

Healing, Community, and Humanity:

How Students and Teachers Want to
Reinvent Schools Post-COVID



An Imagining September Report | tsl.mit.edu/COVID19

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MIT TEACHING SYSTEMS LAB

Remote Learning Guidance from State Education Agencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look

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WHAT'S LOST, WHAT'S LEFT, WHAT'S NEXT:

Lessons Learned from the Lived Experiences of Teachers during the 2020 Novel Coronavirus Pandemic

Justin Reich, Chris Buttimer, Dan Coleman, Richard Colwell, Farah Faruqi, and Laura Larke

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THE TEACHERS HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

Lessons Learned from U.S. PK-12 Teachers During the COVID-impacted 2020-21 School Year

Natasha Esteves, Christopher Buttimer, Farah Faruqi, Aicha Soukab, Raelée Fourkiller, Harley Gutierrez, Justin Reich

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IMAGINING SEPTEMBER

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Everyone is having a different pandemic



DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Why Are Some Kids Thriving During Remote Learning?

Though remote learning has brought many challenges, some students seem to be thriving in the new circumstances. What can we learn from them?

By [Nora Fleming](#)

April 24, 2020

A screenshot of a Teen Vogue article. The page features a navigation bar with the Teen Vogue logo and links for Style, Politics, Culture, Identity, More, Sign In, and Newsletter. Below the navigation bar is a row of five video thumbnails. The main article title is "Distance Learning During Coronavirus Worsens Race, Class Inequality in Education" in a large, bold, black font. The word "Politics" is written in red above the title. Below the title is a sub-headline: "A lack of reliable internet access is only the tip of the iceberg." The author's name, "BY NIDIA BAUTISTA", is written in red, followed by the date "MAY 1, 2020". At the bottom of the article preview are icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Technologies of Remote Schooling

Layer 1: LMS and Video Telephony

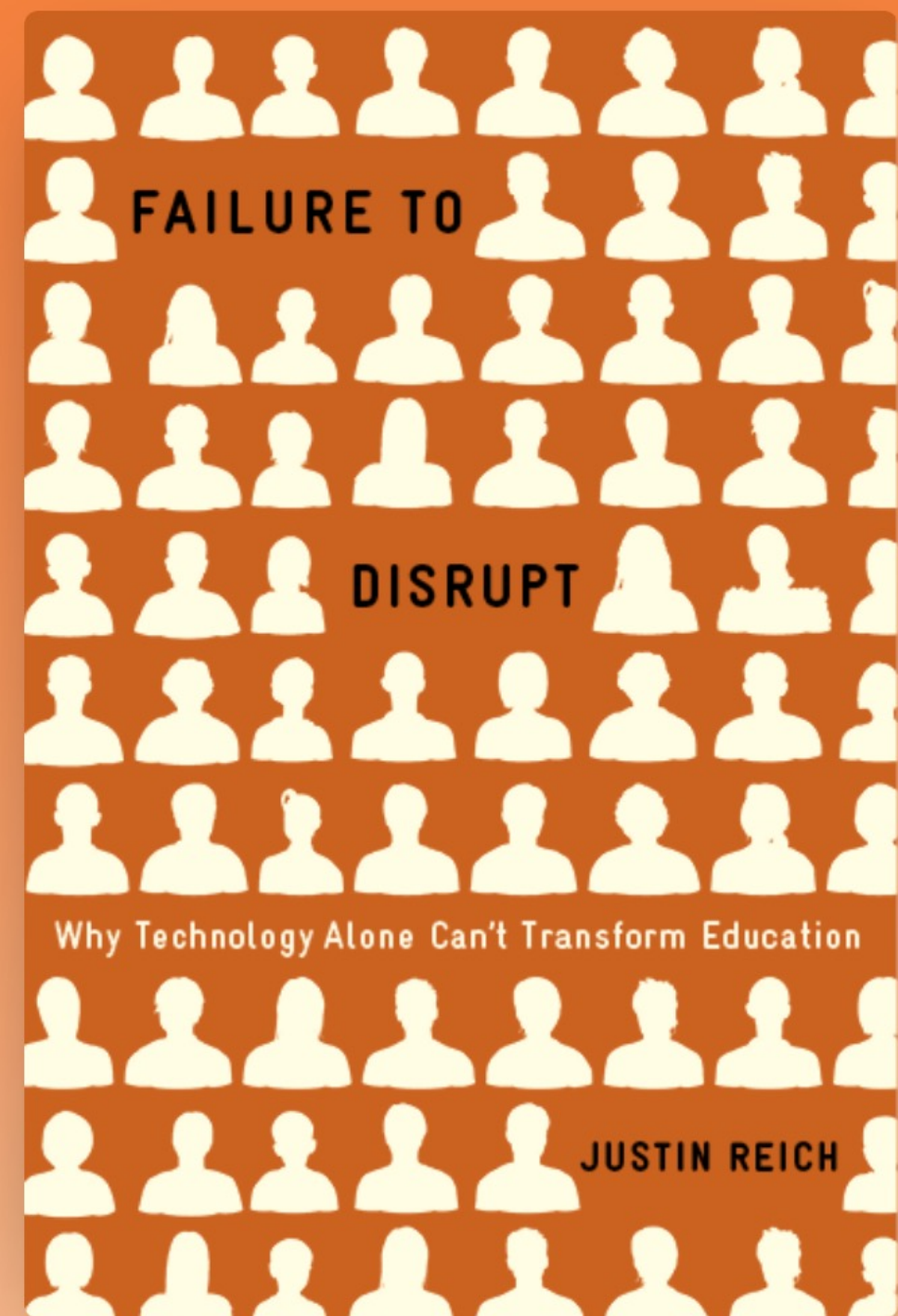


Goal: Reproduce, as closely as possible, the typical routines of in-person classrooms

Layer 2: Supplemental, Disciplinary Apps



Goal: Provide curriculum sources for asynchronous content delivery and practice



Despite two decades of education technology enthusiasts describing us as on the cusp of a revolution in educational systems (intelligent tutors, MOOCs, etc.), teachers have overwhelmingly adopted our oldest technologies to replicate traditional classroom practice.

Two Paradoxes of the Pandemic

We dramatically changed the operation of schools...

But we made online Kabuki versions of in person schooling...

Educators showed tremendous capacity for change and innovation

But everyone in education is really, really tired...



Three Scenarios for K-12 Schools Post-COVID

With the enormous success of the U.S. vaccination campaign, it seems increasingly clear that nearly every student who wants to will be able to return to school in-person in the fall. The signature question that our education system faces at every level is: *What kinds of schools will students go back to?*



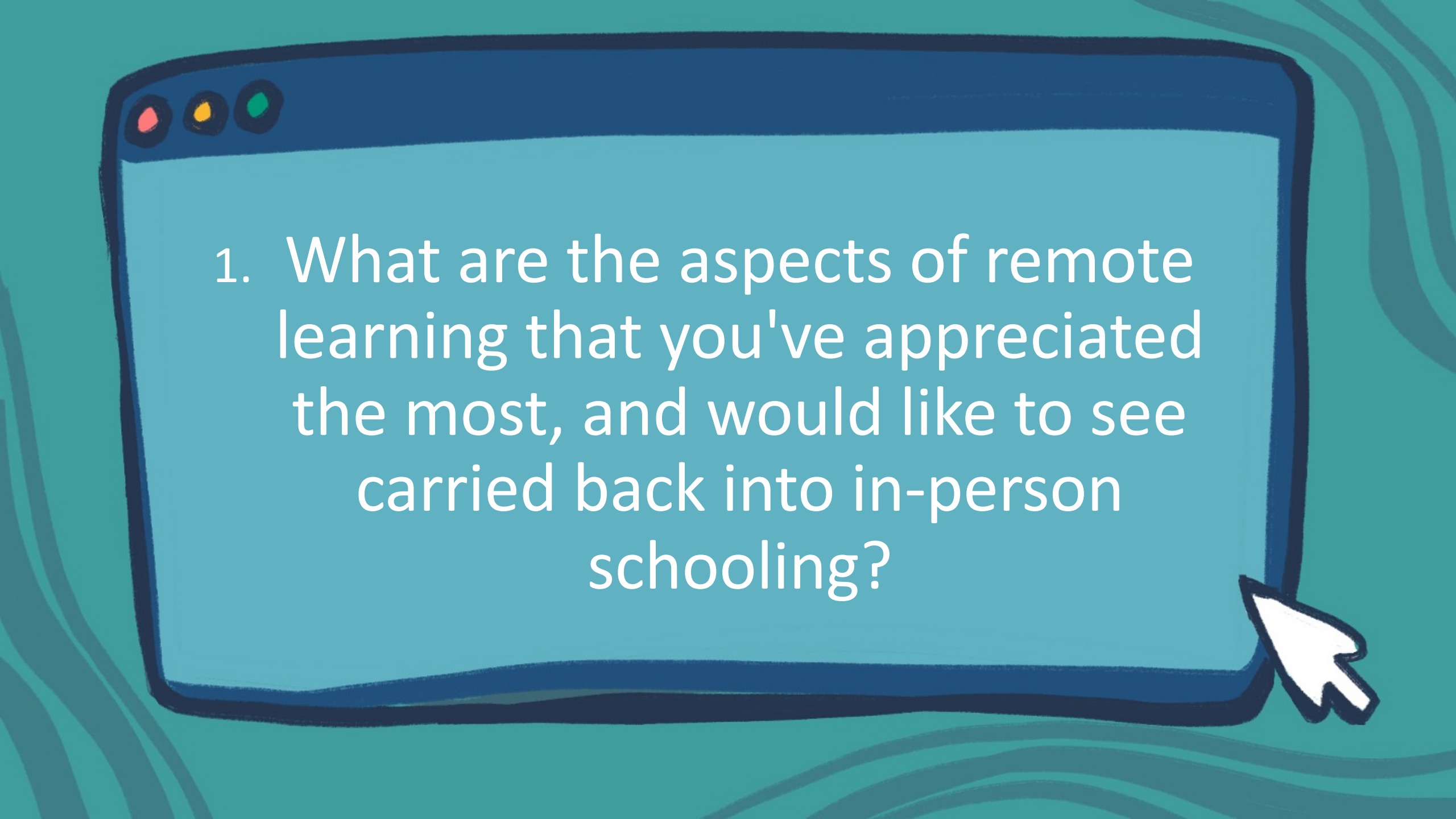
Status Quo Ante
Pandemus

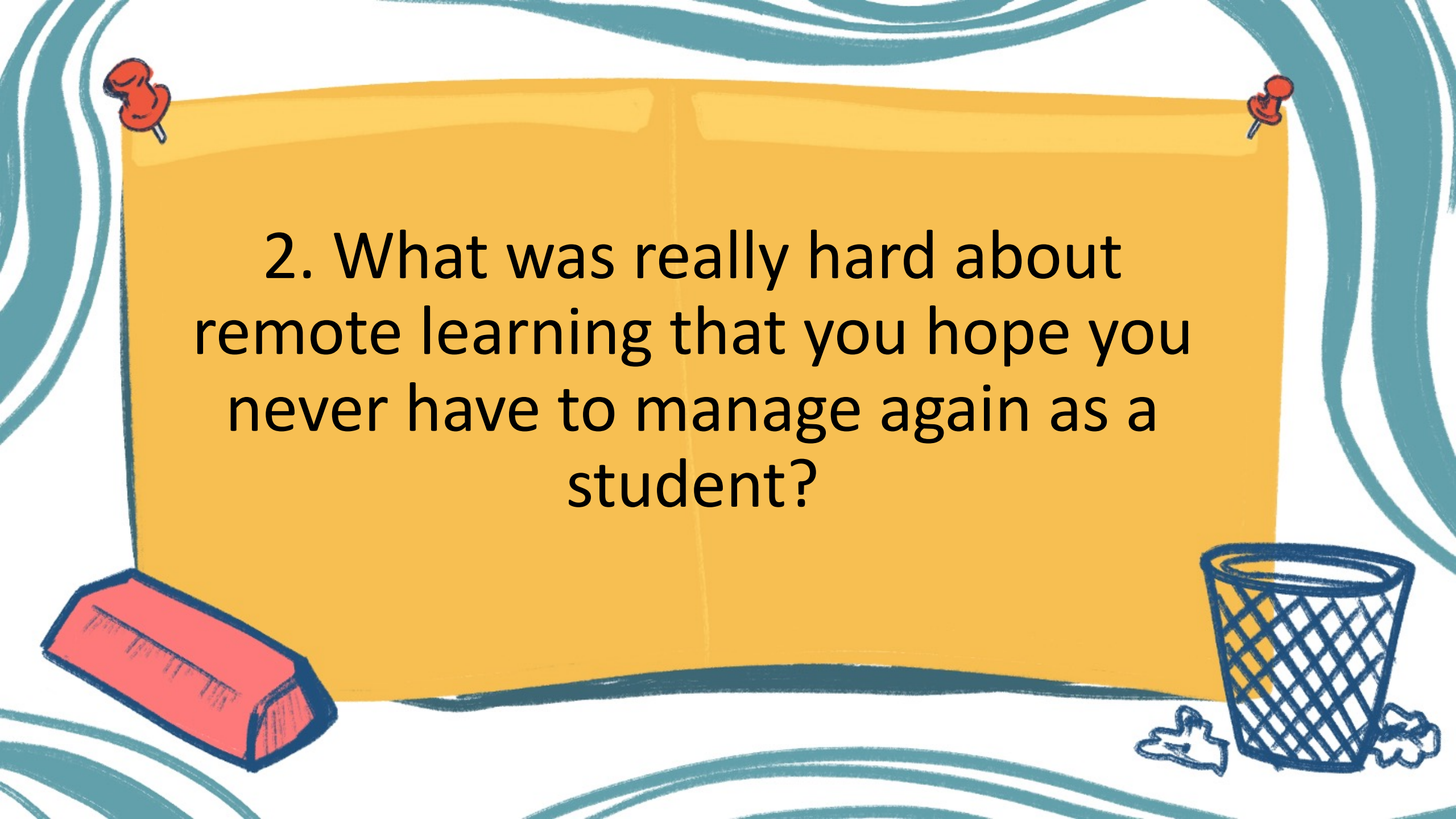
Learning Loss
Remediation

Humane
Reinvention

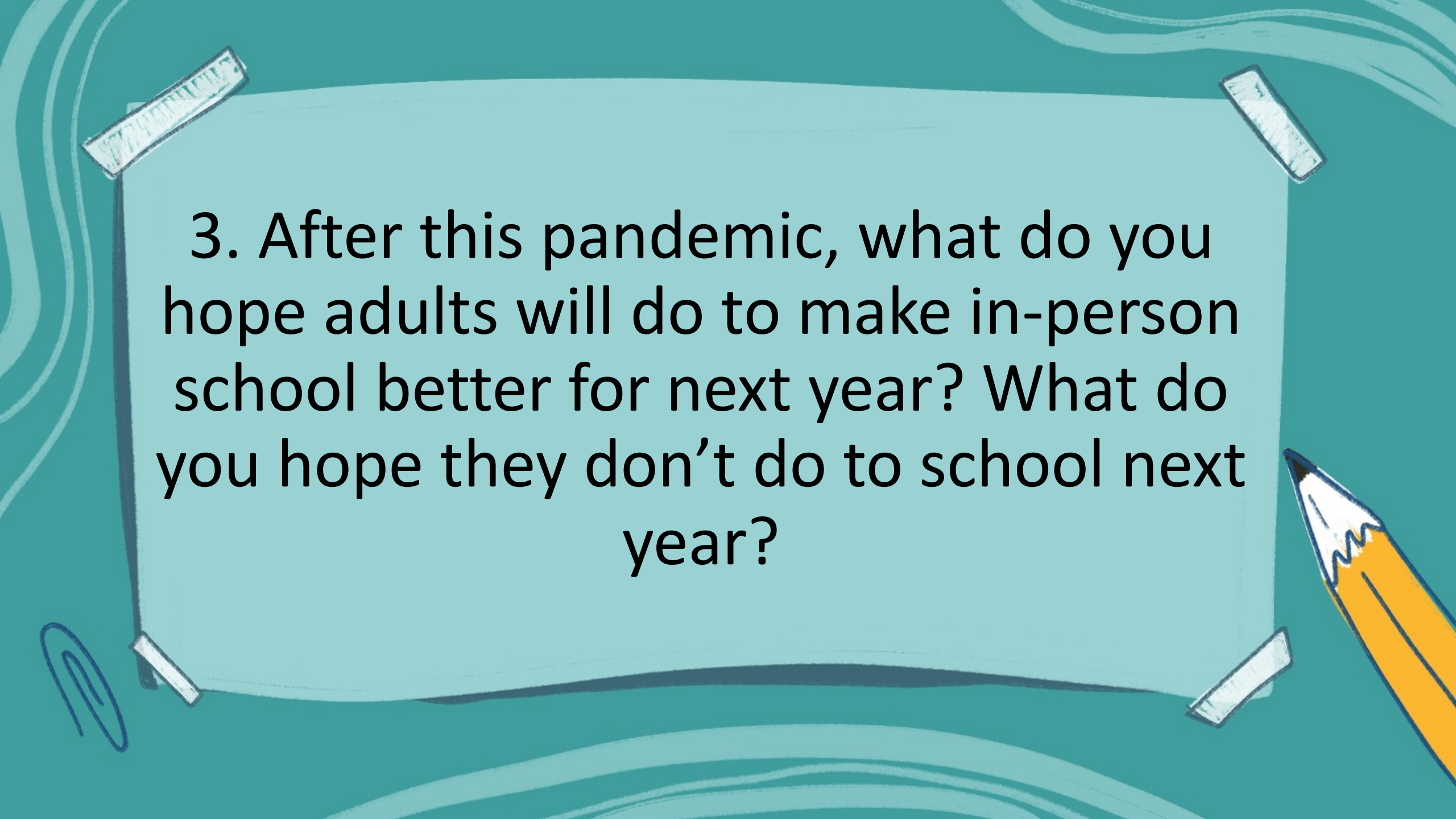


<http://bit.ly/imaginingseptember2021>


- 
1. What are the aspects of remote learning that you've appreciated the most, and would like to see carried back into in-person schooling?





2. What was really hard about remote learning that you hope you never have to manage again as a student?



3. After this pandemic, what do you hope adults will do to make in-person school better for next year? What do you hope they don't do to school next year?



4. What do you feel like you missed out on or lost because of the pandemic in school this year?





5. What are you most proud
of this year?

**What We Heard From Students:
Lost Connections and Growing Autonomy**

**What We Heard from Teachers:
Relationships and Community**

**The Pandemic as a Window into
Longstanding School Inequities**



What We Heard From Students: Lost Connections and Growing Autonomy

If any theme unites student experience, it is the **profound sense of loss of social connections to their peers**. They missed clubs, sports, field trips, and transition events. Students in schools with narrow grade bands (like a seventh and eighth grade middle school) missed practically their entire school experience. They miss their friends. A few expressed concerns about regaining their social skills as the world opens back up. One wrote, “Online school has made me more of an introvert, hard to make friends and socialize with people, want to stay in my house and not go outside.” Not every student felt the same sense of social loss, and a few suggested how much they enjoyed being away from the social pressures of school. Regardless, one student begged teachers not to get corny when everyone returns: “Please don’t be like ‘they missed so much social interaction let’s give them bunch of awkward conversation starters to create friendships.’”

What We Heard From Students: Lost Connections and Growing Autonomy

“ Our school days start at a time that is developmentally wildly inappropriate, but remote school has allowed us to change that and to push it and to say, we don't have to make you get up at 5:30 in the morning to take two trains, to get to school in time for a 7:10 breakfast. We don't have to do that. I think there's a way in which this moment has revealed to kids the ways in which our school system is really dehumanizing. Kids talked about being able to go to the bathroom when they want to. Instead of when they're told yes or no by an adult, they talk about being able to eat a snack. Like why are we controlling them? Why are schools places where you can't eat when you're hungry or why you can't go to the bathroom when you need to, or we're telling you what clothes you can and can't wear. I just think that young people have realized [this] during this moment. And I would say I, as a teacher, also have been thinking a lot about, why are our schools set up this way? What is it for? ”

What We Heard from Teachers: Relationships and Community

While teacher plans for next year were diverse, **we heard two themes with some consistency: the need to emphasize relationships and community and the desire to build on students' newfound sense of autonomy.** As one teacher wrote, "I need to make so much more space for connecting with students, and for students to learn about each other. I have to stop thinking of community building as one 'unit' at the beginning that I rush through, and how community can play a much larger, systemic, role in my classroom." Creating more space for building relationships or integrated social emotional learning lessons in class were among the most frequent responses from teachers. One teacher suggested that, "Adults need to be compassionate about how young people have managed, celebrate their resilience in managing stress, and work collaboratively with them to figure out how to transition helpful coping skills into their lives moving forward." Young people have suffered greatly during the pandemic, and they will still be grieving from those losses in the fall.



Findings

Teachers Were Closest To the Issues But Were Insufficiently Heard, Supported, and Valued

“ I am healing from being in a toxic relationship with my principal and district. I expected to—I’ve been out of my district for about a month now in a new role, new job, new career for almost three weeks. So that has allowed me to heal, I think, or begin the process of healing. I’m now in a work environment, for example, where I’m not questioned and my expertise is assumed. I don’t feel that I’m handcuffed in any way. But because I’m still healing, because teaching was such a big part of my life and my identity for almost 22 years, I don’t know that I have the joy that I once did teaching, but I don’t know if that’s because of the new non-teaching role or if it’s because I’m out. ”

— Vanessa, Former 4th Grade Math Teacher

Missteps Could Have Been Avoided Had We Listened to Teachers

Interviewer: People in higher up positions, are they talking to you? Are they asking you what you need and what you've learned and so on and so forth? And I see you're shaking your head. It sounds like that's not the case where you're at either, right?

Anastasia (a white female 4th grade teacher in the North): Not at all.

In a once-in-a-century pandemic, we in the U.S. turned to epidemiologists to help us understand how diseases travel and mutate. We turned to doctors to understand how to treat people who became ill due to COVID. Unfortunately, by and large, we did not turn to teachers to understand how to teach and support students to learn during pandemic schooling. In the following findings section, we outline evidence of how policymakers and administrators at every level failed to listen to what teachers needed or what they were saying students needed to successfully learn, particularly online and in hybrid situations.

Teachers Learned, Innovated, and Created In Ways That Point to Better Ways Forward

Teaching I did always embrace technology but then this definitely led me to do it more, and also led me to have more room for freedom with the students because I'm not in the same room as them. I've been doing a lot more projects where I just kind of set them free and they go work on something on their own time rather than me giving instruction throughout my whole class period. There's a lot more . . . asynchronous work. And that I definitely think will carry over because students are able to make more choices . . . and have more agency.

— Michelle, a white female elementary music teacher in the South

What We Did Not Hear From Teachers: Learning Loss and Summer School



The absence of particular themes in our data was just as telling as the presence of others. In all of our data from more than 200 teachers, we could not find any teachers who declared that their top priority for next year was to use standardized assessments or classroom assessment data to identify 2020-2021 curriculum content knowledge gaps and then provide targeted remediation and tutoring in those areas. Several teachers explicitly rejected this frame. One wrote: “I hope to advocate for a more humane ‘recovery’ than the ‘acceleration academy’ focused on ‘credit recovery’ or boosting standardized test skills that we often offer. Students need healing more than they need test prep.” No teachers (or students) in our data advocated for summer school—the words do not appear in our data.

To the extent that teachers did agree with the notion of addressing unfinished learning, it was in describing what they do every year in their classrooms. Every year, diverse students enter classrooms with heterogeneous skill and preparation, and teachers use a variety of differentiation strategies to get students working on shared class material as best they can. The level of heterogeneity of preparation may be somewhat wider this year, but to the extent that teachers feel this needs to be treated differently, they are more concerned with building relationships and making more time for individual check-ins rather than testing and remediating.

Advocates for addressing learning loss through testing and tutoring might do well to reflect on why a messaging campaign that has been tremendously successful in the national press and in Congress has so little salience among students and teachers. One possibility is that learning loss represents only a small part of what students and teachers perceive as key challenges for next year. The most effective responses to the pandemic and the most powerful strategies for next year will connect with how students and teachers perceive their world. We would also urge school and district leaders to avoid one-size-fits-all thinking. To be clear: there may be some students—for example those who are just learning to read—for whom “learning loss” is a critical issue and who need additional and targeted support. But our data suggests that making “learning loss” the singular frame for next year is myopic and misses much of what students and teachers think is most important in moving forward.

In describing how to address important topics and concepts, Mara rejected the idea that we need to go back and reteach everything students have supposedly not learned this year:

We don't need to teach the second grade curriculum to third graders [next year]. We can just do what you do when you teach, which is check out where they are and then kind of scoop them when you need to scoop them. Fill in a lesson here and there. So I hope that that voice gets heard because I'm tired of reading about learning loss.

Here, Mara argues that the kinds of differentiation strategies that teachers use every year in schools can be used again this year to ensure that students continue their academic progress.

The Pandemic as a Window into Longstanding School Inequities

In many ways, the pandemic was simply a window into the pre-existing conditions of dramatic school inequalities. COVID brought more death and suffering to communities with more poverty, more people of color, and more essential workers. School staff found themselves acting as the de facto social safety net for children and their families in poverty-impacted communities, providing food, telecommunications access, basic needs, and negotiating access to health care and mental health care. The resulting recession also affected school communities; we interviewed teachers in one Wisconsin high school where their surveys showed that more than 60% of students considered themselves essential wage earners in their families; not just kids with jobs, but key contributors to their families budget. Teachers have always been aware of stark inequalities in young people's experiences, but they were both exacerbated and revealed anew.

In some respects, when teachers and students discussed what needed to change for next year, they were not responding to the events of the pandemic but rather to ongoing systemic inequities and underinvestment in schools. This pattern emerged for us in the very first conversation we hosted with students. We met with a group of middle school students in a Northeastern city and asked them to write about three pre-reflection questions: "How are you feeling in general right now?", "What do you feel like you missed in your learning this year?" and "What do you need to be successful this year or next year?" After students wrote, we convened them and asked them what they liked about this year, and let them reflect out loud for a bit, and then we asked them what was hard about this year.



The Amplify / Hospice / Create activity involves having a group of stakeholders reflect on three questions:

- **What has gone well this year? What are some things we might want to amplify going forward?**
- **What should we “hospice”? What can we let go? What do we not want to return to when we come back to post-pandemic school?**
- **What can we create in the next year which will help us amplify the good and hospice what we should leave behind.**

Table 1: Amplify, Hospice, and Create: Prominent Themes from Ten Charrettes

Theme	Amplify	Hospice	Create
Trust and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home visits that build relationships between home and school • Advisors, advisories, office hour check-ins • Zoom-style chat to allow introverted student more of an opportunity to thrive • Virtual meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excluding parents from school concerns • Rush through content; transactional relationships • Single ways of teaching and sharing what students know • Notion that face to face is needed for all meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share power and collective decision making with families • Organize schooling around smaller, more intimate communities • Create multiple modalities for sharing learning • Powerful in person meetings; virtual meetings for other concerns
Schedule and Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarters with three classes at a time rather than seven • Teacher load of 65-80 students • Longer breaks between classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 -8 period day in secondary schools • Teacher load of 160 students • No time between classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarter schedule with 3 blocks • Teacher load of 65-80 students • Student free periods and ability to use some time in ways consistent with their interests
Depth and Breadth of Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Marie Kondo-ing” the curriculum³ (i.e. focusing on a smaller set of priority standards) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacing guides; rush through content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on fewer standards that orient learning around key topics and skills

What Problems Are Stakeholders Hoping We Solve Next year?

Students

feeling loved + safe, having sources to confide in and not just worry about underperforming for

share my emotions of the pandemic experience with peers and educators

I have these amazing tech skills that you can't even imagine. Now what?

See my friends

Teachers

More classroom support to lighten the instructional demand

Tests. Can we just solve the incredibly confusing and contradictory messages we get about assessment, tests, and grading?

Building on best of last year, ideally without too many meetings.

Who is addressing my trauma. Because I am having it too. From being evacuated from my town in California to riots and insurrections and global pandemics, I have some serious needs.

Tolerance for low-leverage "administrative" work may be at an all-time low. How can I focus on what really matters?

Families

Take my kids, please. But seriously: let me have the freedom to work and have a little bit of life and share the work of raising these humans. +100

To keep up ways to be virtually engaged - so many families have been able to attend conferences, be a mystery reader in preschool, or attend IEP meetings because they are virtual

Meet my child where they are

Continuing to know my child as a learner the way I've been able to as I have listened to them learn remotely

Wean them from screens

How do I stay involved in my kid's learning?

Admins

Union contracts --- how do we change our agreements about time given what we've learned this year?

How do I help teachers bridge from survival mode to thriving?

How to push for needed change when people remain tired

How do we capitalize on the good learning teachers have done this year and help them keep those parts in their repertoire?

How do I spend all of the stimulus funds?

How do we dismantle white supremacy culture in our schools?

Metaphors for School Next Year

In this session, we're trying to develop "tentpole ideas" for schools next-year; design concepts that provide some organizational priority and clarity.

Metaphors are one way to start imagining models for school next year, so let's brainstorm some. Open a link below, turn off your video, turn your sound down if you like, and then follow the instructions for 10 minutes:

Working alone and quietly for 10 minutes, write down at least 7 possible metaphors for school next year. Then, pick 1-2 of the most promising metaphors, and add 5-10 bullets of key ideas or design elements that would be needed to bring these ideas to life. Put the key words of each change in bold.

Once participants finished, we had each participant share a metaphor that they began to develop. We then, as a group, chose three metaphors to discuss and develop in further depth. We invited small groups to proceed with these prompts:

Start with one big idea from the previous list, and then develop it in more detail.

To record your idea

- ****Narrate a story -- Diary Entry from a student point of view**
- **Make a list of design criteria and outcomes.**
- **Draw a picture, snap a photo and copy and paste into the doc**