

pioneering

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A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

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Happy New Year!

We are ringing in 2017 with another great issue of Pioneering and a jam-packed January. With articles featuring three amazing pioneers—Jemar Lee, Carrie Bakken, and Julie Renkoski—this issue is a must read!

Jemar, a learner at Iowa BIG and participant in SparkHouse, tells an amazing story of how Iowa BIG transformed his life. Having met and gotten to know Jemar at two of our gatherings last November, I was shocked when I learned about his “troublemaker” past. Today, he is a powerful leader with unlimited potential!

Carrie, a teacher and school leader at Avalon School in Minnesota, discusses her unexpected journey after answering an ad in the paper to be a teacher at a new school and sticking with it for the next 17 years (and counting) to build a learner-centered, teacher-empowered school.

Visiting Avalon a few months ago, I was struck by the vitality of everyone in the building, and the deep, engaging learning happening all over—in the halls, “classrooms,” and workspaces—without a teacher in the front of any room. During my visit, I spoke with Cole Cadiz, a learner who started his own sandwich making business—Melt Lyfe—and was on his way to owning his own food truck. I have his beautiful business card on my desk!

Julie, a former team member at Education Reimagined (expecting her 2nd child any day now!), writes of her journey from being an over-worked teacher who saw policy makers as the problem to becoming a pioneer who realized the system wasn’t designed to produce the results we say we want for every child.

We are grateful for Jemar’s, Carrie’s, and Julie’s contributions, and we are looking forward to expanding our reach to even more pioneers this year. Our next effort in doing so will commence in just four days at our third Pioneer Lab Training. With 69 pioneers from 23 learner-centered environments in 15 states coming together, we can’t wait to meet these leaders learn about the unique gifts they bring.

Here’s to further accelerating the growth of the learner-centered movement in 2017!

Warm wishes,
Kelly Young



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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.





AVALON SCHOOL

St. Paul, MN

“This school is one of the hidden gems of the Twin Cities. It deserves attention. This is a groundbreaking school that changes people’s lives.” — **AVALON PARENT**

IN THE LAND OF 10,000 LAKES—there are actually 11,842 for anyone counting—educators have been bringing learner-centered education to their St. Paul, MN neighbors since 2000.

Operating on multiple fronts, Avalon School has brought agency to learners and educators alike. By flattening the traditional hierarchy from day one, every educator is given an equal voice through the Avalon “Fist to Five” voting process ([link](#)). Modeling this collaborative work at the professional level opened up educators’ notion of what could be possible for their learners. Now, they aim to cultivate the confidence boosting effects of this agency-driven leadership for everyone at Avalon.

This collaborative stance speaks to Avalon’s message that “community is everything,” which means everyone’s voice is valued and appreciated. This **socially-embedded** principle is just one of the five core outcomes—Critical Thinking, Collaboration (Student/Staff/Community), Effective Communication, Self-Directed Learning, Academic Mindset—every Avalon learner pursues on a daily basis. Allowing learners to take on self-directed projects, while still achieving against the traditional state standards, Avalon transforms their space into a hub for **learner agency** and **personalized, relevant and contextualized learning**.

When a learner needs to pass a state standard in English, rather than reading adult-selected literature and writing predetermined essays, she can pursue her interest in comedy. Throughout the process—researching the craft, identifying her comedic voice, and artfully crafting an entire comedy show—she meets a laundry list of writing standards through a topic relevant to her passions and interests. As she displays her progress at each step, she can reassess her way forward with the guidance of her advisor. The advisor opens the learner’s eyes to resources, questions, and ideas that lift their **competency-based** development to even greater heights.

Opening up the walls of Avalon, another learner might be looking to achieve a requirement in biology. Interested in becoming a doctor some day, this learner has the option to connect with a local hospital through internship and volunteer opportunities, develop a plan for how his experience will relate to the required standards, and spend the next few months exploring the world of medicine.

In each case, Avalon sets a prime example for how a learning environment can handle the expectations of traditional standards, while artfully transforming into a learner-centered space. By approaching each roadblock with the learner at the center, Avalon believes and proves the possibilities for learning are endless.

LEARN MORE

[A Tale of Two Charter Schools](#)

[No More Dramatic Exits: New Tools for Teacher-Powered Schools](#)

[To Improve Schools, Let Teachers Run Them](#)

[Cultivating Life Skills at a Project-Based Charter School](#)



FACTS & FIGURES

Public, grades 6-12

Learners served: 220

Special Education/Section 504: 49%

Free or reduced lunch: 25%

Senior projects completed: 350+ (2004-2016)

Principals: 0

CONNECT

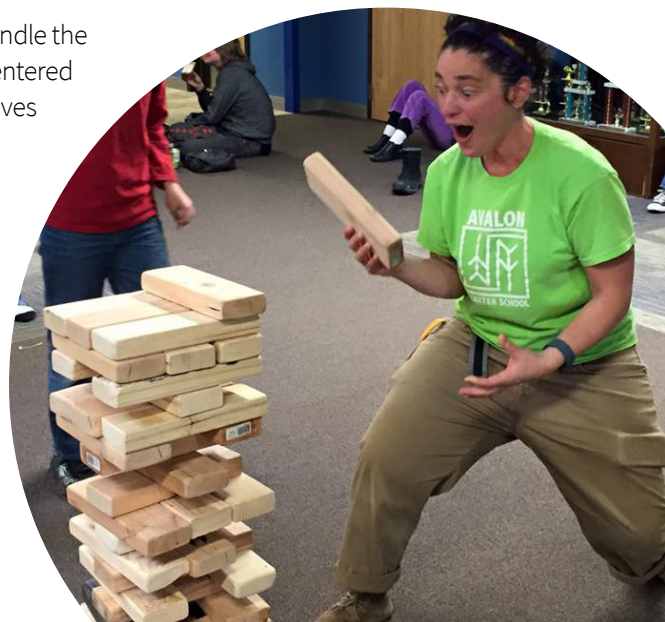
Website

[Avalon School](#)

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Avalon School: A Conversation with Carrie Bakken

Education Reimagined closed out 2016 by chatting with Carrie Bakken from Avalon School in St. Paul, MN. Check out her learner-centered journey, which began with her response to a simple ad in the newspaper and became a 17-year (and counting) deep dive into co-developing a learner-centered environment.

Q. What originally attracted you to Avalon School? What has kept you there?

A. Quite honestly, I originally responded to a general ad in the newspaper about a new charter school starting in St. Paul. I knew nothing about the vision of the proposed school when I applied. But, after learning about the innovative model that included student-directed projects and collaborative teacher governance, I was hooked. I was hired to be part of a team of teachers that would collectively govern and design a student-centered, project-based school. The people, the model, and what it does for students is why I have stayed. In fact, Avalon retains 95%-100% of teachers annually for this very reason.

Q. What does Avalon provide that you (or your current learners) think is most attractive to incoming learners?

A. Students come to Avalon for a variety of reasons. Some come specifically for the student-centered, project-based learning model; some prioritize the safe inclusive community; and others seek the outstanding individualized special education support.



Carrie Bakken

At the heart of all these reasons is that Avalon provides students the individualized support and opportunity to be the center of their learning experience.

Our students' best work is not a score on a standardized test. Instead, they complete a 300-hour senior project presented to the community—supported by families, teachers, and community experts. For example, one of our students who has already completed several extensive projects in social and environmental justice decided her senior project will have a lasting impact on our school's community. She is currently researching the Precious Plastic's models [\(link\)](#) to build a plastic recycling machine that will turn the school's plastic waste into simple school supplies. This is one of many examples of the impressive projects that can happen when students are given the opportunity to own their work.

Q. What role do learners at Avalon play in developing the culture? What stories stick out to you the most?

A. We are a teacher-powered school, but I'd also describe us as student-powered. Students are trusted to learn valuable life lessons, including the idea that with power comes responsibility. They practice mediating conflict, solving problems, and creating new rules through our Avalon Student Congress. With support from their teachers, students also determine their curriculum and decide how they will meet their graduation standards, whether through seminars or student-designed, independent projects.

One of Avalon's many origin stories involves creating the Avalon Constitution [\(link\)](#). The first six-week seminar I taught at Avalon was a government class: Freedom and Responsibility. Many students in this seminar joined my next seminar, Writing the Avalon Constitution, in which they developed a framework for student governance at Avalon while learning about the U.S. government. They defined ownership and accountability and outlined Avalon's three branches of government. They were a source of inspiration as we faced the challenges of putting our new teacher-powered model into action: we realized that if 14- and 15-year-olds could understand the powerful relationship between autonomy and accountability, then adults could, too.

Q. If you were to rewind the clock on your educational experience, how would a place like Avalon have changed how you experienced education?

A. School for me was a means to an end. I was not interested in what I was learning in high school but was motivated by the fact that I would graduate, go to college, and move away from home. However, when I finally had more choices in my schedule as a senior, I felt more academically engaged. I had time to write for the student newspaper, do art, and participate in electives that were interesting to me. In all my academic years, that was the first year I had even the slightest amount of choice.

Last spring, I witnessed the same system at work when observing and supporting teachers in another charter school that received a grant-funded opportunity. I noticed that even when teachers are excellent at what they do and design the most engaging curriculum imaginable, shuffling from class-to-class loses its academic luster for students. Even though I was impressed with the caliber of teaching, even I struggled to pay attention in each class. I think the way school is traditionally designed is in direct conflict with student engagement.

I know I would have cherished the opportunity to design my schedule and create in-depth student projects in the areas of my interest when I was in school. Who knows, maybe I

“I think the way school is traditionally designed is in direct conflict with student engagement.”

Carrie Bakken

never would have made the mistake to go to law school if I had the opportunity to explore my academic interests as a teenager.

Q. Is Avalon able to integrate the St. Paul community into the development of their education design? If so, what does that look like?

A. Yes, at the heart of creating meaningful student-directed projects is the integration of community resources. We have many community partners that support student projects, internships, workshops, theater programs, and host other experiences for students.

For example, one of my students struggled with self-direction, initiative, and perseverance, and we had trouble finding a way to consistently engage him.

Serendipitously, an alum happened to visit Avalon, and she told me about her new job working for a non-profit, PC's for People ([link](#)). At this organization, employees and volunteers refurbish computers and sell them at a low cost to people who cannot afford new ones. Because this student had always enjoyed his computer projects, I encouraged him to seek an internship at PC's for People. After only a few months of his internship, we all noticed a significant change. He began to see his future. He engaged in school, made plans, and saw himself becoming a professional working with computers.

Q. Are there other learning environments in the area that have taken interest in Avalon's design?

A. Yes, we have hosted thousands of visitors since our inception over 15 years ago. This has included fellow teachers, union leaders, legislators, superintendents, foundations, and school reformers locally, nationally, and even from around the world. We regularly host visitors from Canada and Japan, for example.

Because of our experience with successfully implementing student-centered learning and a teacher-led governance model, Avalon offers technical support to schools and supports policy improvements. For example, Avalon currently provides another Minneapolis charter school support in student-centered learning and school improvement. Furthermore, in November 2015, a bipartisan team of state legislators visited Avalon to learn about our teacher governance model. During the 2016 legislative session, the Minnesota Legislature created a \$500,000 grant program for new district teacher-governed schools.

Q. What does the near future look like for Avalon? What excites you about that future?

A. What excites me most about Avalon's future is that the national conversation in education has shifted to include student-centered learning. This conversation is happening across sectors and bridges political divides. Within this dialogue, there is a unique opportunity for Avalon to share our model with other traditional districts, charters, and policy stakeholders. Avalon is also exploring growing the number of students at our site to offer our model to more students locally and expand opportunities for students in our building.

Carrie Bakken Carrie Bakken was hired with a team of teachers in 2001 to open Avalon School in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she is now a Program Coordinator and teacher. Over the last few years, she completed a two year Aspen Institute Teacher Fellowship and won an Outstanding Educator in Ethics Education Award sponsored by the WEM Foundation. Carrie has a Master of Arts degree in Teaching from the University of St. Thomas and a Juris Doctorate from Hamline University. She is also a member of the CTQ Collaboratory and a Teacher Powered Ambassador Alum.



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.

The Paradigm Shift: Unleashing the Learner in All of Us

by Julie Renkoski

PURSUING MY CALLING

When I was in college, I tried to run away from teaching. My mom was a teacher—a great one—but I felt the need to forge my own path. Since I enjoyed writing and was a bit of a grammar nerd, I considered journalism. Still, I couldn’t escape the kids. I chose to spend some of my free time volunteering as a tutor and a Big Sister, and I loved it. Despite my initial denial, I enjoyed working with kids more than anything else, so I not-so-begrudgingly caved and earned a Bachelors and Masters in Education.

As a teacher, I had the privilege of working with incredible people in incredible places. I taught 3rd grade in a suburban Missouri elementary school and then English as a Foreign Language in Arequipa, Peru. When love took me to Los Angeles, CA, I worked as a literacy intervention specialist, first in an urban public school and then in an urban charter school. I loved each of these jobs and threw myself into them. By and large, my co-workers were passionate and pushed my practice, and of course, the kids brought me much joy.

But, it was a lot of work. A LOT of stressful work. I would leave for school at 6:15am and return home at 7 or 8pm. Large portions of weekends and holidays were dedicated to preparation. Thankfully, my wonderful husband cooked, cleaned, balanced the budget, and was endlessly supportive. While I knew this pace of life was ultimately unsustainable, there was something else that bothered me about my situation even more. I was painfully aware, as hard as my co-workers, the students, and I were working, there were still many students who were struggling. We teachers analyzed data, encouraged, differentiated, incentivized, met with parents, met with each other, initiated new programs—it still wasn’t enough. It was so deflating to send a student to middle school knowing he or she wasn’t ready. I feared what this could mean for that child’s future, and it was no consolation to acknowledge that we’d all tried really, really hard.

After teaching for just seven years, I became burnt out and frustrated. I thought there was something wrong with education, and I largely blamed the decision-makers in the system. There was too much testing. Class sizes were too large. There wasn’t enough funding for mental health services. There were too many mandates. Essentially, policy-makers were erecting endless obstacles for those of us on the ground.



Julie Renkoski

THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Then, lo and behold, my husband was offered a position in Washington, DC, and I found myself in the hub of the decision-making that I thought was holding us down. I decided my best course of action would be to learn about and infiltrate this corrupt world. Such was my motivation for becoming a 29-year-old intern with the Re-imagining Education Project at Convergence Center for Policy Resolution (the pre-cursor to Education Reimagined). I hadn't the slightest idea of how drastically this experience would change and rejuvenate my view of both education and myself.

One of the first things I learned through the Re-imagining Education Project was that I'd likely misplaced the blame. I listened in on conversations with many individuals in policy leadership positions whom I'd previously considered culpable for education's woes. Surprisingly, I found them exceptionally passionate, well-intentioned, and knowledgeable. Now, who was to blame?

CATCHING THE CULPRIT

As it turns out, I should have been asking about WHAT was to blame. As I watched videos by Sir Ken Robinson, Sugata Mitra, and 2Revolutions and listened to the conversations amongst the 28 original participants in the Re-imagining Education Project's dialogue, I realized that our more-than-a-century-old system was at fault. The structure in which all of us—students, teachers, and policymakers alike—were operating was ill-suited to our purposes. This system's aim was to provide universal access to core content knowledge so that most of the populace would be prepared to work in the jobs available during the Industrial Age, and it was made efficient through standardization. For this reason, its core design principles were for every person of the same age to learn the same thing at the same pace in the same way. One particular image of this system really brought it home for me—in the video “Changing Education Paradigms” ([link](#)), Sir Ken Robinson likens our education system to a factory conveyor belt that transports batches of like-aged kids from one grade to the next in a uniform way. I began to picture my students on that conveyor belt.

In this system of standardization, exceptions were problems, and it wasn't difficult for me to come up with a long list of student “exceptions” I'd encountered. Eric could never hold still and focus during large group instruction. Christina was bored and needed more of a challenge. Juliana consistently came to school with lice. Tanya's interest waned, except when discussing current events. Kenneth only caught on when given extra time to process language and ideas.

The more I thought about the students I'd worked with, the more I realized they were all exceptions (read: exceptional) in one way or another. The problem was not that they were unique, rather that the system dictated that each unique, multi-dimensional child be molded to fit into the same small, rigid box on the conveyor belt. This meant that I must focus heavily on teaching Eric to face forward and tune in during a 15-minute group lesson. That Christina could do something more challenging only after she'd finished the work everyone else was doing. That I find a way to catch Juliana up on the loads of essential instruction she missed every time she was sent home with lice. That Tanya had to pursue her passions primarily beyond the school day. That Kenneth had to endure whole group lessons in a largely confused state until I could squeeze in an extension for him. The conveyor belt moved along mercilessly, as I desperately tried to keep all the kids aboard.

“The conveyor belt moved along mercilessly, as I desperately tried to keep all the kids aboard.”

Julie Renkoski

MY AH-HA! MOMENT

That's how the paradigm shift truly hit me. I realized that the learner-centered paradigm of education turns our current system of standardization on its head; a system rooted in the learner-centered paradigm stretches, adjusts, and adapts to fit each individual learner. While our current system mandates sameness, a learner-centered system celebrates and leverages uniqueness. Despite our best efforts to deviate from the norm, the system in which we operate sucks us back in.

At first, this idea was a bit overwhelming for me. Viewed from our current paradigm, it sounds like a lot of work. As a teacher, hadn't I tried to accommodate each individual student's needs? I knew I had. That's why, as the learner-centered mindset began to sink in, it was actually freeing to understand the reason my tireless efforts hadn't yielded optimum results—I was butting up against a standardized system. That led me to identify and question many of the structures inherent in our current system. Is a student's birthday really the most important factor in determining what, when, and with whom he/she learns? Is it necessary for every student to adhere to the same learning timeline? Is the best way to organize teachers to assign one to every 25-30 kids? Do all children need to have essentially the same daily schedule? Is it necessary for kids to learn identical content?

When I gave myself the freedom to question those structures, I began to get excited about the possibilities. System design features all became movable pieces that could be kept, discarded, replaced, or modified in each learner's best interest. What an opportunity!

WHAT'S IN A LEARNER?

While allowing myself to imagine what education could be, I began to realize how much fun I was having learning. As a teacher, I'd always touted lifelong learning to my students, but it struck me that I didn't know exactly what that could look like in my own life. By entering an unfamiliar environment that matched my interests, I was learning constantly, and it was a thrill. I was enamored by the new experiences I got to have every day—from conference calls (yes, those genuinely excited me at first!) to meaningful research to strategic communication. I helped compile the thoughts and ideas emerging from the participants of the Re-imagining Education Project into "A Transformational Vision for Education in the US" ([link](#)) and felt such a sense of accomplishment in writing for a real purpose. I began reading for fun again, kept up on current events, and spoke out at a local school board meeting. I started to feel like a participant in the world, rather than just a product of it.

That's when I had my second revelation. Learner-centered education isn't just for kids ages 0-18 years—it's for every last one of us. Learning is discovering who you are, unearthing what you love, and channeling your passions and gifts for a purpose. It's riveting and joyous. After a period of putting up blinders to everything but my job, I began to pursue learning for myself. And, I realized learner-centered education is about supporting our youngest learners through the early stages of their journeys—recognizing those journeys belong to them and they extend far beyond the reach of an education system.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

I still can't imagine what the epitome of learner-centered education would look like or what a system that supports it could be. Often, my Type-A, detail-oriented mind is overwhelmed by the idea of making a truly learner-centered experience possible for each and every learner in a neighborhood, much less the country. But, I do know that I'm excited about education and my profession again, that I see the powerful potential for every single child, and that the beauty of any pursuit is the learning that occurs along the way.

“Learning is discovering who you are, unearthing what you love, and channeling your passions and gifts for a purpose.”

Julie Renkoski

Julie Renkoski is the Research and Mapping Consultant for Education Reimagined, an initiative of Convergence. After growing up and going to school in Missouri, Julie taught in Blue Springs, MO; Arequipa, Peru; and Los Angeles, CA.

When she found herself in Washington, DC, Julie pursued a path in a different sector of education and is grateful that it led her to Convergence. After serving Education Reimagined first as an intern and then a full-time team member, she now contributes part-time while dedicating the majority of her energy to her young daughter and baby-on-the-way. Julie has come to see each and every person, particularly herself, as a learner and cherishes opportunities to be involved in the learning journeys of others.



LEARNER VOICES

Unlocking the Door to My Future

by Jemar Lee

I never anticipated joining Iowa BIG would have nurtured me into the person and learner I am today.

Before joining Iowa BIG a year and half ago, my journey through the traditional education system was very rough. To say I disliked the traditional style of schooling would be an understatement. I felt trapped and was without purpose.

With my increasingly fiery dislike for school, I became a rebellious and misbehaved student. As early as elementary school, I would shutdown, refuse to do my work, and lash out at my teachers. Naturally, all of these actions led to consequences. It started small with having my recess taken away or my mother having to pick me up from school. Then, as I grew older, the punishments turned into detentions and suspensions. I found myself being escorted out of my middle and high school being told, “Jemar, don’t come back until you get your act together.” This message played on repeat for years.

It was always disappointing to know the people who cared about me—my teachers, friends, and family—had to watch all this happen. I was commonly asked, “Jemar, what is it that makes you so upset?” or “what makes you dislike school so much?” But, I could never convey how I actually felt. If I did, I would have acknowledged that I didn’t like the way I was being taught and that my school wasn’t the right fit for me. Simply put, I would have recognized the trap I was in.



Jemar Lee

When I expressed these feelings less directly, I was told, “Jemar, this is how school is. Get used to it—you have many more years to go,” or “Jemar, look at all the other kids that got through it. You will too.” So, what did I do? I pushed through it. But, pushing through didn't make things better; it made them worse. I acted out even more, started losing friends, and saw my GPA begin to drop. My quality of life began decreasing to the point where I started seeing a psychologist and counselor.

Shortly into my sessions, they realized nothing was wrong with me mentally. Everything simply boiled down to my dislike of the school system.

The sessions ended, and I went along hoping things would change or school would magically become different. I hoped I would find a style of education that would work for me. With those intentions, I hunted and fought to find a solution to my problem. And, one day, it finally arrived.

THE WAIT WAS FINALLY OVER

During my sophomore year, I was introduced to Iowa BIG. I learned about their mission to develop students who were makers, designers, storytellers, and social entrepreneurs by creating curriculum with businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. My days of looking at white walls, white paper, and listening to colorless lectures would soon be over. I would be learning out in the community or within a dynamic working space that invited collaboration. Every day, I would be doing something with a purpose!

Iowa BIG's mission immediately clicked with me. It was the solution to all of my problems with education. The ones I could never fully express.

I joined Iowa BIG as soon as I could, starting the second semester of sophomore year. At the time, as excited as I was, I could not imagine how big of an impact the program would have on my life. Within my first few weeks, I quickly started to blossom as a person and learner. I switched from hating school to loving it.

EXPLORING MY PASSIONS

The first project I did at Iowa BIG focused around my passions—architecture and interior design. At this time, Iowa BIG was exploring design concepts for a brand new space. As such, I was given the opportunity to create a floor plan that would accommodate all Iowa BIG learners and staff. After a lot of research and putting my knowledge and skills to the test, I presented my design to the building owner and manager. My design was not only taken into consideration, but it was actually fully implemented!

Now, you might be wondering, “Was your floor plan really built or were just bits and pieces used?” No. My floor plan was exactly what was used! To see my floor plan, as a 17-year-old, brought to life was a dream come true! From that point on, my confidence soared.

I continued working on my skillset in partnership with the city of Cedar Rapids. My team worked with them to redesign a farm zoo called Old Macdonald's Farm. In just six months, I went from dreading any type of school work to working on two passion projects I would have never had the opportunity to pursue in my traditional education environment.

In just my first semester at Iowa BIG, I reached heights I never thought were possible. At just 17, my dreams were already becoming a reality. I never actually thought they were possible, but thanks to Iowa BIG, they are.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The most powerful advocates for learner-centered education are the learners themselves!

Are you a learner? Do you have a story like Jemar's? A project that you could share about? Or reflections and insights about your own learning environment? We want to hear from you!

Contact us for learner submission guidelines. [\(email\)](#)

DREAMING EVEN BIGGER

This summer, I came into Iowa BIG with even bigger and better expectations for myself.

I started the semester by furthering my passion for architecture. Working with a team, we started a project called “The Sleeping Giant.” We are working in partnership with Shive-Hattery—an architecture and engineering consulting firm—to create a 3D model of a pedestrian bridge we are hoping to have built in Cedar Rapids. Our goal is for this bridge to bring more attractions and life to the downtown area of Cedar Rapids.

Of course, architecture isn’t my only interest, so I decided to take on a new field by working on a magazine called *Zealist* with goals to have it published in eastern Iowa. *Zealist* is “a collection of creativity—celebrating culture and what makes us human—to build community through expression.” Our first publication will feature empowerment, diversity, and nostalgia. Anyone is eligible to submit their writing or art that relates to one or more of the set themes. We are hoping this magazine counters the negativity many other magazines swarm our society with nowadays.

“At just 17, my dreams were already becoming a reality.”

Jemar Lee



JEMAR, THE PROFESSIONAL

Even with these exciting projects underway, the best had yet to come. In October, I was invited to be a student representative in Washington, DC at SparkHouse—a student-focused conference put on by Education Reimagined. Over the course of two days, I spoke with people from around the nation about learner-centered environments, how they've helped each of us individually, why we think we need more of them, and how we can lead the charge.

In those 48 hours, I was touched by how these unique environments have affected so many people. This allowed me to reflect on how much my own learner-centered environment—Iowa BIG—has affected me as well.

I've taken a lot of time over the past few weeks thinking about how much I've grown and what I've accomplished in the past year. I particularly remember sitting in my hotel room on the last night of SparkHouse thinking, "I want this to go nationwide, so all students can excel like I am. I want to and will make this available to students across the nation!"

I expressed this thinking the next morning to the Education Reimagined team who not only kept their promise to stay connected and work with me but invited me back to DC to join a visionary leader meeting where we explored ideas on how we think this movement should move forward. Remember that Jemar who used to throw desks at teachers and run away from school? Now, picture him sitting in rooms full of education professionals, voicing his opinion about a topic that means so much to him.

I've gone from hating school to loving it, from being escorted out of school by police officers to networking with adults and students from all over the nation, and traveling the country and speaking in front of over 100 community members on the importance of learner-centered environments. I'm working on many things in order to make a positive impact on my community. If you knew me back then, you would have never thought I would be doing any of this, and I wouldn't have thought it was possible either.

That's why I believe every Jemar out there who feels they can't thrive in the traditional education system should have the option to experience a learner-centered environment like Iowa BIG or whatever fits their interests. If you still don't believe in the impact it can make, look at all of the incredible things I've accomplished in less than one year, since discovering Iowa BIG. My skills in architecture, public communications, and overall professionalism have grown beyond what I thought was possible. Through my new academic experiences, I have learned brand new things about myself, others, and life in general.

My eyes have opened up to a whole new world, and I now see the stories I was once ashamed to share are pivotal in helping the learner-centered movement grow nationwide. My advocacy for improving the education system for all my peers and the generations behind me has only just started, and I won't stop until every student has the chance to blossom and thrive just like I and many others have in learner-centered environments!

As a personal note, I want to give an enormous thank you to Iowa BIG for keeping their faith in me and Education Reimagined for putting their trust in me. You all have opened my eyes to life in a whole new way. I love every part of my education now, knowing I have a purpose. You all have helped me reach new heights of success and happiness I would never have been able to otherwise. My dreams are coming true. And, it's only the beginning. Thank you!

"I won't stop until every student has the chance to blossom and thrive just like I and many others have in learner-centered environments!"

Jemar Lee

Jemar Lee was born and raised in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Jemar is a junior in High School and attends Iowa BIG. Iowa BIG is a learner-centered environment that makes learners into makers, designers, storytellers, and social entrepreneurs with exposure and interactions with organizations, business partners, and the community.

Jemar is a firm believer that education needs to be restructured for the benefit of us learners, to make sure we enjoy our learning and fully succeed. He believes, "Changing the structure of education won't be easy, but we can do it!"



The Right Question Institute

When it comes to developing learner agency, the most significant skill to master might just be the ability to ask strong questions. Every learner has the ability to explore their passions at a deeper level, but without the proper inquiry, a learner is unable to go as deep on a question and might develop the false notion there is nothing left to learn. This concern is at the foundation of **The Right Question Institute (RQI)** ([link](#)), which believes “the skill of question asking is far too rarely deliberately taught in school.” They have made it their mission to “provide a wide range of innovative educational resources that make it possible for all people, no matter their level of education or income, to learn to think and act more effectively on their own behalf.” This includes equipping educators with the tools to guide their learners into self-directed exploration and collaboration with their peers. Discover new ways to further engage your learners in the topics and ideas that are relevant to their individual futures.

Join the Educator Network to access resources ([link](#))

Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions ([link](#))

The Institute of Play

When learning in a community with robust resources and opportunities, it is easy to go outside the learning environment hub, engage with professionals and experts in a variety of fields, experience how they apply their learning, and be inspired by the possibilities for your future. However, if you find yourself in an isolated town—where your access to diverse opportunities is far more limited—you have to be far more innovative. These challenges inspired the launch of **The Institute of Play** ([link](#)) in 2009. Their goal is to “create learning experiences rooted in the principles of game design—experiences that simulate real world problems and require dynamic, well-rounded solutions.” By bridging the gap between the “school world” and the “real world,” The Institute of Play is tapping into what the world of “gaming” might bring to the education landscape. Explore how bringing this kind of play into your environment could boost your learners’ understanding of the world.

Why Games? ([link](#))

AWSM (awesome) ([link](#))

Current Programs ([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^{2.9}

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](#)

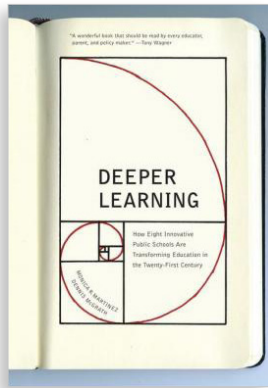
OPPORTUNITY BOARD

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 of our work. If you or someone you know is interested in applying, find out more here ([link](#)).

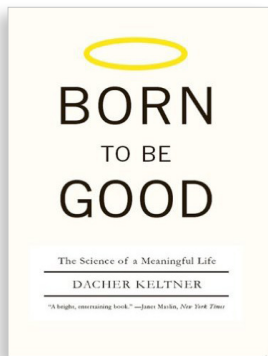


ON OUR BOOKSHELF



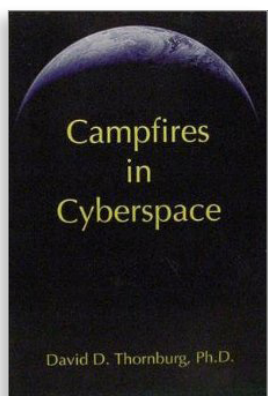
Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century by Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath

A key difference between a learner who decides to stick it out versus one who decides to drop out is usually circumstance, not irresponsibility. Understanding this reality, Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath searched far and wide for learning environments that engage learners on a deep level, reinvigorating the joys of learning in all their kids. In *Deeper Learning*, you will discover eight environments that blew the authors away and gave them rejuvenated hope in the possibility of a truly transformational shift in education.



Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life by Dacher Keltner

Emotions, much like the human body or the shape of today's continents, have manifested from millions of years of evolutionary events. So, when we look at Darwin, how do feelings of compassion and gratitude fit the "survival of the fittest" ideology? In Dacher Keltner's, *Born to be Good*, you are invited to explore an often-untold narrative about Darwin and his belief that living things don't simply exist to live "nasty, brutish, and short" lives. Rather, positive and empathetic feelings exist because they too were selected as more favorable characteristics in the evolutionary process. Dive into how these emotions positively affect our well-beings, and see how you might apply them to your daily actions.



Campfires in Cyberspace by David Thornburg

Have you ever had one of those moments where you discovered a new way of performing an old task that makes your life infinitely easier? Were you instantly struck by how long you went without this wonderful insight? A similar sentiment can be given to our use of the internet. In *Campfires in Cyberspace*, David Thornburg presents thought-provoking ideas on how to take advantage of the virtually limitless tools and knowledge the internet provides, so you can effectively expand the learning opportunities for your learners.

WORTH YOUR TIME

My Journey From Kentucky's Rural Poverty to Wellesley and Across the Empathy Gap

When you spend your childhood battling the challenges of poverty—and then find yourself at a university meant for the wealthiest among us, you find yourself straddling two entirely different worlds. [Read here](#)

My Passion for Literature Succumbed to Reality

How much money will you make? The leading question many learners face when deciding what to major in. Read about one individual's dilemma between choosing between her love for literature and her love for family. [Read here](#)

Why Doesn't Public School Start at Birth?

Most research in early childhood education looks at children between the ages of three- and four-years-old. One Nobel Laureate thinks we should be investigating the positive effects of starting a child's education at a much earlier age—day one. [Read here](#)

[Read here](#)

“And now we welcome the new year.
Full of things that have never been.”

— **RAINER MARIA RILKE**

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PIONEERING : A LEARNER-CENTERED PUBLICATION
www.education-reimagined.org



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