



Now is a unique window for change because recent disruptions to our usual way of working, along with emergency resources from public and private education funders, offer an opportunity to do things never done before.

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## CALL TO ACTION

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## MY WORD OF THE YEAR IS 'TRANSFORMATION'

As we wrap up 2021 and look ahead to 2022, the word that is top of mind for me is *transformation*. Transformation involves disrupting and dismantling longstanding educational structures, policies, and systems that have perpetuated inequity and created barriers to success for too many students. We must support leaders at every level — who are experiencing some of the most stressful years of their careers — to make change possible and sustainable.

It is beyond time to break out of outmoded educational structures and traditions that have not led to substantive results, beyond time to change systems that were never designed to serve all children to their fullest potential.

Now is a unique window for change because recent disruptions to our usual way of working, along with emergency resources from public and private education funders, offer an opportunity to do things never done before.

This is why we made transformation the theme of the 2021 Learning Forward Virtual Annual Conference and a frame for much of our recent work, and why we must continue to work for and support transformation.

Despite generations of investments in educational improvement, huge inequities remain and gaps continue to grow in almost every domain. Tinkering around the edges is no longer acceptable.

Systemic change that leads to transformation in teaching and learning requires an intentional, multipronged approach. We can start by taking the following steps and making strategic investments.

First, a **strong vision and systemwide strategic plan** designed around the ultimate goal of improved and accelerated student achievement is fundamental. Such a plan should address current realities and also look to the future, with reflection and improvement cycles built in to allow for meeting unanticipated challenges.

Systemic professional learning should be at the core of forward-looking strategic plans so that all actors in the system develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets they need to provide an outstanding education to every child. The newly revised Standards for Professional Learning, to be released in April 2022, will be an important asset in this work. They will include implementation tools and action guides to support the development of educators at many levels and in many roles.

Second, **we must invest in leaders**. Educational leaders today are working in a protracted period of crisis and under unprecedented levels of stress. We must provide them with the supports and resources they need to navigate crises, adapt to changing needs, share the load, and stay resilient.

In the October 2021 issue of *The Learning Professional*, which focused on the theme of leadership under pressure, we offered strategies and tools for preparing leaders for crisis, creating cultures of compassion, making critical investments in principal growth, and more. We were moved by the resonance of this issue in the field and are committed to continually addressing it.

Many field leaders have made the case for leadership development as a foundational lever in improving schools, and new research continues to accumulate about the power of leadership (e.g. Grissom et al., 2021). To transform education, we can't just use the same methods of professional learning and support that we've always used.

Recent work points to the need for more collaborative, inclusive, culturally responsive, and partnership-focused leadership development (Cuseo et al., 2021; Hannon & Mackay, 2021). Our



support must shift leaders' perspectives, power up expertise, cultivate deep understanding, and transform practice.

Third, all of this work must be grounded in **a solid commitment to equity**, including processes of rethinking, defining, and expanding the concept of equity and taking meaningful steps to put it into practice. This requires the examination of values, mindsets, and cultures — both in schools and more broadly — that have led to inequities of power and privilege and kept many students from achieving their potential.

Transforming schools will take a delicate balance of acting in a timely and decisive way while maintaining focus on the long-term horizon. We must neither drag our feet nor trip over them. Going slow to ultimately go fast can help ensure that we take every step needed on the long-term journey.

It can help us get all of the right voices at the table (including students, parents, and community members as well as educators at all levels), develop deep and lasting partnerships (with local communities, businesses,

universities, and beyond), and put the right measurements in place.

The OECD, an international economic organization with 38 member countries, recently urged education leaders to prepare for the unpredictable challenges of the future by “revisiting and transforming” some of our longstanding school structures and traditions (Fuster & Burns, 2020).

In a recent report, Andreas Schleicher, OECD director for education and skills, challenged us all to engage in long-term strategic thinking and consider possible alternate scenarios for education “to inspire, to dream, and to transform ... to future-proof systems and stress-test against unexpected shocks” and to “move beyond complacency and easy solutions” by considering the tensions and paradoxes in our current systems that need to be addressed.

The journey of transformation will take time, patience, and intensive planning. But it can inspire passion, hope, and most importantly, progress — all of which our schools need now more than ever.

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