



## RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

### ► THE STUDY

**Reich, J. & Mehta, J. (2021, July 21).**

*Healing, community, and humanity: How students and teachers want to reinvent schools post-COVID.*  
doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/nd52b

**Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular learning practices on student outcomes.**

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR SCHOOLS? INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

**A**s the COVID-19 pandemic continues, educators, students, families, and community members are seeking ways to ensure students' needs are met across a range of academic, social, and emotional considerations. They are also looking ahead to the future, recognizing there may be opportunity for innovation after the last 18 months reset expectations for teaching and learning and made us think differently about what students need to help them learn and thrive.

Recent research by Justin Reich and Jal Mehta offers information, insights, and recommendations from students and teachers about ways to reinvent schools and improve learning environments for everyone's benefit.

## METHODOLOGY

In spring 2021, the researchers undertook three strategies to understand teachers' and students' reflections about the previous school year and their thoughts about what they needed for the year ahead.

First, they invited elementary, middle, and high school teachers from across the country to interview groups of their own students and document what they heard. They used these five questions:

1. What have you liked about learning from home?
2. What has been hard about learning from home?
3. What do you hope adults will do (or not do) to make school better next year?
4. What did you lose or miss out on because of the pandemic?
5. What are you most proud of from this past year?



This portion of the study drew on findings from 200 teachers who interviewed more than 4,000 K-12 students. This represents a convenience sample of the first 200 teachers who responded to the research team's virtual outreach. (It is worth noting that there is an overrepresentation of teachers from Boston and the surrounding metro area.)

Next, the researchers interviewed 50 classroom teachers representing a wide range of grade levels, content areas, geographic locations, and types of schools (public, private, charter).

Finally, the research team conducted 10 sessions, called design charettes, with students, teachers, school leaders and family members to gather their ideas and recommendations for the 2021-22 school year. In these sessions, the researchers used a process that guides participants in thinking creatively about solutions to a defined problem.

Stakeholders participated in a series of structured activities designed to identify what worked well in the pandemic, what can be discarded, and what needs to be created. The researchers

advised participants to engage in thoughtful reflection and planning about innovative strategies that would meet their needs moving forward.

## FINDINGS

The researchers used what they refer to as “an emic, grounded theory approach to identify key themes in the data,” meaning that they analyzed the data in an inductive approach of identifying emerging themes, rather than seeking alignment with an existing framework or theory.

Overall, teachers and students feel that healing, community, and what the researchers call “humane reinvention” will be central to future academic and overall success. The research found students and teachers appreciated the opportunity to slow down and pay attention to relationships among teachers, students, families, and the community.

Both students and teachers said they would advise policymakers to focus not on remediation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather on longstanding structural issues such as uncomfortable learning environments, restrictive curricula, lack of opportunities for interest-based learning, dress codes, discipline policies, and early start times that are challenging for adolescent brains.

### **Student and teacher interviews**

The research revealed two main themes among students and teachers. The first centered on relationships and social development. Students felt a profound and complex sense of loss of social connection during the pandemic.

While some students enjoyed the respite from social activities and

## **JAL MEHTA TO SPEAK AT CONFERENCE**

Jal Mehta will be a keynote speaker at the Learning Forward 2021 Virtual Annual Conference. For more information and to register, visit [conference.learningforward.org](https://www.learningforward.org).

appreciated fewer distractions and more support while working from home, they also missed their peers, sports, activities, and academic and social milestones. Students expressed concern about how that isolation will impact their social skills going forward as well as relationships that might have floundered due to lack of contact.

Similarly, teachers emphasized relationships and community, acknowledging the need to build relationships and integrate social and emotional learning into classes. They reported appreciation for changes like reduced schedules that afforded them more time to slow down and build deeper connections with their students and said they would like to make community building and relationship building more of an integrated, systemic part of their teaching.

The second theme centered on the development of student autonomy during the pandemic. Students reported that the separation from teachers and school supports encouraged them to be more independent, and they enjoyed the comfort and flexibility that learning at home afforded them.

They developed new skills, coping mechanisms, and resiliency because of having to complete work without

a teacher in the room, manage new technology and schedules, and adapt to different learning environments. And students, like many of us, appreciated the ability to wear what they wanted, eat and drink when they needed to, and move around at will.

For their part, teachers recognized the opportunity in students’ newfound autonomy. They expressed confidence in students’ ability to manage certain freedoms and interest in building that into their classes in the future. Many recognized that the closed schools over the pandemic meant freedom from overdirection, disciplinary practices, or negative peer dynamics for some students.

The researchers, too, noted that “the self-directed learning skills that students developed during emergency remote schooling are assets that teachers will be able to build upon for years to come.”

The question of learning loss was not top of mind for students or teachers. Students commented more about their lost year of childhood or adolescence than a lost year of academic content. Similarly, the researchers pointed out, “Not once did we hear teachers describe remediating lost learning through assessment and targeted remediation as their top priority for next year.”

The researchers suggest that policymakers would do well to consider the input of educators with regard to focusing on learning loss and prioritizing remediation or, in fact, to any one-size-fits-all plan for the year ahead.

Teachers and students alike shared their opinions and feelings not only about the return from the pandemic but also about longstanding inequities

in schools that became more apparent during the pandemic. Prompts by the researchers about potential federal investments in schools invited discussions about underinvestment in infrastructure such as labs and classrooms and quality-of-life issues, including school lunches, dress codes, and flexible seating.

Students reported wanting to return to the routines and social aspects of school but not to the constraints they had been experiencing long before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as discipline policies they perceived as unfair and lack of attention to social and emotional needs.

Overall, teachers reported a commitment to taking the lessons learned and professional growth from the past year into the new year to build on lessons learned and innovations, but they also acknowledged the need to recover from the demands of the past year.

### Design charrettes

The researchers describe design charrettes as “an intense, collaborative, design-focused in-person or virtual meeting with a mixture of students, teachers, principals, district administrators, and parents.”

They began with facilitators asking participants to discuss what they believed other stakeholders would identify as their most pressing needs

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and reflect on practices they wanted to keep, let go of, or create. Participants considered how different education stakeholders viewed the challenge of reopening by answering this question: “What are students/families/teachers/administrators hoping to solve next year?” Their answers were collected via virtual posters and sticky notes.

In the second activity, called Amplify, Hospice, and Create, participants discussed what to keep, what to discard, and how to best move forward. The researchers summarized and sorted the themes that emerged in virtual chats and a shared virtual document.

Echoing the findings of the interviews and focus groups, reconnecting and strengthening relationships came up as a prominent theme. For students, the most pressing issues were rebuilding relationships and social connections. Among teachers, the researchers noted that feelings of pain and frustration were often couched in constructive comments about a desire

for more community building and a call for time and support for healing.

To help participants think beyond the current realities of school structures and imagine how schools might be different in the future, the researchers asked participants to think metaphorically and creatively about the future of schooling. To summarize the ideas that emerged, the researchers grouped and described three metaphors based on the conversations:

- Schools as church and temple in that they are a community bound by ritual and shared identity;
- Schools as place of healing in their focus on mental health check-ins and caring conversations; and
- Schools as family reunion with a recognition that individuals who grow and experience life differently come together to recognize and celebrate each other.

### IMPLICATIONS

Based on these findings, the researchers recommend three guiding principles for the year ahead. The recommendations are grounded in the researchers’ appreciation of the complexity of change, especially in schools and among those who have experienced pain, grief, frustration, and disconnection due to the pandemic.



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1. Don't define this year as a return to normal. For too many students, normal schooling wasn't meeting their needs.
2. Amplify key ideas from pandemic schooling, and let go of things that don't need to come back. Have the school year start with a few noticeable changes.
3. Engage in a year of reflection to celebrate the successes from pandemic schooling, grieve our losses, and harness the energy from the emergency to continue to build back better.

Putting the researchers' recommendations into practice will require collaborative learning among everyone involved in schools, and that work should be guided by the **Standards for Professional Learning**. This qualitative research study offers strategies and several tools to help

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educators in that work.

A tool kit is available as an appendix to the report that includes the interview protocol, a data visualization tool, a protocol for an activity to generate specific action from stakeholder input, and a visioning exercise to turn stakeholder feedback into a set of principles to guide planning for schools.

The tool kit can help educators apply the **Implementation** standard. For example, the thoughtful structures and activities that guide the Amplify, Hospice, and Create exercises are an example of an effective use of change management principles to lay out a plan for an anticipated change.

Understanding what people want to hold on to versus what they are willing or eager to get rid of helps guide planning for the period ahead.

The tool kit and the findings from the research also highlight the importance of attending to the **Learning Designs** standard. For example, this research points to the need for ongoing, focused, embedded professional learning about how to integrate social and emotional learning into educators' daily work, invite and encourage more student voice and agency, and sustain and deepen relationships built during the pandemic between families and educators. Respecting and nurturing these facets of students' learning experiences requires well-designed professional learning that draws on research about how adults learn and how to effect change. ■

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