality, the opposite was true.

Life is remarkably full of unexpected happenings—for better or worse—and, in my opinion, our ability to adapt to such circumstances should be at the foundation of our educational experiences. Learning such a lesson at 19 was less than ideal.

Of course, I regrouped and continued pushing forward, but man was I distraught. It wasn't until my sophomore year when I finally decided to stop expecting academics to guide me forward. It was time to start owning my future by seeking out the lessons I had missed over the years—whatever those lessons might be. As an aside, it just so happens I met my fiancée shortly after this mindset shift. The timing couldn't have been better.

### REDISCOVERING LEARNING

My main motivation for taking control of my learning was to pursue a dream of joining the Peace Corps. In order to do so, I needed to find the avenues where I could use my knowledge and skills in ways that could positively impact my campus community and the city of Columbia, overall.

“Life is remarkably full of unexpected happenings—for better or worse—and...our ability to adapt...should be at the foundation of our educational experiences.”

**Paul Haluszczak**

I started by joining a program that I held a personal connection to, and from there, my the next three years of college shaped me into the person I wanted to be all along—engaged in my community, passionate about learning anything and everything my mind was fixated on, and unafraid to try, fail, and try again.

Along the way, I found myself working on a diverse range of projects and initiatives with local, national, and international communities. Each experience showed me a new layer of understanding about what was missing from the traditional education system:

- In South Dakota, I learned from Lakota and Dakota communities that are consistently left out of the education (and political) conversation altogether.
- In Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, I saw how education can not only happen but actually meet kids where they are by removing age-based cohorts ([link](#)).
- While working at a local Juvenile Justice Center, I had a 13-year-old unable to perform basic arithmetic tell me how she had been passed along year after year because “teachers didn’t want to deal with her.”
- While part of a team of campus leaders operating a university food pantry, I learned how food-insecurity drastically impacts academic and career success.

As a witness to all of these negatives, I still didn’t see myself as a possible contributor to transforming education. I was an Economics major looking to skip town for the two years following graduation, working in a foreign country as a Community Economic Developer. I was thankful for the knowledge I gained from these experiences, but I was meant to work with numbers, not teach. Yes, the teaching profession was the extent of my understanding of the education world.

I came back home from the Peace Corps well before my two years was up with even more questions about how I should move forward. I eventually shipped out to Washington, DC with a new job as an analyst in corporate America, and it felt way too similar to my academic experience—restricting, non-autonomous, and soul-sucking.

It’s remarkable how the excitement we have for learning when leaving school translates to the amount of excitement we find in our careers. I’m lucky enough to have found a way to buck the trend, but if it wasn’t for the stars aligning and Education Reimagined having a position open that translated to the career change I was looking for, I would still be stuck with the notion that this is just how education is and always will be, endlessly tweaking the old machine that needs to be replaced altogether.

Upon reading “A Transformational Vision for Education in the US,” all of my hopes and dreams about how education could be were sitting right in front of my eyes. If my mind was still operating in the school-centered paradigm, I would have thought there was little to sing about when reading the vision. But, the years long shift I experienced over the last decade made the document a written representation of my truth.

I may have never experienced a single point in time where I discovered learner-centered education was “the” way to transform education at the systems level, but I certainly found a vision that brought all of my fleeting thoughts to life. As we continue to share the moments that brought us into the learner-centered movement, we’ll create a map of diverse pathways that all lead to the same checkpoint, gathering a community of trailblazers to forge ahead, together, into a bright future.

**Paul Haluszczak** is the Communications Associate for Education Reimagined, an initiative of Convergence. After spending the first two decades of his life in Missouri, Paul joined the Peace Corps for a shortened, six month stint in Cameroon. Upon his return, he moved to Washington, DC to work as a Product Strategy Analyst for a private company.

After spending a year in the analytical world, Paul wanted to take his career a different direction, so he started a personal website in order to build a writing portfolio. He wanted to involve himself in work that resonated with his past experiences as Director of Tiger Pantry, student leader on trips to Native American reservations and Central America, and as a Program Assistant at the Robert L. Perry Juvenile Justice Center. Education Reimagined was the perfect fit, and he is thankful for the opportunities and work that lie ahead.



## LEARNER VOICES

**Check out the articles, podcasts, and videos below.** They might just challenge your assumptions of what kids are capable of creating and doing if we let go of the current Industrial-era paradigm and move towards learner-centered education.



Photo from *Ted.com*

“If we don’t give students a voice, they will not know that they have power.”

**Sociedad Latina,  
STUDENTS AT THE  
CENTER HUB**

### FROM KHOU 11

#### Local Teen Creates New Kind of Knee Brace

Whenever we read stories about “child geniuses” taking on projects we could never imagine doing, we should look at what inspires them. More often than not, it’s in the name of something greater than the spotlight. Take this 15-year-old—whose innovative problem solving is helping people who have never walked before to take their first steps.

[Watch here](#)

### FROM TED

#### How Autism Freed Me to be Myself

Imagine if the best compliment you ever received was “you’re so ‘normal’?” This quote sets the stage for an amazing talk given by Rosie King, a thriving teen living in a world that seeks to place her in a box. But as you will see, she won’t let that box contain her. Challenge your belief of “normal” and discover where it might take you.

[Watch here](#)

### FROM STUDENTS AT THE CENTER HUB

#### Announcing the 2016 Youth Organizing Award Winner

As 2016 comes to a close, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation wanted to celebrate the year by awarding one lucky youth organization with a \$50,000 prize to strengthen the winning organization’s community impact. With seven organizations making it to the final round, the public voted and the results are in. Learn about the winners and their mission to further learner-centered learning. [Watch here](#)



## EL Education

The separation between what traditional schools want learners to achieve—“high performance on basic skills tests”—and what the workforce wants to see—“quality of their work and the quality of their character”—is ever expanding. Seeking to reverse this trend, **EL Education** ([link](#)) has set out on a mission to “redefine and raise student achievement.” Focusing on the mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality student work, EL Education isn’t looking for a simple solution to a complex problem. Rather, they are ready to jump in the deep end and address the root of the problem: our system of learning and system of working are no longer one in the same. The breadth of their work is impossible to capture in a quick summary, so we encourage you to check out what they have to offer for you and your learning community by following the links below.

**EL Education Approach** ([link](#))

**Whole School Transformation** ([link](#))

**Resource Library** ([link](#))

## Opal School Online

Improvements in technology continue to open doors for innovative practices and training in the education space. However, when people think of technology and education, their imaginations go directly to the kids—how they’ll be integrating it into their learning—rather than addressing the need for educators to learn these skills as well, to support learners’ exploration and discovery. In order to keep up, educators, mentors, and coaches need the professional resources to learn about the newest products on the market and their inevitable integration into the learning space. **Opal School Online** ([link](#)) recognized this need and wants education professionals at all edges of the field to embrace the changing landscape of education and welcome the new possibilities of the 21st-century.

**Consulting** ([link](#))

**Blog** ([link](#))

**Workshops and Events** ([link](#))

### UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendars! We will be speaking at some and hosting workshops at others. In all cases, pioneers will be front and center! Join us.

**EduCon<sup>2.9</sup>**

**Philadelphia, PA**

**January 27-29**

[Conference Website](#)

**TASA Midwinter Conference**

**Austin, TX**

**January 29-February 1**

[Conference Website](#)

**Mid-Atlantic Conference on Personalized Learning**

**Baltimore, MD**

**February 27-March 1**

[Conference Website](#)

### OPPORTUNITY BOARD

**Education Reimagined Internship (Spring 2017)**

Education Reimagined is seeking an intern for spring 2017 who is passionate and open-minded about the learner-centered movement, has outstanding research skills, and is willing to dip their toes into many aspects our work. If you or someone you know is interested in applying, find out more here ([link](#)).

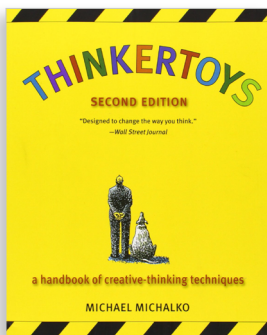
**Learning Architect, ReSchool Colorado**

The Donnell-Kay Foundation is seeking a Learning Architect for the ReSchool Colorado initiative. They are looking for someone who wants to join an entrepreneurial, ambitious team offering meaningful and relevant learner-centered experiences for learners statewide. [Apply here](#)



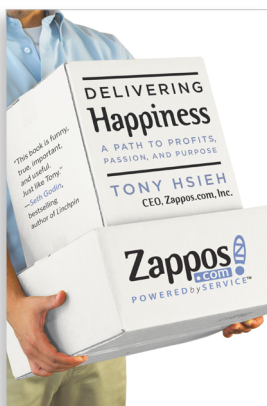


## ON OUR BOOKSHELF



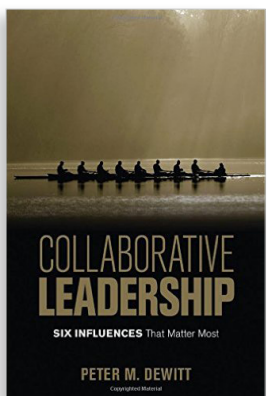
### Thinkertoys by Michael Michalko

Thinking up ways to innovate within the limitations of the traditional education system is an unfortunate burden many educators have to bear. There are only so many ideas one can come up with before everything starts feeling like recycled material—destined, at best, for mediocre success. Enter Michael Michalko and his bestseller, *Thinkertoys*. By sharing tools and techniques that allow you to look at a problem from a point of view no one else has considered, Michalko can help bring your learning environment to that next stage of transformation you've been yearning for.



### Delivering Happiness by Tony Hsieh

Creating a culture that emanates joy, learner engagement, safety, and other abstract qualities you and your community desire takes a kind of leadership hard to achieve. In Tony Hsieh's *New York Times* bestseller, *Delivering Happiness*, he takes you on a journey you have likely never experienced before. As CEO of Zappos, a billion dollar company that was purchased by Amazon, Tony wanted to develop a different type of corporate culture. Focusing on the happiness of others, he implemented strategies that are immediately transferable to learner-centered environments and building the culture you and your community deserve.



### Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most by Peter M. DeWitt

Have you ever found the perfect words to lead your team in a transformative effort only to soon realize those words weren't resonating with the group? Odds are, you were solely relying on your lived experience to mold them. And in doing so, you were unable to capture a message that resonated with the entirely different experiences of each individual on your team. As Peter M. DeWitt explains in *Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences that Matter Most*, to create a transformative space, you must meet your stakeholders where they are and invite them to join the conversation, knowing they will be heard. Discover the radical changes you can make to empower and build your team.

## WORTH YOUR TIME

### The Alphabet That Will Save a People From Disappearing

Without language, the art of communication becomes immeasurably limited. So, when your language is misrepresented in written form due to the limitations of today's alphabets, you might be inspired to create your own. [Read here](#)

### Sal speaks at TED about mastery-based learning

There are an infinite number of examples in life where we approach a new skill and master it before moving onto the next level. But, this isn't the case in our approach to education. Check out what Khan Academy founder has to say about this mismatch. [Watch here](#)

### Under the Hood of Personalized Learning

Discover the mindset behind the learner-centered transformation happening at Making Community Connections Charter School (MC<sup>2</sup>) in New Hampshire. Explore insights on the ins-and-outs of what makes MC<sup>2</sup> learners majority stakeholders in their learning. [Read here](#)

“When it comes to the design of effective learning experiences, one provocative question is worth a hundred proclamations.”

— **BERNARD BULL**

Read past issues of  
**PIONEERING : A LEARNER-CENTERED PUBLICATION**  
[www.education-reimagined.org](http://www.education-reimagined.org)



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1133 19th Street NW, Suite 410  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 830-2310