

# WHAT PARTS OF THE 'NEW NORMAL' DO WE WANT TO KEEP?

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A new poll came out this week. When asked what Canadians wanted life to look like after the pandemic, 72 percent of respondents said it's an opportunity to make some major changes (cited in Delacourt, 2020). Education, as a whole, has traditionally maintained the status quo. If change excites you, the journey within its walls can be quite frustrating.

However, within weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the educational world had been turned upside down, with educators having to work well beyond their comfort zone. The integration of technology has been difficult for many who viewed technology as a means to simply stay connected through work via their emails. Suddenly, educators had to learn years worth of IT within weeks to

accommodate the continuity of learning. This has been no simple feat, and teacher and schools are doing their best to adjust and to provide the required learning. The stress level of educators has sky-rocketed due to the learning curve and has been exacerbated by the worry of the health pandemic. Yet the skill level of teachers has tripled and is beyond commendable. COVID-19 presented the possibility of innovation beyond what could be done in a traditional sense.

With the amount of transformation already occurring, well-being must be a focus. Being thoughtful and calm in our approach and modifying expectations helps us to feel more in control. The focus has been on building connections remotely – with our students, amongst



staff, and within our community. This first step is invaluable and a forever goal. These times are putting our mental health and well-being to the test.

Yet we are educators and our job is to ask ourselves what Halbert and Kaser (2013) have espoused for decades: **What's going on for our learners? How do we know? Why does it matter?** Questions that matter to student learning will add more stress on educators as it will evoke more questioning and in answering our inquiries, it will lead to a realization that more is needed of educators to meet learner needs. Are we up to that challenge of knowing that more can be done? Depending on how educational leaders answer this question, we are either going to manage—or conversely—lead through this pandemic. It is not an easy decision to make nor an easy road to take.

In a recent webinar, Dr. Amelia Peterson posed some thought-provoking questions to a group of alumni of the University of British Columbia's Transformative Education Leadership Program.

She asked:

1. **What opportunities have we lost forever?**
2. **What will we seek to recreate as soon as we can?**
3. **What was wrong before this?**
4. **What good is now possible?**
5. **Can we sustain and grow what is good?**

In answering these questions, there is so much more to consider about the systemic changes that enabled change to occur:

- Although we know that necessity was the driver, what systemic

changes occurred that allowed for a vast amount of learning and innovation to take place in such a short period of time?

- What barriers were in place that prevented this from happening before?
- What enablers are in place now that are allowing for alternative solutions and delivery models?
- Given what we have learned, how can we sustain and improve the enablers?

Dr. Yong Zhao in a May webinar, also ponders and inspires when he speaks about the new normal. Since many students and teachers have now tried online learning, beyond COVID-19, what model can we develop that allows for more student agency and less teacher control. He challenges us to question, "What is curriculum?" and the relevance of what we are trying to teach, and advocates for rethinking the role of teachers, from someone who instructs curriculum to someone who supports learning.

He further suggests that amongst our first actions is to work together with other teachers, within schools, from other schools, and even globally. The network model that Kaser and Halbert founded as part of the Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education, is a

foundational piece to systemic change as it supports the growth of educators. Beyond working together, Zhao's second suggestion is that educators design authentic, significant, real-world opportunities in which students can engage, asking them what they are interested in learning and doing, and designing opportunities for student voice and choice to shine within flexible platforms (online, in-school, flipped, blended).

***"the problem that leaves parents in tears, however, is not virtual learning. It's the fact that the current education system is inflexible"***

During this pandemic, the voice of parents is also being heard in support of a more flexible learning environment. In an article by Jude Schwalback, she notes that "the problem that leaves parents in tears, however, is not virtual learning. It's the fact that the current education system is inflexible," noting the demands on parents are due in large part to the inflexible curriculum. The desire for a flexible learning environment means allowing "children to learn at their own pace and creating an educational experience tailored to the children's interests," therefore suggesting that

collaboration occurs to create these meaningful learning opportunities.

As school leaders, we are always being tasked to accomplish more. However, here is an opportunity to ask ourselves what part of 'more' matters. It will not be easy to have conversations that challenge the status quo of pre-COVID-19 learning, when stress levels are high and school staff is stretched. Our greatest challenge will be to manage these times through our managerial responsibilities while maintaining a lens of instructional leadership.

As Margaret Wheatly says, **“Be brave to have conversations that matter.”** Perhaps we can start by asking staff and students

what we can offer more and less of and asking students what they want to learn and why it matters. Student voice may be the impetus for bringing teachers together to rethink what has to be taught and to design learning opportunities with student voice and choice as a guiding principle.

For school and system leaders, this is when the work of instructional leadership cannot and should not take a backseat. It is going to be stressful and it is going to take time, but it is the perfect opportunity to embark on this process together to re-imagine and re-create a way of learning that can become the norm.

## **Works Cited**

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