

# FORGING THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

THE KIDS HAVE  
A LOT TO SAY



**PEOPLE ACROSS THE COUNTRY** are re-imagining how schools might function in the future. These discussions are taking on increased urgency as a result of evolving technology, shifting access to educational materials and changes in the job market. In addition, people's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the need to think differently about education and to make sure that it is meeting learners' needs.

Youth are directly affected by these issues and by the design of education systems and learning experiences. Yet they are often left out of conversations about how education might need to change and what might be possible – and desirable – when it comes to the future of learning.

[Tomorrow, powered by Remake Learning](#) wants to make sure that youth have a voice in how education could and should change over the next 10 years. The campaign's organizers asked KnowledgeWorks and SLB Radio Productions to gather youth ideas about how they might remake learning for a post-pandemic future. This brief summarizes what young people said.

## GATHERING YOUTH INSIGHTS

To gather youth insights about the future of learning, KnowledgeWorks and SLB Radio Productions collected responses from middle and high school students in the greater Pittsburgh region. Some students submitted their ideas independently, recording them online, while others took part in peer-to-peer interviews. The 46 youth who shared their perspectives represented a diverse mix of backgrounds, grade levels and geographic areas and attended a mix of public, private and charter schools. They responded to questions about who might be involved in education, where learning might happen, what they might change to influence education's futures and what recent practices should continue.

A RELATED SLB RADIO PRODUCTIONS **PODCAST SERIES** CREATED AND HOSTED BY YOUTH FEATURED MORE YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF LEARNING.



# IF YOUNG PEOPLE REMADE LEARNING...

Many of the youth who shared their perspectives understandably grounded their ideas about, and hopes for, the future of learning in their experiences of learning and going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. One commonly held aspiration was to go back into school buildings and see people with whom they have relationships. Beyond that immediate desire, the youth spoke to five key elements they want for the future of learning.



## RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships with and among peers, educators and mentors involved in learning.



## PERSONALIZATION OF LEARNING

Learning that is oriented around each learner's needs, interests and goals.



## LEARNER SUPPORTS

Assistance and interventions that address learners' needs.



## LEARNING LOCATIONS

The places and spaces where learning happens and their key features and functions.



## LEARNING CULTURES

The guiding beliefs and values that shape how a learning location operates and what it feels like to be there.



# RELATIONSHIPS

After a year of working largely online and in many cases from their homes, the youth who shared their perspectives said loud and clear that they wanted relationships to be a key element of learning. This element stood out above all others. Youth want adults to foster relationships with learners such that learners are seen for who they are without judgment. They also want students to have empathy for teachers. In addition, they want the day-to-day experience of being in school to be organized in a way that enables learners to cultivate relationships with one another.

**“It’s very important to immerse yourself into a wider group. Not only does that make you feel more comfortable; it helps you adapt to the area much faster. While relationships come, you also improve yourself by figuring out what you truly want, what you want to strive for.”**

—DeAndre, 12th Grade



# PERSONALIZATION OF LEARNING

Youth also want learning to be personalized, meaning that it would be structured around each learner's needs, interests and goals and feel relevant to them. There would be multiple ways for learners to show what they know, with much less emphasis on summative testing than is common today. The pacing of instruction would be personalized for each student. Content and curricula would reflect students' interests and goals, and educators would take a highly individualized approach to meeting learners' needs. Learning could take many forms, from project-based learning, to play-based learning, to culturally responsive curriculum.

Learning would also feel relevant. Indeed, youth described relevancy as a pressing need and necessary for personalization. They want learning experiences that help them navigate the world. Youth want to learn life skills, such as financial literacy and basic civics, in the place(s) that they call "school."

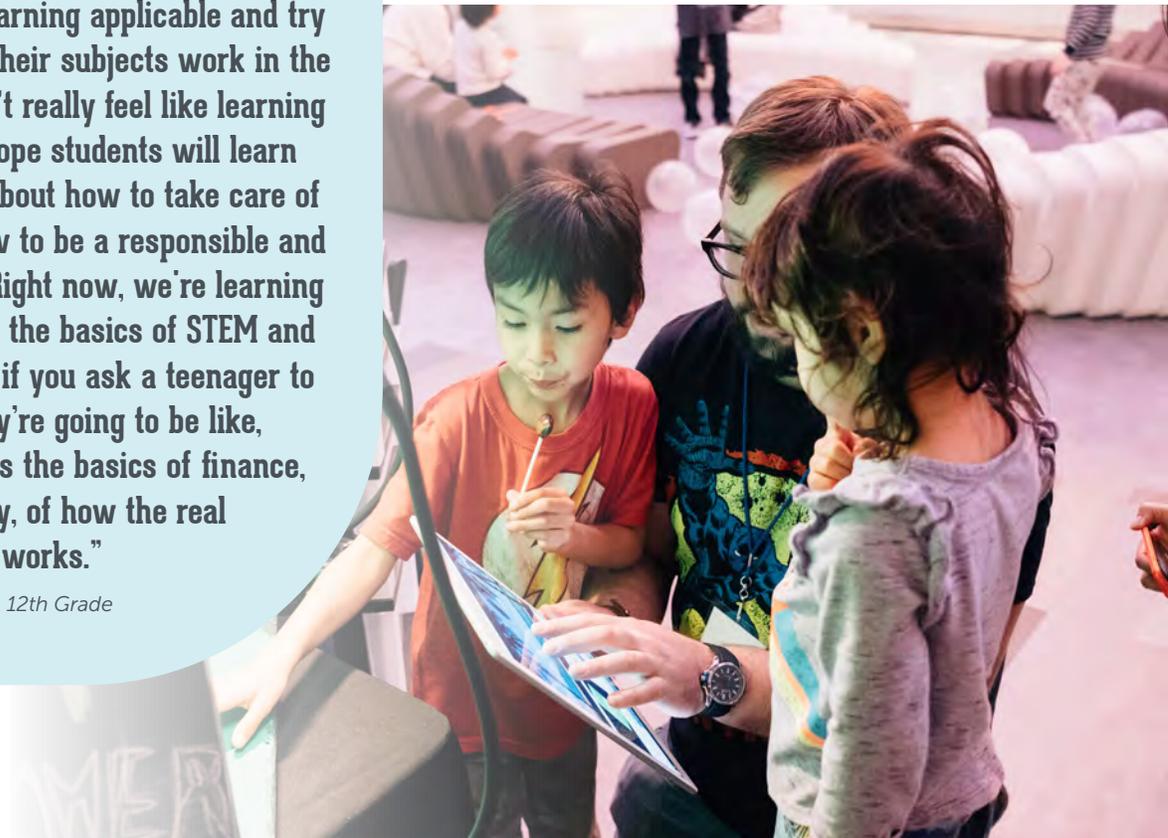
**"A lot of kids are not interested in things that they could be really good at or that they could really enjoy because schools don't prioritize the real-world aspect of these things. Only some teachers who understand this problem try to make learning applicable and try to show students how their subjects work in the real world. So kids don't really feel like learning is useful to them. I hope students will learn about financials, and about how to take care of yourself, and about how to be a responsible and successful individual. Right now, we're learning theory. We're learning the basics of STEM and the arts and stuff. But if you ask a teenager to do their taxes, they're going to be like, 'What?' Nobody knows the basics of finance, of saving money, of how the real world works."**

*—Ashnaa, 12th Grade*

## FUTURES THINKING

Broadly, futures thinking involves making and managing assumptions about change to describe the ways in which the future might be different than today.

The ideas about the future of learning that appear in this publication reflect young people's aspirations. They represent elements of the futures that youth wish to see. These elements can serve as navigation points as we all chart our collective path into the unknown future.



# LEARNER SUPPORTS

Youth see an expansion of learner supports as being key for the future of learning. In articulating the need for more supports, they focused on three main areas: mental health, academics and engagement. They want school to be organized so that there is time and space for staff to check in intentionally with learners. These check-ins would be designed not just to support academics and engagement, but also to address mental health and other barriers to learning that they might be experiencing. As school becomes increasingly digitally mediated, youth want dedicated technology assistance. They also want places of learning to help foster webs of support that include the wide variety of individuals to whom they turned to during the pandemic.

**“I would make sure that every student was heard and understood. I would try to understand the full story. If someone was slipping during class, I would ask them what was going on because it is not easy or possible in some circumstances to split home life and school life. I would just make sure that every student got the support that they needed.”**

*—Josephine, 11th Grade*



# LEARNING LOCATIONS

Youth want the locations of future learning environments to be flexible and configurable. These locations might be indoors or outdoors, or they might be digital – and they might not be the same all the time. Wherever they are learning, youth want learning spaces to be designed intentionally for interaction. They see potential for these spaces to foster relationships among learners and adults and to add a sense of comfort that can help students relax and destress. Youth also want to have smaller class sizes and high-quality school food.

**“I hope that learning will take place in a classroom or a place that’s a safe setting for both the teacher and students. That way they can connect more deeply on another level while still getting their work done.”**

*—Christine, 11th Grade*



# LEARNING CULTURES

Youth also envisioned learning cultures that would be welcoming and safe for all learners. Many described their current school cultures as having high expectations academically but lacking in supports for whole-person health. Youth want learning cultures to be non-judgmental, allowing them to bring their full selves to school. They also want learning environments to have climates and cultures that help create the conditions for deep relationships between teachers and students. Lastly, they want school cultures to be inclusive and sensitive to the events and changes happening in the world outside of school.

**“Most adults in education have high expectations, but not always in a positive way. Environments usually seem pretty judgy. The best teachers have always had open expectations and have promised to be proud of me, even if I mess up. If I were in charge of education, I would make sure that all teachers had good attitudes and never judged their students or had favorites or treated some people differently than others.”**

—Kinsley, 12th Grade



# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE ABOUT TODAY

Any future approaches to learning must address enduring human needs and must do so better than current schools and education systems are meeting those needs. Shaping the future usually involves pursuing some new ideas; altering some ideas and practices that exist, often in siloed patches; and continuing some widespread, current practices that work well.

In reflecting on possibilities for remaking learning, youth wanted to retain some practices that popped up or proliferated out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Continue to make equity a key issue. Youth noted gains in closing the technology gap but highlighted that much remains to be done to make learning equitable.



Expand access to and enable thoughtful usage of digital devices, with a focus on training learners to use them and adapting learning to suit them.



Retain online and hybrid learning as options – but with greater flexibility and personalization than existed during the pandemic.



Give teachers time and discretion in how they plan their days to enable them to foster connections with students in addition to focusing on instruction.



Bring the comforts of home into other learning spaces to help create welcoming learning environments.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** School needs to vary more than it did before the pandemic. It needs to flex around people instead of expecting people to fit within its mold.



# LISTENING TO WHAT KIDS HAVE TO SAY

Youth aspirations for the future suggest what might be possible for learning. They can serve as guideposts as we all work to remake learning, together.

Adults need to keep listening to youth. They also need to treat youth as partners in designing new approaches and adapting those that exist today. Youth are education's end users, and education shapes their futures. Yet youth are often marginalized in both educational settings and broader society. Adults can serve as champions and advocates who insist that learning is remade in ways that make tomorrow a more promising place for every learner.





*Remake Learning is a network that ignites engaging, relevant and equitable learning practices in support of young people navigating rapid social and technological change. Learn more at [RemakeLearning.org](https://RemakeLearning.org).*



*SLB Radio Productions, Inc. is a nonprofit founded in 1978 that uses audio to equitably gather and share authentic reflections from children, youth and members of other communities whose stories are often marginalized. Learn more at [slbradio.org](https://slbradio.org).*



*KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization that partners with learning communities to create the future of learning, together. Learn more at [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://KnowledgeWorks.org).*



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