

pioneering

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A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Executive Director

SXSW 2017

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Dear Pioneers,

Hosting our SparkHouse gathering of learners last November was a game-changer for us. For the first time on a national scale, the whole team was actually seeing the reality of what the world could be like if all learners were educated in learner-centered environments. I think I can speak on behalf of our entire team when I say that who these learners were being was more than we could have imagined. They were confident, poised, self-expressed, creative, motivated—and so much fun to be with! But, what we haven't talked about as much in these pages is what has happened since then.

In this issue, you can read about the “rolling thunder” of **SparkHouse** ([link](#))—how the learners have been keeping the momentum going since the meeting. It has been remarkable to see how much is still happening, even without our direct facilitation or support. And, that's just it. They don't need as much from us because they are part of a community of supportive, engaged adults making sure they have what they need to pursue their passions and make things happen. The learner leadership we are seeing is a demonstration of the power of being educated in a learner-centered environment. And, it is an amazing thing to see!

We have a jam-packed issue for you this week! In addition to the update on SparkHouse, we're featuring a robust **Q&A with Pike Road Schools** ([link](#))—a pioneering Alabama district in its second year of existence—and the **story** ([link](#)) of our very own Associate Director Trace Pickering's journey to learner-centered.

Finally, if you are heading down to Austin in a few weeks for SXSWedu 2017, don't forget to add our **Summit and cocktail party** ([link](#)) to your list of things to do. We have an incredible day planned with learners and leading pioneers in the field ending with a party co-hosted with Next Generation Learning Challenge and The Learning Accelerator. We also have a handy **SXSW guide** ([link](#)) to learner-centered sessions that you won't want to miss. We can't wait to see you there!

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.



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It's a Paradigm Shift. So What?

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Engage with leading pioneers in a mind-stretching conversation about how our paradigm impacts our past, present, and future and what this means for education transformation.

Join Trace Pickering (Education Reimagined and Iowa BIG); Jim Rickabaugh (The Institute for Personalized Learning); Cederick Ellis (McComb County School District, MS); Virgel Hammonds (KnowledgeWorks); and young learners from learner-centered environments across the country. If you're ready to leave the current system behind for a reimagined, learner-centered future, dive into our fun, creative, interactive summit that will push your thinking and ignite new possibilities.

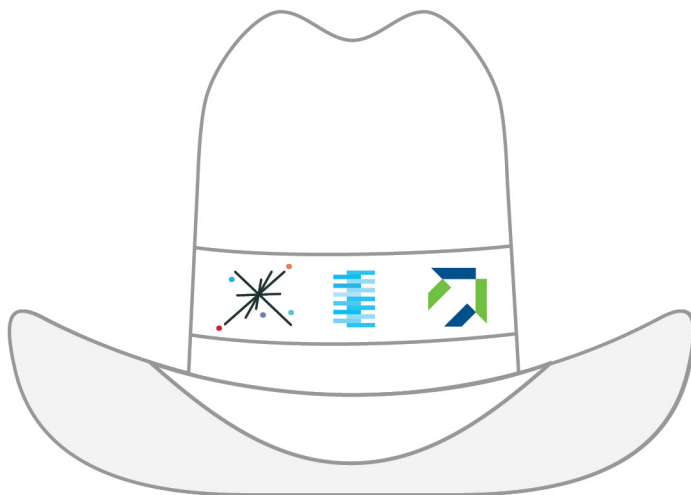


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“My favorite thing about this school is that they don’t allow you to fail. I have multiple chances to succeed and be reassessed but that doesn’t mean that I don’t try hard the first time.” – PRS COMMUNITY 9 LEARNER

IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO LIVE in a burgeoning community ripe and ready to unite around a brand new school system they can collectively call their own. What would you do with this opportunity to not only create from scratch but also to engage your community when their interest is at its peak?

Pioneers in Pike Road, Alabama had the opportunity to explore these questions and more when their population began to grow exponentially after their incorporation in 1997. With this rapid growth came calls for a local school district. So, education leaders began reaching out to innovative environments and hosting conversations with community members: They wanted to “do school” in a brand new way. To create a place where “students are lifelong learners who use their **knowledge, skills,** and influence to make the world a better place.” With this vision, the town broke ground on Pike Road Schools (PRS) on January 10, 2014.

PRS saw their vision coming to life through a uniquely designed, project-based learning system with a strong focus on application. They were also supported by partnerships with colleges of education to be a Professional Development School.

First and foremost, grade cohorts were thrown out the window. Seeking to provide **competency-based** learning in its truest form, PRS learners are met where they are (rather than where the “averages” of their age say they should be). This system of learning allows all learners to be flexibly grouped and progress based on their competency development. All of this development is fostered by PBL strategies, like the Pursuing Our Passions (POP) framework. Lead learners (educators) provide support and encourage learners to pursue **personalized, relevant, and contextualized** learning by taking a deep dive into topics of their choosing.

What might this look like? When a group of learners participated in a “day in the life” of presentation by a local meteorologist, one learner was hooked. Passionate about weather from an early age, he used POP to integrate his interest into the learning community, and he eventually became the official PRS Meteorologist—providing daily weather reports to the learning community and even updating the superintendent during severe weather.

As PRS continues to evolve, each learner will add a new chapter to the book of endless possibilities the PRS vision has created, developing learners who are ready to take on any challenge or obstacle that comes their way. By continuously exploring the opportunities afforded to them as a brand new environment, they are committed to leading their community into a new learning future.

LEARN MORE

[Teaching and Learning Components at Pike Road Schools](#)

[Pike Road School’s first year: Rocky start, brighter future](#)

[Pike Road School Opens](#)

[Pike Road Parents Excited About School Additions](#)

FACTS & FIGURES

Public School

August 13, 2015—first day of school

Second year as a school/school system

K-9 (adding 10, 11, 12 each year, first graduating class 2020)

1,400 learners

72 lead learners

5 Member School Board appointed by the Town Council

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A Conversation with the Pike Road Schools' Team



DR. SUZANNE FREEMAN

Q. What drew you to Pike Road Schools (PRS)? What does it mean to be part of this new way of learning?

A. As a leadership team, we were all drawn to PRS by the opportunity to “do school” in a different way. We saw the possibilities of what could be and wanted to be a part of this exciting process.

Clearly defined beliefs, a compelling mission, and a strong vision provide a lens through which we vet all decisions. A sincere desire to further the mission, commonly called *The Pike Road Way*, is the strength of PRS. Prior to the opening of PRS, the school system and town hosted over a dozen neighborhood/parent meetings to build capacity for *The Pike Road Way*.

Our leadership team continuously discusses what is going well, who needs more support, where we need to adjust, and where we need to build more capacity. We do this by collaborating with learners, lead learners, parents, and community partners. A result of our flat hierarchy is our constant theme for the leadership team: *not about any one of us being right but about getting it right for our learners*. In addition, PRS board members are community leaders who focus on building capacity to accomplish our mission.

We also believe that selecting the right people is essential to maintaining *The Pike Road Way*. As a new school system, we recruited and selected team members whose beliefs philosophically aligned with the system’s beliefs. This shows up in our language. As part of the PRS culture, teachers are *lead learners*, students are *learners*, a grade level is a *community*, and a class is a *family*. These words, and the meaning behind them, communicate the PRS vision for these roles, the passion for the mission, and the total commitment to achieving the mission. Our lead learners embrace this and have continuous conversations about how to further our work.

Q. How did PRS get initial backing to do school in a different way?

A. The Town of Pike Road was incorporated in 1997. And, a “neighborhood school” had been a dream of residents for more than a decade. Town leaders wanted to build a stronger sense of community among families. Children across the town attended 20 different schools, including private ones, and there was still another segment of those who chose homeschooling. To bring the community together, town leaders created Pike Road School System.

The mayor and town council members worked with citizens and learning-centered experts in the field to make this dream a reality. However, they didn’t want to “do school” the way it had always been done. They knew the people of Pike Road expected and longed for more. Pike Road School System couldn’t just be another “mediocre school system,” so they set out to think about “what could be” for their children.

Town leaders formed a group of involved citizens and educators to facilitate conversations about a new vision for public education. This group traveled to P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School at the University of Florida to get a firsthand glimpse into this innovative



RYAN KENDALL



ANGELA LANG



BRYAN CUTTER



NATALIE TUCKER

approach to learning. The group also partnered with Auburn University Truman Pierce Institute to explore Professional Development Schools. In addition, they spent several months talking about a learning-centered school system. For them, it just made sense to make learning more meaningful and to engage learners.

Prior to the inception of Pike Road Schools, Superintendent, Dr. Suzanne Freeman hosted more than a dozen neighborhood meetings to help educate the community on *The Pike Road Way*. Parents, future parents, and community members from near and far turned out in droves to hear more about the opportunity for *excellence in education* in their own backyard. These meetings were designed to build capacity and create confidence in this “new way of learning.”

Thanks to the town’s initial work and the conversations that took place at the superintendent’s neighborhood meetings, parents were ripe for thinking about school in a different way. Many embraced *The Pike Road Way* with open arms. They realized blazing a trail might involve some bumps along the way but that the change would be worth it.

Q. What embodies *The Pike Road Way*?

A. *The Pike Road Way* is grounded in clearly defined beliefs, a compelling mission, and a strong vision which enables Pike Road Schools to approach learning in a different way. Our mission is to “create a culture of intellectual curiosity where all students have ownership over their learning and are inspired to think, innovate, and create.”

The world is our classroom, which is why project-based learning (PBL) is a core component of *The Pike Road Way*. Our learners are solving real problems that have an impact on their school, community, and the world. Learners co-design projects with lead learners and, in many cases, design their own projects. Learners are researchers, curators, content creators, and publishers. This gives them a sense of purpose.

PRS lead learners develop trusting relationships with learners and get to know their interests, enabling lead learners and learners to co-design work that is meaningful. Lead learners guide, instruct, and support learners in their learning, as well as help them navigate content and resources. As needed, lead learners scaffold the learning to meet learners’ needs and celebrate their progress.

Learners also have a major voice in the day-to-day organizational structure of school. Learners initiate and lead school clubs, research and write grants, design and execute school-wide programs, and teach younger learners (Big Patriot/Little Patriot).

Another major component of *The Pike Road Way* is partnering with our parents and community. We encourage parents to talk with their child each day about his/her learning. We want the learning from school to carry over into family life so that homes are places of intellectual curiosity—where families are talking about how things work, good books, current events, and more.

Most importantly, there is no limit on learning. Our goal is to support each learner to become the best version of him/herself. Because of our approach, learners find their sense of wonder and experience learning as a natural and joyous part of life—in other words, #LearningNeverEnds.

Q. How have you recruited and supported teachers in this new role?

A. We recruit people who have the same philosophical beliefs and passion for our mission. Our leadership team maintains a laser focus on recruiting, vetting, and

“When I first heard Dr. Freeman’s vision for a creative teaching environment where children are challenged to own their own learning, I was enthusiastic. I’ve seen firsthand in the workplace the impact when someone has just checked all the boxes to get their degree but never truly learned. I knew I wanted something better than that for my children, and I feel PRS is giving us that and more.”

PRS PARENT

inducting lead learners. We recruit lead learners who are lifelong learners, trailblazers, innovators, and collaborators and who have the capacity to be relationship-builders, designers, facilitators, role models, and leaders.

We have a culture of continuous learning and growth mindset. Hence, once selected, lead learners are inducted into *The Pike Road Way*. This is not a one-time event. Each summer and throughout the school year, staff continuously learn together through discussions, article/book studies, and observing one another. As needed, support comes from outside experts, professional learning conferences, and/or learning from business and industry partners who support environments of continuous learning.

We encourage lead learners to take risks and embrace failure as a valuable part of the learning process. As a leadership team, we model this. We talk about our failures, share our learning, and ask questions to show our curiosity. We now see that lead learners do the same with their learners and have powerful conversations about pushing the boundaries of what could be.

We **empower lead learners**. Each community determines the allocation of their time (no bells), the pace of their learning, and projects (many of which are co-designed with their learners). They share their learning with one another, and we learn from them. Our culture is not about titles but about contributing to the learning, no matter what your role.

The daily schedule includes a block of uninterrupted time for lead learners to design together, reflect on teaching and learning, and discuss student work/progress. We use the word “design” rather than “plan” because designers are responsive to the needs and interests of their learners.

We utilize a non-traditional evaluation system called *The Continuum to The Pike Road Way*. The system is fluid and provides lead learners with continuous feedback through *Coaching Conversations*. The foundation of the coaching conversations is our mission and beliefs—fostering continuous learning and improvement. We also emphasize that this is a journey, and we celebrate approximations along the way. It is truly a team effort.

Q. Pike Road is in its second year, what lessons have you taken from year one? How have the learners adjusted to the changes?

A. As a new and innovative school system, we experienced some hurdles. In response to our Innovation Waiver submitted to the Alabama Department of Education, the state questioned us three separate times regarding instructional or organizational practices. When questioned, however, we toured the person(s) through the school, encouraged them to observe classrooms, and asked them to talk with our learners. Each time, the officials were not only persuaded but even became advocates for *The Pike Road Way* and asked PRS to serve as a model for other school systems.

The first few weeks of school, parents were concerned that their children were not learning and were just “playing.” Parents were accustomed to a traditional letter grading system, so several asked for traditional grades, textbooks, and worksheets. We knew that using a standards-based approach for reporting learning would be a *game changer* in terms of getting the focus on learning and away from “playing the game of school.” So, we held numerous parent conferences to explain the system and then worked strategically with our lead learners and learners to better communicate about and utilize this new system.

Once learners started talking about their learning (what they have mastered and have yet to master), parents started noticing that their children were focused on improvement and could enjoy the learning process.

“Our culture is not about titles but about contributing to the learning, no matter what your role.”

PIKE ROAD LEADER

We have improved our leadership skills by reframing obstacles into opportunities. We have learned to tell our story through social media, newsletters, movies, interviews, exhibitions showcasing student work, and encouraging learners to talk about their learning with their parents and the community. This has had a positive impact and allowed us to continue our journey. We are true to our mission and consistently use our beliefs as the filter for decisions of what to do or what not to do at PRS.

The rate of student enrollment with our limited physical space has resulted in large lead learner/learner ratios. However, we resolved to use all spaces to accommodate a focus on collaboration, engagement, and learning. Lead learners creatively use conventional spaces in unconventional ways. For example, the cafeteria and a library/media center serve as collaborative learning environments; the stairwells function as film studios; and hallways accommodate learners collaborating in small groups. With movable furniture, all rooms are easy to reconfigure based on each learner's needs, whether setting up for collaboration or independent work.

Most importantly, we are not limited by walls because the world is also our classroom. As learners experience real-world learning, the learning spaces include the community and beyond.

We have honest conversations about why we do what we do—where we are strong and where we need improvement. We are very candid that this work is messy and complex; we continue to evolve each day of our journey. Our ultimate goal is to have so much buy-in and ownership by learners, lead learners, parents, and the community that *The Pike Road Way* emerges as the new tradition.

Q. Since you opened your doors in 2015, do you have a favorite story about your Pike Road learners?

A. Problem solving, collaborating, and serving the community; these are just three take-aways that PRS “Community Six” learners (traditionally called “sixth graders”) gained with their *Bags of Love* project. When a group of Community Six learners heard that a local homeless shelter was in need of bags of toiletries and other necessities, they took action and formed the “Passionate Patriots.” This group had recently learned to sew in Maker-space (using donated sewing machines) and wanted to use their skills for a good cause.

The learners sewed more than 100 drawstring bags and developed a campaign to collect items to fill these bags. Through trial and error and creating several prototypes, the learners created the most efficient way to sew and fill the bags; they even willingly sacrificed recess and snack time to accomplish their goal.

They worked with the graphic design learners to create a movie to advertise this project and solicit donated items, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, travel-size shampoo, soap, and deodorant. The learners also learned about the perils of homelessness and wrote individual notes of encouragement for each bag. This didn't stop with C6 learners; it became a school-wide effort and was connected with a kindergarten project.

"Why are there bees on our playground?" asked kindergarteners in Mrs. Allen's class. This question resulted in our kindergarten learners hearing from several local bee experts. They learned that bees weren't so bad as all that and their wax and honey can be very beneficial. Thanks to an expert from within our community, these kindergarteners learned to create their own product: "Honey Express Lip Balm," which they then donated to the *Bags of Love* project.

“Our ultimate goal is to have so much buy-in and ownership by learners, lead learners, parents, and the community that *The Pike Road Way* emerges as the new tradition.”

PIKE ROAD LEADER

Once the *Bags of Love* were prepared, the C6 learners went to the homeless shelter and personally delivered and served a meal to the homeless. This change had a major impact on the residents at the homeless shelter and on our learners.

Q. What's next for PRS?

A. We will continue to provide meaningful professional learning and hold constant conversations to refine our practices. This includes refining how we assess learning, empowering learners to take ownership of their learning, and collaborating with parents about their child's learning. Part of this will also help us to provide more depth to and further challenge all learners.

We are encouraging our lead learners to journal their experiences and share their learning through presentations and publications. Our superintendent is working on a book that tells our story. We want all of our lead learners and learners to lend their voice and tell our story.

Community members remain a very visible and integral part of the school's daily operation, as well as helping to expand learning opportunities beyond the walls of school. We continue to increase the opportunities for them to share their expertise and collaborate with lead learners and learners to design learning experiences, provide research opportunities, co-design and co-facilitate projects—both inside and outside of school. Remember, the world is our classroom.

We are expanding *The Pike Road Way* through high school. This includes service projects and authentic learning experiences with community leaders as well as furthering partnerships with higher education. This will allow for mentoring by adults who share learners' passions and interests. These business and industry partners will co-design and co-facilitate with lead learners. Additionally, representatives from these businesses and professions are serving on Academy Advisory Boards. We are developing additional partnerships with colleges and universities to provide dual enrollment, career technical courses, college courses, and online learning for high school learners.

We want to go deeper in using technology to transform teaching and learning. We use the SAMR model, making the focus on modification and redefinition to transform learning. Our purpose for using technology is to connect learners to information and people throughout the world, enable learners to collaborate, create content, and publish to a worldwide audience. This will allow learners to publish in a variety of ways (movies, animation, blogs, iBooks, etc.) and to receive feedback from professionals and a global audience. Our goal is to use technology as a tool to redefine how learners learn.

The Town of Pike Road is collaborating with PRS to renovate a historic school for use as Pike Road High School. This facility will be completed this summer for our middle and high school learners. This is much needed space for our rapidly growing school system.

Dr. Suzanne Freeman serves as superintendent for Pike Road Schools. In 2009, she was Alabama Superintendent of the Year and was a finalist for National Superintendent of the Year. She was the 2010 recipient of the Chiquita Marbury Technology Innovation Award from the Alabama State Department of Education. She is currently a member of Auburn University's National Advisory Council for the College of Education and serves on the Board of Directors for Alabama Partnership for Children.

Ryan Kendall began his career teaching history in Oklahoma. Since moving to Alabama in 2009, he has worked as a teacher, technology integrationist, and technology director. Currently, he serves as K-6 Principal for Pike Road Schools. Ryan earned two master's degrees: Instructional Technology and Instructional Leadership. He is passionate about student-centered learning, leadership, and transformation in education.

Angela Lang has served as a principal, PreK Director, and Evaluation Coach. Mrs. Lang was selected to the 2009 New Leaders for New Schools Cohort and later joined Lowell Milken's National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. She was part of North Carolina's Race to the Top Grant Initiative to implement and establish Personalized Learning Environments within Guilford County's Middle Schools. She currently serves as Principal of Pike Road School, a newly established Pre-K-9 public school located outside of Montgomery, AL.

Bryan Cutter has a passion for teaching and learning. He taught for five years before he realized he wanted to transform education through school leadership. Cutter currently serves as assistant principal on the leadership team at Pike Road Schools where he helps to create a culture of intellectual curiosity where all are inspired to "think, innovate, and create."

Natalie Tucker has been in education for the past seven years as a teacher and instructional coach. Her current role as instructional coach allows her to partner with lead learners (teachers), learners (students), parents, and the community to change education as we know it. Natalie believes in the opportunity we have to cut steel bands to unleash imagination and creativity.



The Paradigm Shift: How Serendipity Transformed My Mindset

by Dr. Trace Pickering

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.

I’m often asked how I came to think about education and the design of student learning the way I do—one which is squarely in what we now call and know as the “learner-centered paradigm.” The short answer is two-fold: serendipity and an intrinsic desire to innovate, create, and make new things happen.

The serendipity part of the story is likely a familiar one. The perfect mentors and guides appeared in my life at the exact moment I needed them, and I was ready to be open to new patterns of thought.

As a high school sophomore, I was a below “average” student with no direction or interest in school—outside of playing basketball. Luckily, my coach and teacher, Dan Koch, saw in me what I couldn’t see in myself. He challenged, pushed, and cajoled me to “see” what he saw—a person with gifts to give and talents to share. Although a traditional teacher in a traditional school, Dan was different. He cared deeply about knowledge, students, and engaging us in American literature and history. He made me want to be like him—a teacher who cared.

Fast forward six years as I began my teaching career. I simply copied the teaching strategies I witnessed as a student. Within a few months something began to gnaw at me. It was clear that the bulk of my students were bored and disengaged and, frankly, so was I. However, I saw a huge transformation occur every day at 3:30 when school let out.



DR. TRACE PICKERING

The kids on my basketball team were highly engaged in practice, and they were learning together joyfully. I was engaged and passionate, too. The kids practicing for the school play or heading out to their family farms were happy, excited, and open to learning.

The irony and stark contrast didn't go unnoticed. I grew increasingly uncomfortable as the year progressed. I began asking myself, "What is wrong with school that it really is the drudgery I remembered growing up?" I thought it just required being a great teacher who openly showed he cared about kids. Clearly, that wasn't enough or the solution.

The next year, I joined a team of teachers at a middle school where we shared the same students and got to meet every day to plan and help the kids. While still traditional in our approaches, this did allow me to see that teachers could collaborate, work together, and be open to trying new things. I found the energy to try several larger-scale projects, and while the projects were nascent in their development, it helped me see that it was possible for kids to be more engaged in their learning.

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT, OBE, AND DR. WILLIAM SPADY

The big shift, or "ah-ha," for me happened in the third and fourth year of my professional career. I moved again; this time to a large urban high school.

During the first year, I was engaged in alternative assessment models. I had grown tired of the idea that points and tests made for a meaningful or accurate way of assessing learning. Because of this, I was asked to join the Iowa Success Network where I met my next great mentor, Al Rowe.

As part of the Iowa Success Network (ISN), I worked with a group of progressive educators over the course of two years to develop early iterations of authentic assessment and project-based learning, which led to my burgeoning friendship with Al. During this time, Al was spending every weekend on the road presenting and speaking with Dr. Bill Spady, an often-forgotten name in today's education world.

I consider Bill to be the modern father of the learner-centered movement. His work was known as Outcome-Based Education (OBE). OBE was sweeping the nation in the early 90's and hotel conference centers would be filled with 700, 800, 1,000 educators every weekend wanting to hear Dr. Spady speak.

He argued for transforming education, focusing on the learner, and helping them develop life skills beyond content acquisition. In short, he was calling for the development and teaching of knowledge, skills, and dispositions through lifelong outcomes. This powerful learning moved me into a very new and exciting paradigm—what we now call "learner-centered."

While working with the ISN, I was also traveling with Al and getting opportunities to present on topics around OBE, helping myself and others start to envision a very different way to "do school." Excited by the possibilities of creating something new and fundamentally more aligned with helping humans self-actualize, I dove headlong into understanding this work.

At the time, I was still school-centric in many ways because I largely believed we could continuously improve the system into what we wanted—in other words, reform it into something new. It would be a few more years before I recognized that you can't simply improve your way into something entirely new. Rather, you must first step firmly into the belief that transformation is the best way forward. When the OBE movement died ([link](#)) a tragic and rapid death in 1994—literally in 3 months—I remained committed to the ideas and ideals of an education system founded on learners and learner outcomes.

“It was clear that the bulk of my students were bored and disengaged and, frankly, so was I.”

DR. TRACE PICKERING

FROM “CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT” TO “SOCIO-CULTURAL SYSTEMS DESIGN”

By the early 2000’s, I was involved as an incubator and facilitator of education innovation. This is when I met my third mentor, Dr. Susan Leddick. She led a year-long series in my organization called “Contemporary School Leadership,” which blossomed out of her decade-long work relationship with Dr. W. Edwards Deming and social systems scientists Dr. Russell Ackoff and Jamshid Gharajedaghi.

For those who may not remember, Dr. Deming was the father of the quality movement ([link](#)) in America and played a major role in helping Japan become a major, high-quality manufacturing nation. Near the end of Dr. Deming’s career, he and Dr. Leddick spent a significant amount of time with Dr. Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, two of the world’s leading social systems scientists, when the distinction between continuous improvement and redesign was clarified.

Dr. Leddick spent the next several years teaching me about systems thinking and how to design social systems, and I was fortunate to spend many days learning from Gharajedaghi as well. This work was the final step in my own transformation from someone hanging on to the last few school-centered beliefs to someone wholly grounded in the learner-centered paradigm.

With this, I came to learn that continuous improvement is valuable only if you are operating in a system you believe has the capacity and design to produce the outcomes you want. It became crystal clear to me that I no longer should spend time in the current system trying to squeeze out another drop of improvement or work on things I didn’t believe would produce what I wanted to bring into being.

Reform is all about continuous improvement of the same system, whereas I believed we needed an entirely new system. So, I committed myself to teaching social systems theory and practice, writing about the critical distinctions between reform and transform, and discovering how schools might need to look and act moving forward. Yet, something was still missing. I had been unable to make this new paradigm be realized by others, even on a small scale.

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND EMERGENCE

Enter my fourth mentor, Mr. Chuck Peters, who provided me with the learning and framework to move fully from theory to action, even within the messy contexts of school and community. Chuck asked me to respond to our Governor’s “Education Blueprint.” In a lengthy paper, I described a well-intentioned but reform-riddled vision for our state—one incapable of achieving the outcomes desired by the Governor and Iowans. This response was answered with an invitation from Chuck to join his media company as its first Community Builder focused on “changing the conversation our community is having around education.”

Chuck brought Peter Block, author of *Community* ([link](#)), to our city to teach us how to be community builders focused on the gifts and possibilities already within our community. Furthermore, he showed us how to tap into those primary resources to help our community co-create its own compelling future. This set of skills was what I needed to convert all that theory and excitement into action! I now had the paradigm of learner-centered education, the science of social systems design, and the practice of emergent community building—I could see my way to making a learner-centered example possible.

With my friend and colleague, Shawn Cornally, we engaged our community in experiences and conversations about education, what we wanted our education system to produce, and the possibilities that would exist if we truly designed “school” from a blank sheet of paper.

“I came to learn that continuous improvement is valuable only if you are operating in a system you believe has the capacity and design to produce the outcomes you want.”

DR. TRACE PICKERING

This work led to the creation of Iowa BIG ([link](#)) and, ultimately, to becoming a pioneer with Education Reimagined. While Iowa BIG was being born through our community building efforts, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution was engaged in the same work with players at the national level. Their seminal document ([link](#))—declaration, really—directly aligned to what we, and many others across the country, were engaged in.

So, with that lengthy backstory to provide needed context, I'm pleased to now be a member of the Education Reimagined team where I can help sew together, unite, and unleash the collective power of a community of learner-centered educators, community leaders, and legislators to transform the American education system to one that fully self-actualizes every child and cements itself in a positive and possibility-filled America.

I'm thankful to be on this journey with everyone in this community and to be working for and alongside them. I'm always reminded of the saying, "If not us, then who?" We are the change schools and communities have been waiting for. We all must consider stepping up to create this future for not only our own kids and community but also the entire country. I firmly believe our future depends on it.



“We are the change schools and communities have been waiting for.”

DR. TRACE PICKERING

Dr. Trace Pickering serves as the Associate Director of Practitioner Engagement & Learning for Education Reimagined. Dr. Pickering also serves as Executive Director of Iowa BIG, a leading learner-centered pioneering environment. Prior to this, Dr. Pickering served as Associate Superintendent in the Cedar Rapids Community School District in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, USA. Pickering has a diverse set of experiences as an educator and entrepreneur and in private business.



SparkHouse Learners Shed Light on an Age-Old Question

All too often, we (the education community) find ourselves at conferences, gatherings, conventions, symposiums, and the like, and in the moment, we are empowered with seemingly unlimited energy, ready to move our learning ecosystems toward a transformational future. There's great power in being in a room with hundreds of like-minded individuals all looking for ways to stretch the boundaries of what's possible. Ideas are shared, collaborations go late into the night, and hope is restored.

For those of us who hold these events, we relish in the energy and are driven to continue providing these spaces of innovation. And, our hope is always to see continued engagement and collaboration even after the event has passed.

What does it take to not only get energized and enlivened by a house-rocking event but also bring that action back home?

As is often the case when working in the learner-centered paradigm, unknown answers tend to show up from the young learners themselves. Three months ago, Education Reimagined held its inaugural SparkHouse [\(link\)](#) gathering where 42 learners from 12 states and 15 learning environments came together to explore how each of them could become leaders in the learner-centered movement. As a team, we are still awestruck by the power and energy that showed up over the course of the two days we spent with them. And, checking in with them earlier this month, we discovered something that (maybe) shouldn't have come as a surprise: the "rolling thunder" is ever-present. These learners are still riding on the wave of enthusiasm, passion, and leadership we saw come alive at SparkHouse, even months later. And, what's more—they have taken ownership for their continued collaboration and actions.

What are we hearing from them? The question we asked was simple; the responses were dynamic and action-oriented.

Have you taken any actions to share the possibility of learner-centered education and accelerate the movement since we were together for SparkHouse in November 2016?



Hannah and Jemar

IOWA BIG • CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

Absolutely! We are in the preliminary steps of starting an organization and student congress called EdRevison. Our mission is to educate communities about the importance of learner-centered education and empower traditional and nontraditional students and teachers by bringing them together to revise education. While doing this, we plan to host events, work with learners in magnet schools, and speak at events in our region.



Maddie

RSU 2 • MAINE

The second I returned home from SparkHouse, I immediately began discussing what I learned with my friends. Learner-centered education completely changed my views on education, and I wanted others to be as excited about it as I am. I am a part of the student government in my school, and I have brought up talks about learner-centered education and what changes we can make to move our school in that direction. At some point, I would like to get around to the elementary and middle schools to let the younger students know about learner-centered education. They are the future learners of the nation. I will be graduating next year, and I do not want the thoughts of learner-centered education to end after I leave.



Ikonkar Kaur

LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT • LINDSAY, CALIFORNIA

I have talked to the Lindsay District on how we could improve the way we are using the learner-centered system right now. We need to integrate more of the project-based aspect into our schools.

“They came to the event as leaders of their environments and left as leaders of a movement.”



Bryce

RSU 2 • MAINE

I have discussed these things with my friends and got their opinions. I will be going to a meeting with students from different schools in our district to discuss some changes that can be made to our education system to better it. I will probably bring up the many things that I saw at SparkHouse. Unfortunately, there are still students in our district that don't like learner-centered education and want to change it. I hope that by telling them about my experience at SparkHouse, it will change their minds.



Abigail

MOUNT VERNON PRESBYTERIAN SCHOOL • ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Currently, I am in the process of creating and developing a podcast centered on the idea of allowing learners to share their voice. The main purposes of this podcast is to not only empower learners to stand up and speak out but also share experiences of meaningful and impactful learning that's done outside of the classroom.



Carissa

POUDRE SCHOOL DISTRICT • FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

Over the last few months, the teachers and administrators that attended SparkHouse with myself and the two other girls from my school have all been constantly talking about our experience. The relationship that has formed between the five of us is unlike any other relationship that I have had within my school. Not to mention that I have been talking nonstop about my experience at SparkHouse because it was truly remarkable. We are currently working and talking about what actions we should be taking next. Because we are from a large school and district and we are all very busy people outside of school, it's been a bit of a slow start. However, we hope to present to our school board in the future.

“When adults talk about learner-centered education, people ask, “Where’s the evidence of this working?” When learners talk about learner-centered education, we are the evidence.”

ANYA, MOUNT VERNON PRESBYTERIAN SCHOOL, ATLANTA GEORGIA



Kennedy

POUDRE SCHOOL DISTRICT • FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

I have talked about the idea of learner-centered education with all of my peers and multiple teachers since attending SparkHouse back in November, and I have been wanting to bring the idea of changing our education environment to the school and district board.

Other participants have written letters to council members, crafted blog posts about SparkHouse and the importance of learner-centered education for present and future learners, prepared school-wide presentations, and spoken with State Commissioners of Education. One learner was so inspired by a project implemented district-wide in Lindsay, CA that he has taken action in providing free Wi-Fi access to peers in his community of Camden, NJ.

What is evident in all these actions is the choice to jump into the role of a leader who believes in the possibilities before them, rather than feeling defeated by the barriers standing in the way. Young learners have a knack for believing in what's possible. In fact, we see them as the best ambassadors to generate and build sustainable energy around the learner-centered movement. Without their voices, our pioneers will always be searching for that missing piece to truly transform their education system.

As we march on in 2017, we can't wait to continue exploring and creating spaces where learners are not only given an opportunity to be heard but also recognized and respected as leaders in the advancement of the learner-centered education movement. Their enthusiasm and belief in living into new possibilities is a mindset that we can't move forward without!

“Young learners
have a knack for
believing in
what’s possible.”



Leadership for Learning

The National Center for Innovation in Education has released a new paper, “**Leadership for Learning**” ([link](#)), that seeks to create “an actionable understanding of leadership in an era of learning in which the student, not the institution, is the primary reference point.” How does the notion of leadership change when we are talking about a ground-up, community-owned, system-wide transformation? How does the role of leader become shared across a team? What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to play that role? And, what are the accountabilities a leader holds to their learning community? In the first major piece on leadership in a learner-centered system, authors Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger, and Jim Rickabaugh tackle these questions head on. They recognize this work is messy, and the issues are complex. They don’t pretend to have all the answers. But, in what is an insightful framing of the conversation, they lay out a spiral of inquiry to jumpstart thinking and learning. Explore this work further and discover how your own concept of leadership has shifted in your move to learner-centered education.

Leadership for Learning: What is Leadership's Role in Supporting Success for Every Student? ([link](#))

What’s Possible with Personalized Learning?

How do you start a conversation with your community about transforming your learning environment? How do you avoid edu-babble or get lost in misunderstandings of what certain words mean? These are some of the questions that iNACOL decided to take on in your recently published “**What’s Possible with Personalized Learning?**” ([link](#)) Meant to serve as a tool for sharing with community stakeholders, the report takes the reader through a conversation from why this change is needed to how it is being brought into life in a variety of ways across the country. It closes with an invitation to step forward, providing stakeholders—whether they are parents, teachers, business leaders, community members, or learners themselves—with ways that they can get involved in supporting the transformation of their local learning environment. It is digestible and accessible, including videos, engaging questions, and conversation starters. The next time you find yourself in a conversation with your community, take a look at this guide and see what it has to offer.

What’s Possible with Personalized Learning? An Overview of Personalized Learning for Schools, Families, and Communities ([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.

NEA NATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Orlando, FL
February 24-26
[Summit Website](#)

MID-ATLANTIC CONFERENCE ON PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Baltimore, MD
February 27-March 1
[Conference Website](#)

TRANSFORMSC SPRING CONFERENCE

Greenville, SC
March 13
[Conference Website](#)

OPPORTUNITY BOARD

Education Reimagined is hiring! Interested in joining our team? [Learn more here](#)

City Neighbors Hamilton (Baltimore, MD) is looking for a **Principal** for their 2017/2018 academic year. [Apply here](#)

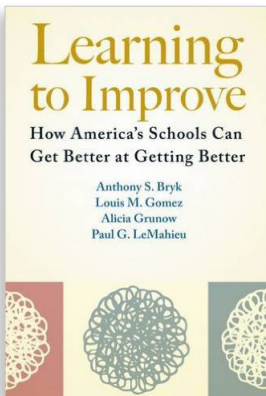
Join the **ReSchool Colorado** team as a **Learner Advocate** to serve a cohort of learners and their families in Denver for a year-long pilot. [Apply here by February 17](#)

B4KIDS is seeking a founding **Head of School** for their 2017/18 academic year! [Apply here](#)



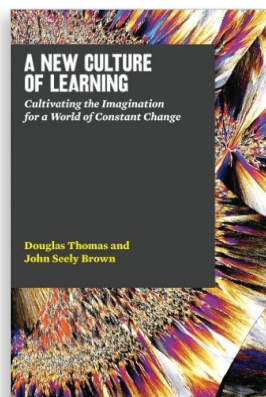
The 20time Project: How educators can launch Google's formula for future-ready innovation
by Kevin Brookhouser

For educators stuck in the depths of the school-centered paradigm, the idea of implementing a strategy that allows learners to freely explore their interests and passions for even one minute a day is a burdensome ask. But, Kevin Brookhouser wants to provide an avenue for letting go of this mentality. In *The 20time Project*, he invites naysayers and learner-centered pioneers alike to discover the opportunities afforded to the entire learning community when learners can freely choose topics of exploration and educators can integrate learning targets within these individual pathways.



Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better by Anthony S. Bryk, Louis M. Gomez, Alicia Grunow, Paul G. LeMahieu

One of the missing links in accelerating the learner-centered movement is integrating research of all kinds into the learning ecosystem. To get to a system truly designed and meant for all learners, research and practice must coexist in a way they never have before. In their book, *Learning to Improve*, authors from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching take “learnings from six years of pragmatic activity” and introduce how these two sectors of research and practice can work together in transforming education to reach all learners.



A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown

Culture is often viewed as a slow changing phenomenon where drastic shifts only play out over several decades or centuries at a time. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown believe this line of thinking is showing inconsistencies with the pace of today's world. In *A New Culture of Learning*, the authors invite you to join them in imagining a world where culture is in constant flux—where new technologies and innovative thinking are pushing us faster and faster into an unknown future.

WORTH YOUR TIME

Preparing Young Americans for a Complex World

With the network age upon us, our world has become interconnected in a way that could not have even been imagined a few decades—or even years—ago. Learners must be ready to recognize and take on the challenges that face us in this new world. How can we prepare them for the unexpected?

[Read here](#)

School libraries can serve as personalized learning hotspots

What spaces in your learning environment might be hotspots for learning rather than remain empty and underutilized? What would happen if libraries, stairwells, and hallways became collaborative spaces for deep exploration? [Read here](#)

How Video Games Can Save The World

How might we view video games in a different light? Rather than associating this activity with violence, or general mind-numbing content, what if it could support learners in solving some of the world's most difficult problems? [Read here](#)

“Leadership and learning are
indispensable to each other.”

— **JOHN F. KENNEDY**

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