

pioneering

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A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Executive Director

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Dear Pioneers,

Today marked the first day of the 4th Pioneer Lab Training—our largest training to date. As the guest list for this training grew, we reflected on the myriad ways all five elements can be cultivated within each learning environment. We also noticed three system-wide lessons many pioneers are discovering regardless of their learner-centered model.

The first is about their starting point. Time and again, we hear how it all must begin with each individual learner's interests and passions. This means standardized curriculums are no longer the driving force behind what learners experience on a daily basis. Rather, pathways are designed with the learner's interests as the starting point and standards are mapped to the project on the backend. This completely flips the traditional framework and truly puts learning in the hands of the learner.

This new way of thinking about the starting point leads directly to the next lesson: everyone does not need to learn the same thing. Preparing learners in a one-size-fits-all system will never translate to our no-size-fits-all world. Naturally, there are commonalities seen across individual learning experiences, but these characteristics sit at a much higher level than something as specific as learning the quadratic function or the difference between mitosis and meiosis. What remains constant are the core competencies we want all kids to graduate with.

Lastly, we've seen that enabling learners to identify meaningful goals and to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to pursue those goals is more important than ensuring every content standard is met.

With so many fields of study sitting outside the standard subjects found in traditional schooling, allowing the learner to dive deep into their interests and passions will not only allow for unexpected growth opportunities in the learner but will also allow educators and the community at-large to grow in the process.

With these reflections in mind as we go about Pioneer Lab Training this week, we're excited to continue amplifying pioneer voices in another issue of *Pioneering*. Be sure to explore Henry County Schools, a young learner's story from McComb School District, and much more.

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.





HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS

MCDONOUGH, GA

“Kids have grabbed onto this and accepted the challenge we have given them of owning their own learning.” – KAREN PERRY, SPECIAL PROJECTS COORDINATOR

IN A LEAN DISTRICT OFFICE THAT SERVES AND SUPPORTS 50+ learning environments, nearly 3,000 educators, and over 42,000 learners, how do you rally everyone around a unifying vision? For Henry County Schools, the answer is simple—autonomy.

Even before exploring the idea of a learner-centered system, Henry County leadership has sought to provide every environment with the freedom to implement learning strategies based on the unique needs of their learners and community. This idea has allowed the vast majority of resources to be poured into the learning environments themselves, rather than the central office.

Starting from this structure, they were already in a mindset that focused on school empowerment rather than district empowerment. But, Henry County soon realized this still wasn't quite right. As the idea of personalized learning began permeating the conversations, district leaders started exploring what their philosophy would look like if learners were at the center (instead of schools). Once the wheels started turning, there was no stopping them.

In 2013, Henry County began building their broad vision for their shift to learner-centered learning. And, by the fall of 2015, the first cohort of learning environments began putting their community- and learner-focused plans into action.

Every environment was guided by five pillars created in an initial district visioning process—Learner Profiles, **Competency-Based Learning**, Authentic Learning, 21st-Century Skills, and Technology-Enabled. With this north star guiding the planning phase at individual environments, **learner agency** was quickly identified as key to the five pillars' success. At every turn, difficult questions were quickly resolved when the learner became the focal point of the conversation and was seen as the owner of the learning process.

Central to every learner's journey at Henry County Schools is their Learner Profile. From the first day of school to graduation, learners have a central profile that allows educators, parents, and the learner to review and update academic progress and learning interests, contributing to their co-created Personalized Learning Plans. This means learners can avoid doubling back on content already mastered because every educator has a clear picture of their unique learning needs.

As Henry County Schools continues to roll out their learner-centered initiative, they are aiming for all 50 environments to have made the shift by 2020. With each new cohort of environments, lessons learned are passed through the entire district to ensure continuous improvement. At Henry County Schools, learner-centered education is an endless, rewarding journey rather than a race to the finish line.

LEARN MORE

[CompetencyWorks Case Study](#)

[Henry County's Personalized Learning Philosophy](#)

[Video: Personalized Learning at Henry County Schools](#)

FACTS & FIGURES

Public

30 miles south of Atlanta

42,000+ Learners

50 Learning environments + Impact Academy (blended/virtual school) & Academy for Advanced Studies (college/career academy)

55% Free and reduced lunch

60% Black, 35% White, 5% Hispanic

85% Graduation rate

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A Conversation with Karen Perry



KAREN PERRY

Q. Before Henry County Schools began shifting to learner-centered learning, how did the district operate?

A. In the early 2000's, our community was experiencing significant population growth, so the district was almost entirely focused on getting more schools open, kids in chairs, and simply keeping up with the demand. It's difficult to create a sense of community during a wave of growth like that. To make this process efficient, we basically had the same exact footprint in every school—meaning every school looked and operated the exact same way. We were standardizing everything and just looking to hold on as the wave of growth continued.

Finally, about seven to eight years ago, we got to take a breather and evaluate the district. We assessed what instruction looked like and how effective it was in the different communities our district serves. A simple realization cropped up. Schools are standardized, but communities are not. And, every school serves a unique community.

In recognition of this reality, we wanted to provide more autonomy to our schools. Our central office is thin, and we pour the bulk of our resources into the schools themselves. By doing so, we allow schools, rather than the district, to be the decision makers. We have a loose-tight balance between all of our stakeholders where the idea of learner agency, teacher agency, and school agency is the common thread running through the whole organization.

We no longer have a cookie cutter model, which definitely makes things less efficient. But, I think it makes it more authentic and true to who all those school communities are. They're putting their own blood, sweat, and tears into the work and their own stamp on personalized learning such that it best fits their community.

Q. How do you see your current work preparing the district for another wave of growth down the road?

A. We'll be clear about the instructional approach and the philosophy behind what's guiding each school's transition. We'll have the expectation that every school we open will be a personalized learning school. This means the staff we look to hire will need to express particular competencies that reflect the district's guiding vision. We'll also have district support aligned to a personalized approach for educators. Instead of everyone receiving the same exact professional development, we're personalizing it for individual educators and leaders.

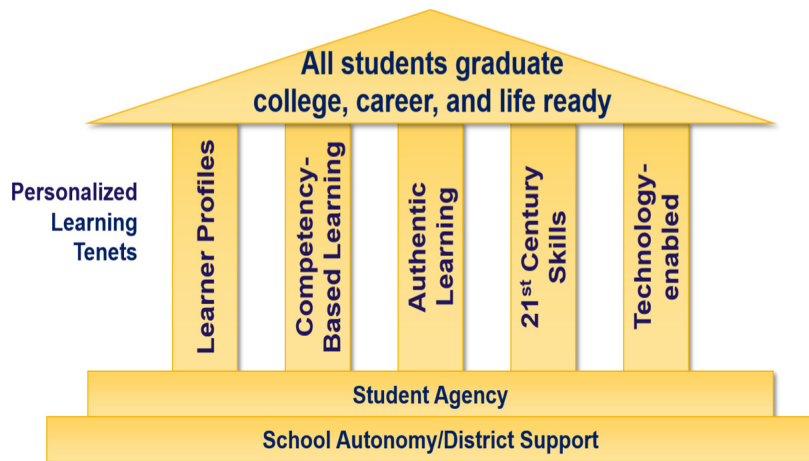
It's a different challenge starting a new environment with personalized learning at the forefront. I'm looking forward to opening up new schools and starting with this philosophy, rather than having to redesign and turn the ship around.

Q. For Henry County, what does personalized learning really mean?

A. Personalized learning is a commitment to student agency. We believe students

should be able to make substantive decisions about what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate that learning. For us, personalized learning never meant kids solely learning from a website and adaptive software. And, one of the challenges we've had is getting that perception back from the community and the tech industry at large.

We've been really clear from the beginning that personalized learning is about creating deep, interpersonal connections between teachers and students, as well as between students and their peers. We want kids to be college, career, and life ready. When we say life ready, we mean kids who can collaborate and communicate effectively. We want to cultivate the kind of kids you want to live next door to. That's really important to us as a community.



We believe learning should include five tenets (shown above). With the Learner Profile, kids should know themselves well and be known well to the team around them. The profile answers the pivotal question: Who are you as a learner?

Next, we're shifting to competency-based learning. We've clarified what every kid should know and be able to do for every content area, as well as what should be integrated cross-curricularly. Within that cross-curricular focus is our commitment to 4C's—communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—which we borrowed from the P21 Framework. We also think learning should be authentic in nature. And, at the back sits technology, which enables and enhances the other four tenets. That's our broad district vision.

The challenge for each school is to take that broad district vision, with the student agency focus, and figure out what it's going to look like every day, on the ground, for the community being served.

Q. Throughout each planning phase, what ideas have spread across learning environments and which have remained specific to individual communities?

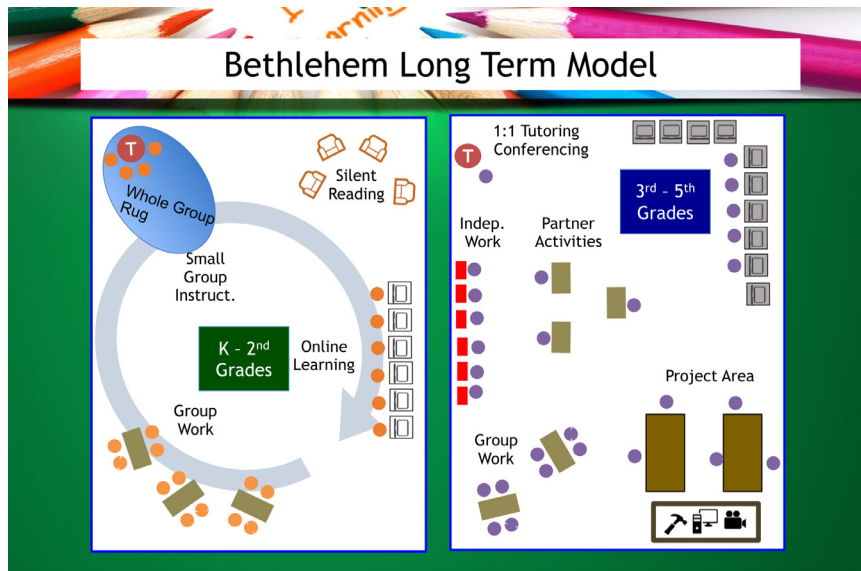
A. The first item that needed to be addressed was this idea of whole group instruction. Some models and approaches began emerging gradually through practices like “choice boards.” If you look at a continuum where teacher-centered is on the left and student-centered is on the right, “choice boards” are still mostly teacher-centered.

“We’ve been really clear from the beginning that personalized learning is about creating deep, interpersonal connections between teachers and students, as well as between students and their peers.”

KAREN PERRY

Teachers are deciding what's on the "choice board" and what the student's available options are.

The next iteration of this idea was playlists. These turned the focus more on agency. How good were kids at accessing their own resources, making decisions, setting goals and reflecting, and adjusting their own course of action? It's possible to be loose or tight with any one of those things.



“We require that each school’s design team include parents and learners.”

KAREN PERRY

At one of our elementary schools, kids are rotating through multiple stations during their K-2 years, then in grades 3-5, they begin floating around more freely based on their learning needs. You can see how these learning environments lead to agency because kids are having to make decisions about where they're learning, who they're learning with, and how they're going to accomplish their learning.

At one of our high schools, they've created an "Enter, Engage, and Express" model. "Enter" is whole group instruction where teachers introduce content to kids, then kids break out and "engage" with materials in myriad ways (hands-on, collaborative, online, project-based, independent study, etc.). This allows for multiple pathways to learning, while accomplishing the same content goals. Finally, kids "express" what they've learned through different means.

In both examples, learners are making substantive decisions about what and how they learn. And, these are just from two schools and not a model everyone follows. In fact, we are model agnostic. We don't care what your model is, as long as students are being served well and you are moving in a direction that allows for student agency.

Q. Throughout this process, how have learners and parents been involved?

A. We require that each school's design team include parents and learners. We don't want these schools simply communicating out: "This is the plan, and you're going to love it." They must engage students and parents in the decision-making process all along the way. So, we are ensuring parents and kids are at the table from the start. And, throughout the implementation process, there is a lot of focus-grouping, surveying, and collection of perception data on how parents and students view what's being created.

Through this, we have seen that kids love it. They have grabbed onto this and accepted the challenge we have given them of owning their learning.

Once parents understand it and hear their kids articulating why they're learning what they're learning, parents are really excited by the spark of learning that happens in these environments. We've seen that parents and kids are the best storytellers when it comes to sharing the power and potential of a personalized learning environment.

We also have each school implement a pay-it-forward plan where they open their school for tours to show parents and community members what this learning looks like in action. Almost without exception, everyone leaves those tours really impressed with the kind of learning that is happening because it really is a different way of learning than what us adults remember from when we were growing up. When we talk about radically changing the learning experience, it helps people to actually see it.

Q. What does the initial rollout look like for learning environments, and how do new cohorts learn from more experienced ones?

A. During the planning phase, which takes a good amount of time—strategic research, design, and thinking—one of the initial momentum builders we discovered came through pilot classes. Every school pilots particular practices and learns from those experiences. After the pilots, these lessons are assessed and schools explore what they want to implement first and how they want to roll it out in their building.

Year one then focuses on the handful of practices, with each additional year adding more things on. Every school has a four-year rollout plan embedded in their initial strategic plan. As more plans get put into action, we're able to give warning and encouragement to different ideas being proposed. For example, we might see an idea moving forward that was attempted two years ago at another environment but ultimately failed. We can provide that example and bring new considerations to the conversation. With these lessons learned, schools can move forward with their plan with the knowledge of what to look out for along the way.

We expect each set of schools to pay-it-forward to the next cohort. There is great collaboration between cohorts. When we first started this project, we went all across the country visiting innovative schools. Now, our strategy is to send new cohorts to visit other Henry County cohorts of schools already further along in their transition so they can learn from what's happening across the district.

We want to invite schools to stop their work for a second and think about what this could be if you allowed yourself to dream big and started making intentional decisions in a bold student-centered direction. Going to visit other schools is a big opportunity to notice how different schools can look, even in your own county. It's really cool for us to say you can go right down the road to learn new things, rather than flying out to California or up to Maine.

Q. What have been some of the biggest surprises from learners during this transition?

A. We are constantly reminding ourselves that even little kids can be agents in their own learning. Kindergartners are fully capable of leading student-led conferences. Little kids are able to take on project-based learning and make independent decisions about how they learn and the resources they use. I think a lot of times elementary teachers are surprised at that. But, even more significant is how surprised high school

“We want to invite schools to stop their work for a second and think about what this could be if you allowed yourself to dream big and started making intentional decisions in a bold student-centered direction.”

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teachers are by the capabilities of elementary students. I love sending high school teachers down to elementary schools to watch these young kids leading their own learning. Because if you can do it with seven-year-olds, we can do it with 17-year-olds.

Teachers have also been surprised to see that kids actually want to have the independence to show their learning in a way that fits their interests. Even when we initially had “choice boards” and teachers presented options to each kid, some would immediately try to negotiate their own method. They would point to the five options available to them, and say “I don’t want to do any of those; I’d rather do this thing over here. I want to write a book or build a website to show my learning.”

I love when kids surpass teacher’s expectations. Those are some of my favorite stories.

Q. What would you say to a leader curious about exploring learner-centered transformation in their community but worried about the risks involved?

A. I firmly believe the place to start is in spending time reflecting on the student experience from the student’s point of view and then getting clear on the reasons why schools need to change. It’s really tempting for people to move right to the actual implementation changes for schools, but we have seen better success when schools, leaders, and teachers get clear about the why before moving to the how and what.

If you’re really committed to a cycle of innovation over time, the **how** is going to constantly change. It’s less important to have conversations about models and bell schedules and technology platforms. Those are “how” topics. If leaders are clear on why school needs to change, and they can clearly articulate that to their community, state, and district, then there’s actually a lot of latitude in how you do school.

We have a lot of self-imposed constraints on how we do business and a lot of that is held in place only by tradition. If you begin to challenge your core beliefs about how to do school, I think that everyone would see they have more flexibility than is currently perceived.

Additionally, when you start changing the student experience, parents want to know what their kid is experiencing. If you’re changing things, you need to show up with a clear rationale for why you’re making those changes. Most people understand that the nature of information is dramatically different than how it used to be; and most people see that technology is allowing more collaboration and globalization of information. Leaders in schools are the ones to create the connection between how the world is changing and why school needs to change with it.

I would encourage anyone at the beginning stages of this to take the time to do the soul searching and the research to get clear on their why. The what is going to change over time. There’s no silver bullet to this. Personalized learning is a philosophy, not a program. If you’re going to do things in a dramatically different way, you need a rationale that is pervasive throughout the organization.

“If you’re really committed to a cycle of innovation over time, the **how** is going to constantly change.”

KAREN PERRY

Karen Perry (@karennole) is the Special Projects Coordinator for Henry County Schools. Karen coordinates their personalized learning work, including the redesign of all 50 learning environments in the district and the district work to support the implementation shift to learner-centered learning. Prior to her current role, Karen’s 20 years in education have included teaching, coaching cheerleading, serving as a Graduation Coach to support at-risk students in graduating on time, and serving as the district testing coordinator.



Learning Built with My Interests in Mind

by Patricia Coleman

My name is Patricia Coleman, and I go to Summit Elementary, a student-centered learning school. I used to go to a traditional school, where I always did well, but I knew I could do better. I had to wait for everyone else to finish their work, instead of getting to move on. I got bored waiting on the others and became uninterested in my work. That all changed when I started student-centered learning.

I have always been interested in technology, but I never had the chance to use it in my learning until now. In traditional learning, we use lots of pencil and paper. In my opinion, technology or iPads are way better tools for learning. The technology actually engages me in my learning and teaches me about my work. Teachers use to just show me the work I had done without any feedback. Now, my teacher practitioners give me feedback and direction when I need help, and I don't have to wait for the rest of the class to keep moving.

For instance, I was working on order of operations, and I decided to do a quick worksheet. I started to work on it, but I realized it wasn't helping me at all. Then, I got on my iPad and went to Compass Learning where they had an assignment dealing with order of operations. Compass Learning is a computer program that uses test data to create a learning path for each scholar. It explained everything I needed, and I moved right along.

Another big difference Summit has made for me is about how I work with other scholars. At Summit, we call the students "scholars" because we expect excellence at all times. We call our teachers "teacher practitioners" because they have more freedom to be creative with how they teach and how we learn. Our principal, Mrs. Washington, is called our "Lead Learner" because she is leading us to become the best learners we can be.

I use to hate helping others when I was finished with my work. Now, I'm excited to help. In student-centered learning labs (we call our classrooms "learning labs"), we are free to help each other. In my old schools, I would sometimes explain the work to another scholar, but they wouldn't understand me. My understanding was different because I was more advanced. Now, we can help classmates that have the same understanding or the same work, while others work on other things. It's like we always have help, but we don't have to wait for others to finish, or we can keep working on it at our own pace until we get it.

At Summit, I found a new interest in coding. Instead of doing a regular paper project, I can use Scratch Jr, a coding app for beginners, to show that I have mastered my learning target. Learning targets are skills that are specific to each scholar based on what they know and what they don't know. In our projects, we create evidence to prove we understand our learning target, and we are ready to move on to the next target.



PATRICIA COLEMAN

I once had a learning target on parallel and perpendicular lines. Instead of a worksheet, I decided to put my coding skills to work on Scratch Jr. I drew, scripted, and programmed everything into a cartoon to explain the difference between perpendicular and parallel lines. It made me feel proud. It took a lot of effort, unlike a pencil and paper project on a similar topic that would have taken little effort.



Then, I started to use Scratch Jr for my evidence on other work. If I had stuck with traditional ways of learning, I would not even know what coding was. Above is a screenshot of a cartoon I created using Scratch Jr about figurative language. It takes place on the beach and none of the characters are humans. It was so fun to create because coding is like a puzzle that puts pieces together to create a picture that moves. It's not easy and takes a lot of time, but it is so cool when it is done.

Recently, I discovered new interests that I would have never known without the opportunities I have now. Animation and architecture are other examples of my new interests. I cannot imagine myself being where I am without student-centered learning. Without this, I probably would not know about coding, have a chance to help others in a fun way, or have the opportunity work at my own pace. My interest in animation has grown stronger due to this different way of learning. I have watched and used animation to learn new things and to teach other scholars in my learning lab. It's very easy to do here because each scholar has their own iPad to use every day in class.

Animations are drawings that move or have motion. People use animation to make things like cartoons, videos, and video games. I have always been fascinated by the way cartoons and movies are made. It seems so hard to do. An app, Toontastic, on our iPads inspired me to learn more about it. It allows scholars to create stories of any kind. It's one of the ways we can show evidence of our learning. It's very different from the coding we do on Scratch Jr.

I really like being at the Summit Elementary. I am free to explore new things in a positive environment. We still take a lot of tests but at least the learning for the test is fun. In the traditional school, we had to test and the learning was so boring! I hope I can stay at the Summit until high school. I think there is so much more for me to discover that I wouldn't be able to do like I can here.

“I discovered new interests that I would have never known without the opportunities I have now.”

PATRICIA COLEMAN

Patricia Coleman is 11 years old. When she grows up, she wants to be President of the United States. If that doesn't work, she wants to be a computer programmer. She lives in McComb, Mississippi with four sisters and one brother and attends Summit Elementary in McComb School District. She likes technology, comics, and writing stories. She likes using the app Jumbler to help her with story ideas. Her favorite author is Rick Riordan (*Percy Jackson* series), and her favorite subject is math.



Partnership for 21st Century Learning

When seeking to prepare an entire generation of learners for the 21st-century workforce, how do you go about creating a framework for learning that serves as a general guide rather than a rigid list of items to check off? Upon grappling with this question **Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21)** ([link](#)) arrived at a strategy aligned with their values: You seek out a large sampling of voices from across communities and across industries. They gathered input from educators, parents, learners, and business leaders into the conversation about how to prepare learners for the future of work, and an insightful framework emerged. The P21 Framework not only includes learner outcomes but also the supports needed to develop them. After multiple iterations over the last decade, the P21 Framework has become an empowering guide for educators and learning environments around the nation and world to transform their environments to meet the needs of the 21st century. The P21 Framework guides all of P21's robust work in research, advocacy, and resource development.

Framework for 21st Century Learning ([link](#))

Resources for Educators, Policymakers, Parents, and Project Managers ([link](#))

The 4Cs Research Series ([link](#))

AspenSEAD

In 2016, the **Aspen Institute** formed a **National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (AspenSEAD)** ([link](#)) to explore how Social-Emotional Learning can be better integrated with the rigor of academic learning. The commission formed after the institute collected evidence pointing to the positive impact social-emotional practices have in everyday learning. On top of this evidence, they saw more and more employers hiring for “occupations that require the mastery of social and emotional skills.” AspenSEAD's research involves the voices of all education stakeholders, including the creation of a Youth Commission “contributing firsthand experience and real-time insights to how schools can support students' holistic growth.” Learner voices will only accelerate AspenSEAD's mission to “develop a roadmap that will point the way toward a future where every child receives the comprehensive support needed to succeed in school, in our evolving 21st-century workplace, and in life.”

Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Fast Facts ([link](#))

A Sampling of the Literature on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development ([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

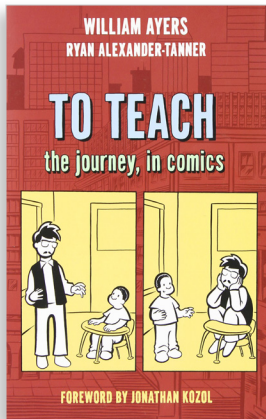
[Meeting Website](#)

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!](#)

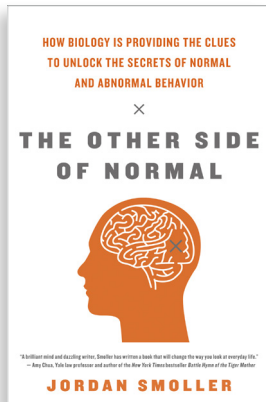
Education Reimagined is hiring for one dynamic, diverse team member! We're seeking a **Communications Associate—Social Media.** Learn more [here!](#)

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



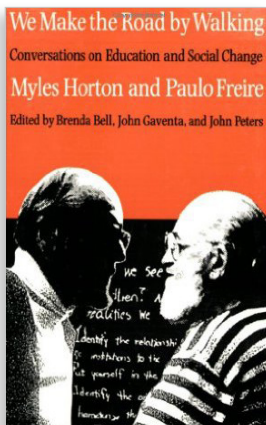
To Teach: The Journey, in Comics by William Ayers with illustrations by Ryan Alexander-Tanner

A picture is worth a thousand words. And, in William Ayers' *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*, the illustrations provided by Ryan Alexander-Tanner leave educators of all backgrounds speechless. With each page, and in just a few words, Ayers and Alexander-Tanner express deep insights into the many inefficiencies within the traditional model of education. They implore readers to question tradition and explore the possibilities that sit outside the traditional paradigm of learning. Explore the opportunities available to all educators if the goals of education shift to the interests and needs of each individual learner.



The Other Side of Normal: How Biology Is Providing the Clues to Unlock the Secrets of Normal and Abnormal Behavior by Jordan Smoller

The world would be a very simple (and boring) place if everything could be defined along a black and white, this or that, line of thinking. But of course, there are limitless grey hues mixed within every subjective continuum. Jordan Smoller explores these grey areas in *The Other Side of Normal*, where he specifically digs into the concept of “abnormal” psychological behaviors. Smoller, a Harvard professor, invites readers to consider where their absolutist nature may separate conditions of the mind as if they are worlds apart when, in actuality, they are sitting right next to one another.



We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire

As learner-centered pioneers work at the edges of education transformation, there are two important support structures guiding their work. One, knowing there is a community they can connect with to accelerate the learner-centered movement. Two, understanding the power of social change and recognizing the leaders who have made it happen in the past. Two of the greatest social change actors, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, invite you into their minds in *We Make the Road by Walking*. Discover how these historic movers and shakers of the world make such a high impact in their communities.

WORTH YOUR TIME

Shift Your Paradigm— Episode 006

In the sixth episode of the *Shift Your Paradigm* podcast series, Bill Zima (superintendent), Mark Tinkham (principal), and Bryce Bragdon (young learner) explore the many lessons learned along RSU 2's learner-centered journey. [Listen here](#)

Why Grades are not Paramount to Achievement

What might happen if the education system ended its long-term relationship with traditional grading? Educators in Kentucky wanted to find out. Discover the lessons they learned in their six-week experiment. [Read here](#)

Got Questions?

When a five-year-old traps us in an endless inquiry of “why,” we might want to ask ourselves why we don't encourage this behavior more often. The power of a single question can open doors we may never have known existed before.

[Read here](#)

“Don’t underestimate the power of your vision to change the world.”

— LEROY HOOD

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