

pioneering

ISSUE 36 • JUNE 9, 2017 • EDUCATION REIMAGINED

A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Executive Director

MESA COUNTY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT 51

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education 
reimagined

● connect. share. discover. lead. ● pioneering

Hello Pioneers,

Education Reimagined recently partnered with TLTalkRadio hosts Randy Ziegenfuss and Lynn Fuini-Hetten, Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent at Salisbury Township School District, to launch the *Shift Your Paradigm* podcast series. The series showcases learner-centered pioneers (including young learners) and their insights on what leadership looks like in the learner-centered paradigm. As I've listened to these fabulous conversations, two things have stood out to me.

First, learner-centered leaders are learners. Whether they are administrators, teachers, or students, they know they don't have all the answers and continue pushing to learn more.

In *episode three* of *Shift Your Paradigm*, Kevin Brown, Superintendent of Alamo Heights Independent School District, shared why he no longer feels anxious when he doesn't know how to move forward. He's developed a strong faith in the educators and learners in his community and knows they will all figure it out together. This leads to my second insight.

Learner-centered leaders *share* leadership, empowering everyone in the community to contribute to the overall success of the community of learners.

These two elements are foundational qualities that make learner-centered leaders great educators, learners, administrators, mentors, and advisors. When we see our work as emergent (arising out of interactions among people with a shared vision—especially those closest to the issue), we no longer have the illusion of having the “right” answer and seeing our work as a simple matter of implementation. For example, we can be comfortable knowing learning pathways can't be determined with the expectation they will be applicable for the entire year. By the end of even the first day, new insights develop about each learner's individuality and adjustments will need to be made. These pathways emerge, bend, and alter in the daily conversations with learners.

Learner-centered pioneers know this well, and in this latest issue of *Pioneering*, we feature an environment living these qualities of leadership and implementation—Mesa County Valley School District 51 in Grand Junction, CO. Also included is an exciting announcement about a new learner-centered publication, *Trailblazers*. From beginning to end, it has been a production by learners! We're proud to reprint one of the articles for your reading pleasure.

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.





MESA COUNTY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT 51

GRAND JUNCTION, CO

“We owe it to our students to do away with the ‘sage on the stage’ mode and really meet them at their level.”

— HEATHER O'BRIEN, PRES. MESA VALLEY EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, ELA TEACHER

THE BEGINNING OF A COMMUNITY'S LEARNER-CENTERED JOURNEY can oftentimes be traced back a decade or more before any visible signs of transformation can be found. Remarkable achievements that appear to have come from one or two years of diligent work, are actually the result of years of ideation, experimentation, and forward-moving iterations.

Mesa County Valley School District 51 is no exception. Though they may seem to be an overnight sensation, their story starts all the way back in 2006 when district leaders took action in shifting to a nascent form of personalized learning. They began creating multiple pathways for learning with their core strategy filtered down to a simple phrase: “Time is the variable; learning is the constant.”

In 2011, with the Department of Education's support, Mesa County really began pushing the pedal to accelerate their district-wide transformation. Recognizing the vital importance of including the community in this transformational work, Mesa County leaders took community engagement to a whole new level. Already familiar with the learner-centered work happening in Lindsay, California, the district invested in a two-day trip so the entire school board, a local newspaper publisher, the director of the Chamber of Commerce, the director of a local economic development partnership, and members of the local university could fly out to Lindsay Unified School District and be firsthand witnesses to the power of learner-centered education.

Witnessing the joy, engagement, and maturity of Lindsay learners, the Mesa County community members wanted to implement learner-centered education across the entire district by the next academic year. Understanding the immense structural changes necessary, Superintendent Steve Schultz and his team suggested beginning their transformation with seven demonstration environments. They intentionally avoided calling them “pilots,” knowing this effort was more than a test. They wanted to make it clear they were all-in, rather than letting people infer this transformational process was only temporary.

In each environment, learners are engaged in a **competency-based** learning system where the pace of learning is adaptable to the needs of each child. Through their 16 Habits of Mind framework, there is an ardent focus on developing the **knowledge, skills, and dispositions** necessary to cultivate lifelong learners. This includes creating a culture of learning that ensures a strong support system surrounds every learner and failure is viewed as a necessity in any learning experience.

Soon after the demonstration programs began, the leaders within every other environment in the district began asking when they too would have the opportunity to implement this new system of learning. Ready to answer the call, district leaders have formulated five phases of implementation they believe will provide smooth transitions across the district and bring learner-centered education to all 22,000 learners. Although the journey started out slowly over ten years ago, Mesa County Valley School District 51 saw their window of opportunity and never looked back.

LEARN MORE

[CompetencyWorks Case Studies](#)

[Getting Smart Podcast | District 51 On Building a Performance-Based Education System](#)

[D51 Foundation](#)

FACTS & FIGURES

Public

Performance-Based Learning

44 K-12 learning environments

22,105 learners

51.1% Free and reduced lunch

12th largest district in Colorado

Partners with Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College

CONNECT

Website

[Mesa County Valley School District 51](#)

Social Media

[Facebook](#)

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Conversation with Steve Schultz



STEVE SCHULTZ

The Education Reimagined team caught up with Mesa County Valley School District 51's Superintendent, Steve Schultz to explore the transformational journey the district has been on over the last decade. Steve has been in the district in various capacities over the last 35 years and has been leading the way as they work to transform their district one step at a time. As the 12th largest district in Colorado, the ripple effect Mesa 51's work will have across the state could prove to be monumental.

Q. What excites you about working in education and, in particular, working on learner-centered transformation in Mesa County Valley?

A. I have always had a passion for teaching and a burning desire to see every student succeed. I believe EVERY student can learn. It is the responsibility of school districts to meet students where they are and not the other way around. I agree with Tony Wagner when he proclaims that the industrialized model of education is obsolete and that we need to reinvent education in the United States. I am very excited because Mesa 51 is committed to doing just that.

Mesa 51 is two years into a transformation process in which we are building a Personalized Learning model. Students will eventually move through school at a pace that is right for them, while demonstrating mastery of content before forging ahead. Student voice and choice will be critical to this model's success, as will the integration of social and emotional learning.

Q. At what point in your 35 years at Mesa 51 did you have this “ah-ha” moment that learners needed a new system of learning?

A. I can't pin the need for a new system of learning for Mesa 51 students to a single “ah-ha” moment. Years of teaching experience, observation as a principal, and data confirmed that too many students had been graduating unprepared for their next step. Seeing and hearing from teachers and parents that many students were not engaged and did not see the relevance of education made it clear something had to change. The old Industrial Age Model was not working. Students not learning, their lack of engagement, and the changes driven by a global economy prompted us to develop a performance-based policy in 2006.

This first step defined multiple pathways to graduation and gave more flexibility to students, teachers, and principals to design individualized programs for students who needed it. Though this was a breakthrough for our students, we found regulations from the state's then accountability system, along with other regulations, acted like a cargo net and limited our efforts. Nevertheless, this first step to a more personalized learning model began breaking the mold of the traditional industrialized model in D51. In 2010, senior leadership worked with our Board of Education to update district goals. Personalized Learning was identified as a priority, and we began researching and planning

how we could take personalized learning to a whole new level. Reviewing the literature, plus visits to Lindsay Unified School District in California and to Sanborn Regional School District in New Hampshire, allowed us to develop our plan for a new D51 Learning Model. We began the first of our phases of implementation of a performance-based learning model in the fall of 2015.

Q. Mesa 51 has taken a measured approach to transforming their system. From what you have learned in the last decade or so, what would you suggest is the fastest way for educators/pioneers to make an immediate impact in transforming learning in their community?

A. Build relationships and build trust. Take the time to wrestle with the messy work of real collaboration and build a model that fits the unique needs of your local community. Lifting a model from one place and dropping it into another won't work. Be sure to bring all segments of the community to the table to create a vision to drive behaviors, define core work, and long-term district goals. There are no shortcuts.

Q. What do you find unique about Colorado that gives your district an extra boost in exploring this transformational work?

A. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has gone to great lengths to encourage innovation and pursuit of personalized learning implementation. With the help of partners like **CDE** ([link](#)), **Colorado Education Initiative** ([link](#)), **KnowledgeWorks** ([link](#)), the **Gates Family Foundation** ([link](#)), and the **Great Schools Partnership** ([link](#)), a network of districts interested in personalized learning has been developed. Even though each district may be pursuing various kinds of personalized learning, the network provides critical support through collaboration and shared professional learning opportunities.

Q. How have adjustments Mesa 51 has made to date affected the engagement of learners at each level of learning?

A. District-wide, we have been emphasizing our 5 STEPS to developing a “growth mindset” culture. The impact of this is very evident.

Students and their teachers talk about it, and there is increasing evidence they are applying what they are learning. We've also heard many parents commenting on it. It has been exciting to see the language of growth mindset showing up at school, at home, at student's athletic events, and around the community. For example, one parent shared with me a situation where, during a family meeting, her fourth grade son pointed out: unless the family acquired a growth mindset, they would not be able to resolve the issue at hand. Multiple volunteer coaches from community soccer, baseball, and lacrosse leagues have described young players reminding each other to have a growth mindset as they work on acquiring skills.

There is an increasing level of excitement around this new mentality, as evidenced by teacher participation in professional learning opportunities and an increasing number of students achieving personal learning goals. Though we still have a long way to go, momentum is growing.

Q. What changes do you see on the horizon that will make things even better for these learners?

A. We have collaborated with students, parents, community members, teachers, principals, and other staff to put flesh on the **D51 Learning Model**. This includes:

“Take the time to wrestle with the messy work of real collaboration and build a model that fits the unique needs of your local community.”

STEVE SCHULTZ

1. Developing a district-wide Shared Vision and identifying the Core Behaviors that will define how we operate. By the end of fall 2017, we will have collaborated with key stakeholders to define our core work. The completed vision will solidify our district direction, guide decision making, and provide anchors for long-term goals with measures of progress.
2. Creating a Teaching and Learning Framework that brings clarity to instructional practices and expectations, while still allowing for professional autonomy in how expectations are met.
3. Designing growth model rubrics for transparency of expectations in each content area to provide consistent measurement of student mastery.
4. Creating professional learning, including interest-driven “design hubs,” to support further implementation district-wide.
5. Expanding the use of a district-wide learning management system (LMS).
6. Expanding the use of our newly created Social and Emotional Learning Framework to assess student developmental progress on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).
7. Allowing schools to proceed at their own pace of implementation with collaborative support from initial demonstration schools, colleagues, and district-level personnel.

All of these structures provide students and teachers the basic tools for students to know where they are in mastering the standards, to set personal learning goals, and to establish an environment of individualized support for student voice and choice.

Q. Why is an SEL focus important to Mesa 51's learner-centered transformation?

A. Social and Emotional Learning needs to be emphasized for students to develop growth mindsets, healthy habits of mind, and mental health. Our conscious attention to it drives meaningful student engagement. It provides the confidence and tools for students to “own” their learning and find relevance in their education. We believe it is foundational to a meaningful personalized learning model.

Q. What unintended effects have you seen throughout this transformation journey?

A. The more students, parents, community members, teachers, principals, and staff understand the “why behind the what” of performance-based learning, the more enthusiastic about the transformation they become. Though we have a long journey ahead, taking the time to collaborate and listen to people along the way builds ownership, trust, and commitment—adding to our momentum. Success will only come with patience, mutual support, and understanding along the way.

“The more students, parents, community members, teachers, principals, and staff understand the ‘**why behind the what**’ of performance-based learning, the more enthusiastic about the transformation they become.”

STEVE SCHULTZ

Steven D. Schultz, Superintendent of Mesa County Valley School District 51, has worked in education for almost 35 years—all with Mesa County Valley School District 51. He was a teacher for ten years, a principal for eight, and served as an Executive Instructional Director for four years. He then took the position of Assistant Superintendent for five years, before accepting the honor as Superintendent in July 2009.



LEARNER VOICES

Intelligence

by Cali Ragland

On Wednesday, June 7th, a new learner-centered magazine made a big splash in the education world. *Trailblazers*, a national publication created by and for learners amplifies the voices of young learners who have stories and ideas to share about the learner-centered movement.

The magazine's co-founders and SparkHouse participants, Anya Smith-Roman, Kaylyn (K.J.) Winters, and Abigail Emerson took advantage of the creative freedom afforded to them at Mount Vernon Presbyterian School and the Mount Vernon Institute for Innovation by launching this project at the end of 2016.

The message of *Trailblazers* is as simple as it is profound—Young Learners, Big Voices, New Paths. By curating guest articles from youth around the country (and world), *Trailblazers* sheds light on the powerful insights learners are ready to share if the conditions are right. With permission from the *Trailblazers* team and the article's author, we are providing *Pioneering* readers with a sneak peak of one of their first issue's articles and invite you to check out the full issue [here](#).



CALI RAGLAND

Growing up, I simply assumed I was unintelligent. While kids added numbers written neatly on Ms. Woodrow's notepad, numbers flew through my brain, spinning frantically as I slowly waved my fingers, piecing them together. When Ms. Woodrow gathered us in a circle to share a story, everyone touched each word with index fingers and slowly pronounced letters. Words jumbled in blurs of syllables and trembled against the inside of my throat. I just could not do it; letters and numbers were elusive friends, taunting me anytime I came near their playground.

One day before gathering to read a story, a woman knocked on Ms. Woodrow's door.

Mrs. Bear and I walked to a quiet room and towards a grey cubicle. We reviewed the warm sounds of letters and read sentences into the blanketed air. We wrote words onto note cards until the pencil's graphite shoes stumbled over the word "bed." Mrs. Bear leaned over. "Do you know how I remember how to spell the word 'bed'?" Her pencil drew the letters in lowercase bubbles. "I think of Cali..." Her pencil drew a figure with long hair, its head resting on the "b," a pillow.

Next, she drew the figure's feet propped on the face of the "d." "...sleeping in her bed..." Her pencil covered the little figure in a blanket; the graphite warmth falling down over the letters. "...dreaming at night." Silver clouds rose from the figure's sleeping head. My eyes glinted at the transformation before me. My lips fell open at the realization of this word. It had an infectious beauty. Fireworks rose in my brain, the colors and fire falling, streaming through my head and catching my neurons into flames. For the first time, I was engaged and empowered. I too could understand knowledge and had a voice.

That night, I emptied the bag Mrs. Bear gave me on the floor, separating the puzzle of note cards. Arranging the laminated words and piecing together their jagged edges, I formed a sentence. My soul flashed. I had created that sentence. I read it aloud, then mixed it up. I thumbed through each note card, saying the words into the living room's listening air. I closed my eyes and spelled, the letters' sounds linking to create a unit of meaning. I read each story carefully. When I finished, I emptied the bag's contents again and read to my mother, new smiles growing after each word. Like the queen of *One Thousand and One Nights*, I was Scheherazade, telling word stories every night to myself, my sister, and my mother.

In the elementary school library, I sat among the kindred spirits of the books and their authors, feeling my obsession with words came from the same spark in their souls. A fire lit within me to gather stories.

This spark of curiosity continued into middle school when "Creative Expressions" appeared on my schedule. Opening the door, a man with wild hair and a lab coat splattered in paint gleefully welcomed us in a German accent. Dr. F, a substitute, discussed the class in a frenzy. The next day, our teacher, Mr. Heidt—who looked suspiciously like Dr. F with smoother hair—began class with an invitation to free write based on his own exclamation and a quote by Edward Bulwer-Lytton: "Uh! I got a fevah!; 'It is a glorious fever this desire to know.'" This was my clicking moment. Creative Expressions ignited my spark of curiosity into a passion for learning. Mr. Heidt taught me everyone has the potential for Genius. I thought that to be a genius required insane intelligence. But, there are twelve qualities of Genius: curiosity, playfulness, imagination, creativity, wonder, wisdom, inventiveness, vitality, sensitivity, flexibility, humor, and joy. I learned to value my own qualities and those qualities in others.

It's remarkable that school has been a place that has both made me feel hopelessly unintelligent and lit my soul on fire in wanting to know more. While I gained confidence in myself as a learner (mostly in reading and writing) when still very young in elementary school, for much of my elementary school experience, my feelings of being simply unintelligent persisted. I always felt behind or slow as the class was being taught a lesson by the teacher. Until 7th grade Creative Expressions, I never felt so empowered as a learner. These feelings of empowerment came from the idea that I could learn or do anything as long as I was curious. Mr. Heidt gave us a space filled with color and strange odds and ends that peaked our curiosity and allowed us to chase our passions and create.

"For the first time,
I was engaged
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CALI RAGLAND

Realizing I was not simply unintelligent and that all can learn and create with passionate curiosity was a moment that changed my life personally. It also highlighted the need for education to shift from teachers being “holders of knowledge” to them being “facilitators of learning.” Part of facilitating learning is helping to peak learner curiosity and then providing an environment where students feel comfortable chasing that curiosity, solving problems, and exploring a subject more deeply.

Another clicking moment—one that made me think about the need for education transformation—occurred for me in a tenth grade geometry class. In math, I have always felt under-confident. Although I appreciated math as a subject that could be fascinating, I was never curious enough or truly believed that I could understand it. I simply memorized steps to complete the seemingly irrelevant problems. This changed during my sophomore year in high school. My geometry teacher showed the class Powerpoints about what fascinated and confused her about geometry. She gave us space to wonder, and we were given time to work through problems and proofs on our own and in groups. For the first time, I had a math teacher speak with me—a student in an average/lower level math course—about math as a critical thinker and curious learner. Although I understand that geometry might afford itself to this type of learning because it is so visual and self-reflective (as it often involves proofs), I wonder how my experience with math in school would have been different if my math teachers had always shared with us what excited and confused them in math and had given us space to wonder. How would I have grown as a learner? These experiences have shown me that I (and everyone) can learn and do anything with their own curiosity. I just need to be in an environment that doesn’t, as educator George Couros has said, extinguish it.

Albert Einstein once said, “I have no special talents; I am only passionately curious.”

There is a poster of Albert Einstein in the library at my high school that says: “In school, he was no Einstein.” Einstein wasn’t a genius because of his schooling or any special talents. He was a genius because he chased his passionate curiosity.

If schools can transition from teachers as “holders of knowledge” to “facilitators of learning” and can provide spaces for students to chase their curiosity and passion instead of extinguishing it, students can become geniuses: life-long learners and innovators.

“I thought that to be a genius required insane intelligence. But, there are twelve qualities of Genius: curiosity, playfulness, imagination, creativity, wonder, wisdom, inventiveness, vitality, sensitivity, flexibility, humor, and joy.”

CALI RAGLAND

Cali Ragland is an 18-year-old student at Perkiomen Valley HS (PA). She is deeply passionate about education, curiosity, and stories. This school year, she created an independent study course with her sister and humanities teacher, Mr. Garreth Heidt (@Ed_by_design). This course is a design project exploring curiosity’s role in education. You can follow their journey [here](#).



Q.E.D. Foundation

The **Q.E.D. Foundation** ([link](#)) envisions “communities where each individual is empowered to use his or her unique voice effectively and with integrity in co-creating our public world.” This vision was born out of the founders’ firsthand experiences at **Making Community Connections Charter School (MC²)** ([link](#)) in Maine. As witnesses to the impact competency-based, socially embedded learning can provide learners who lost their footing in traditional environments, these pioneers wanted to spread the power of learner-centered education beyond state lines. By launching Q.E.D., they began building services around “training, coaching, strategic consulting, and tools and resources in support of competency-based learning systems and practices, knowledge of learners and learning, student agency and equity, community collaboration, and democratic practices in education.” Now operating in the New England area, as well as specific learning environments across the country, Q.E.D. has developed knowledge and expertise in bringing learner-centered education to communities looking to transform their learning systems to fit the specific needs of their learners and community at large.

Services ([link](#))

Transformational Change Model ([link](#))

All Kinds of Minds ([link](#))

Highlander Institute

When technology began aggressively entering the education landscape, many educators were given the tools, but not the training, to integrate it into their systems. As the exponential pace of technological innovation (in education and society overall) became more and more apparent, the **Highlander Institute** ([link](#)) did what they do best—they *adapted* ([link](#)) to the needs of the here and now. The Institute specializes in hosting monthly and annual meetings for education stakeholders to explore the new opportunities that have emerged in the education landscape. They create the space to not only discuss new technologies but also explore the shifts in pedagogy that come along with them. The Institute “focuses on the educator, providing unique, tailored, embedded supports at the classroom, school, and district level” so that local and national education leaders can come together and reimagine the possibilities for 21st-century learning.

Fuse RI ([link](#))

EdUnderground ([link](#))

Unconferences ([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.

BIG PICTURE LEARNING'S BIG BANG CONFERENCE

St. Louis, MO

July 25-28

[Conference Website](#)

ELEVATE! BY MESA COUNTY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT 51

Grand Junction, CO

July 31-Aug 1

[Event Info](#)

25TH ANNUAL MEETING: THE STATE POLICY NETWORK

San Antonio, TX

Aug 29-Sep 1

[Meeting Website](#)

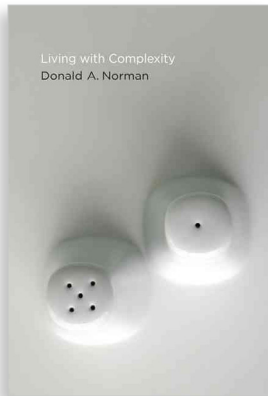
OPPORTUNITY BOARD

Nellie Mae Education

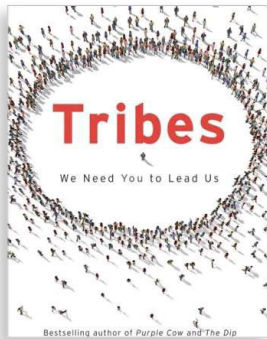
Foundation is accepting nominations for New England public high school educators who have worked to advance and advocate for learner-centered approaches not only in their own classrooms, but at scale. **Nominations due July 14th.** Learn more [here!](#)

Education Reimagined is hiring for one dynamic, diverse team member! We're seeking a Communications Associate—Social Media. Learn more [here!](#)

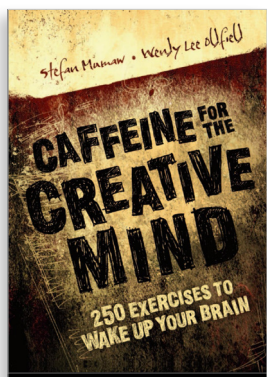
Transcend is hiring for a Research and Development Specialist. Learn more [here!](#)

**Living with Complexity** by Donald A. Norman

Life is complex. And, the demands to simplify it can often result in gaping holes that lead society down unnecessarily dangerous roads—let the world of diet fads be proof of concept. What if we decided to tame this complexity rather than eliminate it? Donald A. Norman's *Living with Complexity* invites readers to consider this very notion. Author of *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman wants us to celebrate our ability as human beings to master life's complexities through two things: sheer intellect and beautiful design. Calling upon our collective brain power and artistry, Norman favors intentional problem-solving over extreme simplification.

**Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us** by Seth Godin

At the core of every local and national movement is a group of strong visionaries and action takers able to gather support from unexpected segments of the community. And, the key to their leadership is overcoming one major roadblock—fear. Recognizing this reality, Seth Godin wrote *Tribes* to showcase what can happen when we overcome our personal fears in order to lead our communities to a brighter future. Discover what lies on the other side of fear and how you might encourage your community to answer your call for transformation.

**Caffeine for the Creative Mind: 250 Exercises to Wake Up Your Brain** by Stefan Mumaw and Wendy Lee Oldfield

When push comes to shove, local leaders are best equipped to determine the structures and strategies that will match the unique needs of their learners. Attacking each day with an intense focus on creativity and problem solving can cause mental fatigue. So, what can you do to jumpstart your day, even when you're up against one roadblock or obstacle after another? In Stefan Mumaw and Wendy Lee Oldfield's *Caffeine for the Creative Mind*, they provide 250 exercises to get your creative juices flowing. Select one, and see where the rest of the day takes you.

WORTH YOUR TIME

Designing a New Education System: ReSchool Colorado

"What if we built a system around talents rather than focusing on deficits?" This simple question jumpstarts a new video showcasing ReSchool Colorado and their mission to reimagine the entire education system in Denver, CO. Made in partnership with The SKOOL Project, it is well worth your time! [Watch here](#)

Systems Change Depends on Us

In the transformation of the education system, the question of equity (and how inequity permeates a system) must be tackled head on by those at all levels. At The Center on Culture, Race and Equity at Bank Street College of Education, they take a three-pronged approach that might just provide guidance for learner-centered practitioners struggling with this question.

[Read here](#)

Pushing the Boundaries: Positive Youth Development and School Design

Springpoint's Executive Director, JoEllen Lynch, explores what areas of learning should be considered non-negotiables when providing learners voice and choice in their learning. [Read here](#)

“Let us make our future now,
and let us make our dreams
tomorrow’s reality.”

— MALALA YOUSAFZAI

Read past issues of
PIONEERING : A LEARNER-CENTERED PUBLICATION
www.education-reimagined.org



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