

LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University and founding president of the Learning Policy Institute, is a longtime leader in education, an expert on professional learning, and an influential researcher and policy advisor. She has been leading President Joe Biden's education transition team, giving her a unique perspective on the current moment in education and the future of U.S. policy.

Elizabeth Foster, vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward, spoke with Darling-Hammond recently in a conversation that focused on opportunity in the midst of crisis and what educators are learning and accomplishing during the shift to online and hybrid learning environments. Here are excerpts of Darling-Hammond's comments, which have been edited for clarity and length.



Linda Darling-Hammond

# An extraordinary time for innovation

A conversation with Linda Darling-Hammond

**T**here are several things during this difficult time that can be seen as opportunities to make changes that have been long needed. What happens in human history is that, when we have moments of crisis — pandemics are just one example — people are very inventive. If we can allow people to share what

they are inventing — allow teachers to share the pedagogies they are creating, the tools they are finding, the ways in which they are finding ways to support their students — we can transform aspects of the old model of transmission teaching that need to change.

It is a challenging time, and I don't want to minimize the grief and the stress and the difficulty. We do have

to worry about what people are calling “learning loss” — the fact that there are kids who are disengaged, kids who are having to work to support their families, kids who are not online, and kids experiencing grief and trauma. But in the midst of all these struggles, there are discoveries and insights and success stories that we need to understand and build on, especially when we see that people are collaborating in so many ways. There is innovation that could allow us, when we get past the pandemic, to reinvent schools in new ways and to serve children in new ways.

## WHAT WE’RE LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

### Narrowing digital divides

One positive change is that we did in a few months what we hadn’t done in two decades in terms of closing the digital divide. We have had a digital divide for more than 20 years, and there was a stark realization in March 2020 when schools closed that a third of kids (by some estimates and in some states) did not have the devices or the high-speed internet necessary to go into online learning. And this, of course, disproportionately affected students of color, especially African American and Latinx students, and low-income students. Because this issue was brought to the fore, because of that necessity, within just six months, most kids in many states got devices and connectivity.

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While we still have work to do, people are actively engaged in doing the work at the federal and state levels so that kids who have been locked out of the digital economy because they were not equipped are now able to become proficient in the uses of technology that will allow them to be part of the digital economy in the future.

Technology also allows us to address a lot of the assistive technology needs for our students with disabilities. We are now more readily able to do text-to-speech, use larger fonts for reading, play that video of a lecture faster or slower or in a different order. We are getting a lot of reports that some students who were failing are actually doing better in this environment. I hear this almost every day from places all over California.

Students with disabilities, and really all students, are adapting to these new tools in ways that are actually reinforcing and accelerating their learning.

### Innovation among teachers

The innovation and creativity that is going on in the educator workforce is extraordinary. Teachers who hadn’t figured out how to use technology are now much more proficient. With hybrid learning, people are beginning to discover the ways in which they can integrate a combination of new learning tools, including multimedia strategies and interactive learning tools, along with in-person instruction. And while nothing is perfect and there is still a long way to go, we have inventors everywhere, so I think we are crossing a big divide in more ways than one. Maybe not yet closing the divide but crossing the divide that kept us in a paper-and-pencil modality for a long time.

Teacher learning is a mixed bag, of course. Obviously, teachers are doing a lot of professional learning by webinar, and some of it is still comprised of deadly dull PowerPoint slides. But some of it is teacher-to-teacher professional learning — showing, demonstrating, sharing lesson plans and units, and building on each other’s practices.

There are new opportunities to see each other teaching. In Long Beach, California, they have realized that they

have some great teachers that a lot of kids and teachers want to study, so they opened up certain classes with those teachers — they have some teachers teaching as many as 2,000 people. These teachers are known for their pedagogies generally but also for their distance learning innovations, so the district has allowed other teachers to come in and see how these teachers do their work. The district used the opportunity of the online world to help people learn from each other in ways that are not typical in brick-and-mortar schoolhouses, with the plan to build on that as they go back.

Right now, in online learning, some teachers are demonstration teachers and other teachers can watch their classrooms to see what they do and learn from them in a teacher-to-teacher professional learning model. This has been structured around the availability created by the technology, but the district intends to continue that when they go back to in-person instruction by having video cameras in some of the rooms and continuing to use digital platforms as a way to see one another teaching — and then to talk about it and learn from each other.

Teachers have been saying for a long time that they want to learn from one another. And that certainly has happened before. But you can reach so many more teachers when you are doing it online. It is no longer just, “Let’s get together in the cafeteria of the middle school” — although that in-person time with the coffee and doughnuts is important for community building, too. But you can really create online communities and learning platforms that are teacher-to-teacher in very productive ways as well.

### **Found time for collaboration**

Another great innovation in the hybrid context is that many districts are having one group of kids come in Monday and Tuesday in person and then learn online for Thursday or Friday, and that is flipped for the other group of kids. So then Wednesday is

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for professional learning and school cleaning day. The kids, who are learning to work asynchronously, can be given projects and tasks that they can do independently, whether from a learning hub or at home. In this way, we are getting a whole day a week for collaboration among teachers. This was so important in the spring, when teachers were just figuring it out, but it is continuing in some places.

We have needed this for a hundred years! In the United States, we have always had less planning and collaboration time for teachers than in other countries. We are one of the worst countries in the world in that regard. Our teachers teach more hours per week and more hours per year than any other country in the world and have less planning and collaboration time.

The difference between the international average for nonclassroom teaching time and the U.S. average is about eight hours a week. The average teacher internationally gets those eight hours to collaboratively learn and plan. So now, all of a sudden, we have magically discovered those eight hours that we were missing in our schools and districts. *(See more about this by reading a commentary about the international OECD TALIS data at [edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/blog/1223](http://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/blog/1223).)*

We are also realizing that kids can learn to be agents of their own learning, and that there can be a combination of direct instruction, group work,

assigning projects, putting kids in teams, and having them work with other tools — whether it is Khan Academy or some other multimedia interactive learning software or online gaming that teaches the history of the Underground Railroad.

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### **LEVERAGING WHAT WE’VE LEARNED**

They say necessity is the mother of invention, and we are all feeling that necessity. That shared, felt need is very motivating, and it puts people in to a community of practice very naturally. There is an organic community of practice around “How do we do this thing?” and it makes people want to collaborate.

I think we want a mix of strengthening professional learning within the brick-and-mortar school and accessing ideas from across the country or even across the whole world. Teachers share kids in the building, but they share content with people from all over. Resources like the National Writing Project and the California History-Social Science Project allow people to ask, “How am I going to teach this concept using these new tools in new ways that promote student engagement?” These are the kinds of innovations and supports we want to encourage as we transform the nature of teaching.

We have certainly learned a lot as we have had to worry a lot about student engagement. Students can disengage online, especially if they are experiencing just transmission teaching. But many teachers have worked really hard to find new engagement strategies, including one-on-one approaches, ways that they can pop in to different types of breakout rooms, setting up office hours, structuring more project-based

learning, and putting the kids in the role of active learners around projects and ideas. Those are the innovations we want to be sure are part of the professional learning that people are experiencing as they are coming back in to buildings.

Parents are also seeing student engagement in a new way and may have a perspective on it that could be helpful for professional learning. Students, too, should have a voice so that they can help teachers understand what is engaging and what is not. Both could be important additions to the professional learning process.

### **OPPORTUNITIES ON THE HORIZON**

While the [presidential] transition team's workings and decisions are confidential, President Biden and first lady Dr. Jill Biden have made it clear throughout the campaign and in their

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formal policy statements that they care deeply about teaching and about teachers. They want to see that teachers have lots of access to rich professional learning. They see that teachers are leaders and want to support teacher leadership in a variety of ways so that teachers can share what they know as mentors and as leaders in school improvement.

One of the things that they said is that they wanted the secretary of

education be someone who had been a teacher. That was a criterion for the search, and in our nominee for secretary, Dr. Miguel Cardona, we did get someone who is deeply rooted in teaching. I think we are going to see a lot of emphasis on not only investments in teaching, including teacher compensation — which is on the agenda — but also in teachers leading the profession. ■