



# HARNESSING *Tensions*

A Both/And Approach to School  
Recovery and Reinvention

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## To Recover and Reinvent in Education, Harness Six Key Tensions

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Nearly one year after COVID-19 shuttered school buildings across the US, schools and systems are in the throes of heated debates around remote learning, school re-opening, and health and safety. Education leaders looking around the corner confront even more complex challenges and opportunities:

- » **Near-term:** How will we support recovery from learning loss and trauma?
- » **Medium-term:** How will we reinvent the design of schooling to move [beyond the inequitable, industrial model](#) whose flaws have now been exposed and amplified?

We believe the growing conversation on learning loss represents a unique opportunity for our field. Too often in education, well-intentioned efforts to solve hard problems skim over complexity and pay the price in solutions that don't last or plans that leave out key voices. However, [a growing body of research](#) reveals that great leaders take a different approach. They embrace complexity, see the

[paradoxes](#) inherent in tensions, and come up with creative, "both/and" solutions. This approach – [well established](#) in the [field of leadership](#) – is making inroads [in education](#). For example, [Education Leaders of Color](#) signals the importance of moving beyond historical either/or polarities in their [third-way values](#). This is not about avoiding hard choices; rather, it's about designing better solutions that account for the complex reality we're facing.

Our organization, [Transcend](#), works with schools and systems across the country who are pursuing recovery from our many intersecting crises in ways that [sow the seeds for reinvention](#). The communities we work with are navigating the six key design tensions shown below.

Schools' and systems' ability to navigate these tensions will directly impact their ability to recover and reinvent. Below, we unpack each question's essential tension and share how communities are navigating it by converting the *polarities* (opposing pulls of each tension) into *paradoxes* that prompt design questions, which in turn lead to new *possibilities* for better, more equitable approaches. We end with some key actions leaders across the field can take to harness these tensions for better, more equitable designs and outcomes.

# 6 KEY TENSIONS

### WHO?

Whose needs must we prioritize?

*Students vs. Adults*

### WHY?

What purpose should guide our efforts?

*Meeting Standards vs. Activating Agency*

### WHAT?

With limited time and resources, what activities should we prioritize?

*Academic vs. Wellness Experiences*

### HOW?

How will we handle the vastness and diversity of needs?

*Universal vs. Customized Supports*

### WHERE?

Where will learning and recovery happen best?

*In Schools vs. Any/Everywhere*

### WHEN?

What factors will drive our timeline?

*Speed vs. Sustainability*





# 1

# THE QUESTION OF “WHO”

*Whose needs must we prioritize?*

POLARITY

STUDENTS



ADULTS

*“Our kids need our FULL energy and attention. Anything less means we’re not doing right by them.”*

*“Our educators are struggling, exhausted, and burning out! So are parents! Adults’ wellness matters.”*

## PARADOX

It’s clear that education only works if both young people AND the adults who support them are growing and have their needs met – so they feel safe, healthy, and able to focus. This isn’t easy, but we believe it’s more possible than today’s polarizing debates may suggest. So...

**How might we design equitable approaches that meet the needs of both students and adults – perhaps even in mutually-reinforcing ways?**

## POSSIBILITY

Valor Collegiate is an intentionally diverse network of schools in Nashville, Tennessee. They have consistently eliminated and reversed academic opportunity gaps. Yet they are best known for their Compass Model, which prioritizes the well-being and comprehensive human development of both students and adults. Students undertake practices like self-reflection and authentic personal sharing in circles; adults take these on in parallel spaces. Using parallel content not only saves time and helps the adults better facilitate students’ experiences, but also gives adults space for identity reflection, healing, and personal growth. This deeply-human student and adult work is operating remotely during COVID and has spread to communities across the US; you can learn more about it [here](#).





# 2

# THE QUESTION OF "WHY"

*What purpose should guide our efforts?*

POLARITY

**ENSURE ALL STUDENTS MEET STANDARDS**



**ACTIVATE STUDENTS' DRIVE & AGENCY**

*"Students need to catch up on knowledge and skills, so they're not behind."*

*"Students need to be fired up and equipped to drive their own learning."*

## PARADOX

Ensuring all students have the knowledge and skills they need to meet grade-level standards is challenging but vital for equity. However, this is far easier when students are motivated. We know that the content standards cover is only a small fraction of what students will ultimately need to thrive in a fast-changing world. The [science of learning](#) suggests that students who build the agency to continue driving their own learning can over time make faster, more sustainable academic progress. So...

**How might we help students learn essential knowledge and skills in the near-term *while* growing their motivation and agency to drive their own learning in the long-term?**

## POSSIBILITY

[Concourse Village Elementary School](#) in the South Bronx has really leaned into this paradox, co-developing an innovative model called [RevX](#) where students learn through project-based modules designed to solve real-world challenges. In this approach, young people engage in relevant issues that demand research, concrete skill development, and problem-solving acumen. Learners choose personally-relevant challenges (e.g., racial or religious discrimination) and design solutions that they apply and evaluate. Post-COVID, Concourse Village launched this model remotely and saw strong learner engagement, given the engaging learning modalities and highly relevant content.

Across the country in San Francisco, [Red Bridge](#) cultivates learner agency by rewarding student autonomy instead of compliance. One of the model's most radical shifts is moving away from grouping young people by "grade levels" to grouping by "autonomy levels." Progress across the autonomy groupings reflects student work habits such as time management, focus, organization, initiative, and achievement in academic goal areas. In this [blog post](#), we share how Red Bridge applied this model amidst the challenges of COVID.



# 3

## THE QUESTION OF "WHAT"

*With limited time and resources, what activities should we prioritize?*

POLARITY

### ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES



### WELLNESS EXPERIENCES

*"They've already lost 4.5 months of instructional time! Let's focus here."*

*"It's hard to learn if you're traumatized, marginalized, disconnected. Learners need to be well to learn well."*

## PARADOX

Despite important debates on what knowledge and skills to prioritize (traditional academics, [21st century skills](#), etc.), no one doubts that rigorous learning truly matters. However, especially when so many students have experienced stress and trauma, we must remember that students are more than their brains; they are whole people who both need to be well to learn better and deserve to thrive in all aspects of their humanity. Too often, we conceive of these as mutually-exclusive activities that compete for time, but it doesn't have to be that way. So...

**How might we attend to students' holistic development in ways that enable academic learning *and* overall well-being?**

## POSSIBILITY

Van Ness (a D.C. Public Schools elementary school) has developed a whole-child model for Pre-K through elementary school students. The [model](#) helps young people – especially those experiencing trauma – shift from their "survival state" to their "executive state," which is essential for learning anything. In the process, students nurture relationships, build self-regulation skills, and affirm their identities. This holistic work sets young learners up to engage with Van Ness's rigorous, collaborative, and hands-on learning, where self-knowledge and emotional intelligence are critical to persist and succeed. The Whole Child Model is spreading to schools throughout D.C. and [across the country](#) who recognize the importance of whole-child experiences.





# 4

# THE QUESTION OF “HOW”

*How will we handle the vastness and diversity of needs?*

POLARITY

**UNIVERSAL SOLUTIONS**



**CUSTOMIZED SUPPORTS**

*“Let’s extend the school day [or any other mass treatment] to catch all students up.”*

*“Let’s figure out which supports will work best for each learner.”*

## PARADOX

The sheer magnitude and complexity of this moment makes it tempting – and likely necessary – to reach every learner through universal supports. However, 2020 revealed the vast differences in students’ strengths, situations, needs, and preferences. While many struggled with remote learning, some (for a variety of reasons) preferred that format and grew. Research on [individual variability](#) suggests that customized approaches such as [targeted universalism](#) can be most effective and equitable. In addition, expanded choices (of classes, models, learning environments) allow learners and their families to decide what fits best for them. So...

**How might we meet each learner with what will work for her, while ensuring a common baseline for all?**

## POSSIBILITY

[Edgecombe County Public Schools](#) in N.C. has designed innovative learning environments that uphold high standards for all while customizing for each learner. For example, they created the North Phillips School of Innovation, an opt-in microscool for students who wanted more personalized learning environments, including smaller groupings, a focus on identity development, and learning via projects that match their passions for making positive change. Initially, 50 students opted in; by 2020, the “microschool” grew to 350. North Phillips students and teachers were better prepared for remote learning because of the personal relationships and independent learning skills they built. When COVID is over, Edgecombe hopes students will return to a district with a multiplicity of options for where and how students can learn, ranging from pods to micro schools to more innovatively designed K-12 schools. Read more [here](#).

[Teach to One 360](#) is an innovative learning model used in middle and high schools throughout the U.S. to ensure high-quality math instruction for all students. The program uses ongoing formative assessments to identify the underlying concepts each student needs to learn and employs sophisticated algorithms to help educators flexibly match students to various learning modalities (e.g. teacher-led small-group instruction, peer-based learning, and online learning) each day. Though all students work towards standards mastery, they do so using customized pathways and paces. When school buildings closed during the pandemic, students were able to continue learning in their own tailored learning pathways while continuing to engage through multiple modalities remotely.



# 5

# THE QUESTION OF “WHERE”

*Where will learning and recovery happen best?*

POLARITY

**IN SCHOOLS  
UNDER “OUR ROOF”**



**ANYWHERE &  
EVERYWHERE**

*“...so learners can get vital social contact and services, and so we can ensure quality.”*

*“...so learners can benefit from all possible sources of love, support, learning, and affirmation.”*

## PARADOX

There’s no shortage of [arguments](#) in favor of students coming back to buildings and taking pressure off families. However, families’ preferences on this [vary](#), with significant differences along lines of race and income. Moreover, this past year has underscored the range of other sources of love, support, and instruction that surround students – in their homes, communities, and (via technology) around the world. Approaches that ignore these sources may miss out on tremendous assets (and ways to take pressure off schools) right when students need every possible source of support. So...

**How might we tap into every source of learning, love, and affirmation that surrounds students, while ensuring our schools do all they can to provide direct support?**

## POSSIBILITY

Perea Elementary School in Memphis has moved beyond transactional parental engagement to [working with families as true partners](#) in the learning process. Perea’s COVID response model offers a hybrid of in-school learning for young people with the greatest need, a fully virtual learning option for parents who choose it, and one day a week of project-based learning for everyone at home. These options necessitate a new level of communication and partnership between home and school: Family Orientation, continual communication from teachers and Instructional Assistants, social media posts, emails and texts from the school, and strategic Family Engagement events. Each of these demystifies the learning taking place at school and enables caregivers to directly support their children as learners.

Other models – especially at the secondary level – go beyond the home by supporting students to enroll in other institutions (e.g., community colleges) or apprentice with employers; students then receive credentials for their time and learning.





# 6

# THE QUESTION OF "WHEN"

*What factors will drive our timeline?*

POLARITY

**SPEED**



**SUSTAINABILITY**

*"We must move fast, even if it's imperfect and bumpy."*

*"We are better off moving together and in ways we can sustain over time."*

## PARADOX

The severity and duration of impacts from COVID make anyone who cares about young people want to act with urgency. We feel this deeply. At the same time, education is a human system with many stakeholders whose ideas matter and whose commitment and participation will make or break any solution. Many of these stakeholders are fatigued and traumatized. We've seen too often in education (and elsewhere) how dominant approaches to reform have excluded key voices, especially those most marginalized. Recovery – and certainly reinvention – will likely take a matter of years, not months. So...

**How might we respond as fast as possible to acute needs while developing a strong coalition of stakeholders who are motivated and sustained to pursue recovery and reinvention in the years to come?**

## POSSIBILITY

[Lindsay Unified School District](#) exemplifies a "both/and" response to this prompt. Their learner-centered culture is filled with urgency, grounded in immediate, real-time action to meet the needs of every young person. When the pandemic hit, they [moved swiftly](#) into a remote model. At the same time, they are highly thoughtful about pacing change and empowering young people and the local community to reclaim ownership of the system.

For over a decade, Lindsay's journey toward a community-owned, personalized model has been guided by a [strategic design](#) developed with community stakeholders who articulated their desires for education. This design serves as a north star and has allowed the district to stay focused on the long-term, even when acting with urgency.







## Looking Ahead

We are at a pivotal moment in education. We must not go back to what was “normal” before 2020 – it was deeply inequitable and clearly inadequate for meeting the needs of a rapidly-changing and uncertain world. This will not be our last crisis: the future demands agility and flexibility. We believe students and the adults who support them deserve not just recovery, but also true reinvention of our education system in ways that embrace equitable, 21st century learning.

As decades of reform efforts have revealed, there are no silver bullets or quick fixes. However, by harnessing the tensions inherent in the complexity we face, we believe we can not only get to better approaches for the near-term but also unlock the innovation needed to transcend today’s polarization and design a better, more equitable future together.

### What can you do?

We urge education leaders, supporters, and policymakers to follow the roads being forged by the communities we described: to embrace the complex tensions of this moment, reframe them as

paradoxes, and use these to spur creative designs of better solutions. This [6 Tensions framework](#) can be a powerful strategic tool to navigate through uncharted waters. Here are some ideas to consider as you assess this moment and define your strategies:

1. Use these tensions as a tool within your system / organization when developing and vetting recovery plans and strategic initiatives. To do so, consider reflection questions such as those in the box below. We also created a separate [reflection guide](#) with these questions to support you work.
2. Share this resource with the leaders and teams you work with. Ask what tensions they most feel and how they are navigating them. Share your story of how you are harnessing tensions to design better, more equitable approaches.
3. Let us know how it goes! Share you experience with [jenee@transcendeducation.org](mailto:jenee@transcendeducation.org), so we can learn from and amplify the creative ways you are navigating these tensions!

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### 1. Which of these six tensions feel most pressing in your context?

- Are there additional tensions you are navigating?

### 2. Identify a priority or initiative or challenge that your team is finding especially complex:


- Which of the tensions are at play in that situation? What are the pulls you’re feeling?
- We all have biases. Which ends of the tensions are your goals and resources biased towards? Why?
- What would be the consequences of biasing towards one end of the tensions?
- How might you maximize the upsides and mitigate these downsides?
- How might you use paradox prompts to reframe the tensions and spur creative, “both/and” solutions?
- Who else might need to be around the design table to get to the best answers?
- If both/and possibilities seem out of reach in the near-term, how might you think differently about your assumptions related to time and sequencing?




Transcend is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting communities to develop and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments.

Every week, we are facilitating and engaging in conversations about how to harness these tensions to design better, more equitable models of learning.

To join one of those conversations or access our discussion guide and host one in your community, reach out to us or join the [Transcend Design Community](#).

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#### Access Additional Tools for Harnessing Tensions

- [6 Tensions 1-Pager](#)
- [6 Tensions Reflection Guide](#)

