

5 Practices to Reimagine Education in 2021 and Beyond



Learning is hard. It takes time, it's uncomfortable, it's not always clear what the best path forward is. And when we're in the middle, it can feel like we are failing. And sometimes we do, but that is part of the process. As you experience that breakthrough or the success that you have been working so hard for, the struggle and challenges that you faced become part of the journey and in retrospect, are necessary.

People are always going through challenges at different times and in different magnitudes but what we've experienced living through 2020 has provided a collective learning experience. The pandemic has turned us all into beginners as the usual ways of doing things were no longer an option. Virtually every business and organization had to design new ways of operating accommodate social distancing and keep everyone safe. This meant that as individuals we had to reimagine habits like going to restaurants, movies, and working out. We had to

learning and therefore they were on track as they moved from grade level to grade level. We rarely question this process, because the structures have existed for so long have allowed us to keep the system in place that look very similar and function as they have for over 100 years.

In 2020 all of that changed. It has been hard and many of us found ourselves having to learn how to do new things to connect with students and teach them in new models. As a result, this provided more lessons and opportunities than many of us wanted to challenge our thinking about what matters most. As many educators have leaned into the challenge and looked to learners, we have seen new practices and models emerge.

Here are 5 examples I have curated that I hope allow you to use a beginner's mind to reimagine common practices in education.

1. What if we reimaged homework and all the stuff that we require students to do to create assignments, work and accountability that aligns with our goals?

Mary Davenport shared her transformation in an Edutopia article, [Rethinking Homework for This Year—and Beyond](#), as she reevaluated homework and the benefits that she and her students have realized because of this shift.

I'm now laser-focused when designing every minute of my lessons to maximize teaching and learning. Every decision I make is now scrutinized through the lens of absolute worth for my students' growth: If it doesn't make the cut, it's cut. I also take into account what is most relevant to my students.

For example, our 10th-grade English team has redesigned a unit that explores current manifestations of systemic oppression. This unit is new in approach and longer in duration than it was pre-Covid, and it has resulted in some of the deepest and hardest learning, as well as the richest conversations, that I have seen among students in my career. Part of this improved quality comes from the frequent and intentional pauses that I instruct students to take in order to reflect on the content and on the arc of their own learning. The reduction in content that we need to get through in online learning has given me more time to assign reflective prompts, and to let students process their thoughts, whether that's at the end of a lesson as an exit slip or as an assignment.

4. What if we create opportunities for smaller learning communities with mentors or advisors that create a sense of belonging, connectedness, and accountability for students?

Jenee from Transcend has written a great series about reinventing education, and in particular I find this example of the [Lakota Oyate Homeschool Co-op](#) to be a powerful example of how we can create smaller learning communities that foster belonging for diverse communities.

“This pod is taught together in this multi-aged group, which is supported by a whole community of family members. Marie serves as the “proctor” and Lakota Language and Culture teacher, working one-on-one when needed and leading the group during non-virtual learning portions of the day, such as nature exploration and hosting elders. Core academics like math and science are pursued in hands-on, practice-based ways. Students also spend time in nature during science learning, and math is grounded in culturally-relevant practical examples – a future lesson will be on how to erect tipis for maximum occupancy and egress. After the morning sage and cedar burning, the group then moves to a talking circle where the child with the feather or rock holds the floor. This is designed to be a reflective space for setting intentions grounded in Lakota values of respect, generosity, bravery, and courage. The children might reflect on the question, “What is a way that I can be generous today and share with others?”

5. What if we created personalized pathways for students to meet them where they are and ensure they get what they need?

The Chiefs for Change have authored a report, The Return, and while I don’t agree with everything in this report, this provocation around an individual plan for each student and reallocating staffing models, is worth considering.

“As students reenter schools, it will be more important than ever that each student receives an **individualized plan for their academic, social, and emotional needs**. Individual learning plans are not new—these are required for students with special needs—but will now be something all educators should do upon reentry as they diagnose student learning, set specific learning goals, identify social and emotional learning needs and supports, and coordinate interventions with multiple providers and educators. The suggested staffing model makes meeting these very different needs more likely. Reconfiguring teacher and

Rethinking Homework for This Year—and Beyond

A schoolwide effort to reduce homework has led to a renewed focus on ensuring that all work assigned really aids students' learning.

By [Mary Davenport](#)

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I used to pride myself on my high expectations, including my firm commitment to accountability for regular homework completion among my students. But the trauma of Covid-19 has prompted me to both reflect and adapt. Now when I think about the purpose and practice of homework, two key concepts guide me: depth over breadth, and student well-being.

Homework has long been the subject of intense debate, and there's no easy answer with respect to its value. Teachers assign homework for any number of reasons: It's traditional to do so, it makes students practice their skills and solidify learning, it offers the opportunity for formative assessment, and it creates good study habits and discipline. Then there's the issue of pace. Throughout my career, I've assigned homework largely because there just isn't enough time to get everything done in class.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Since classes have gone online, the school where I teach has made a conscious effort as a teaching community to reduce, refine, and distill our curriculum. We have applied guiding questions like: What is most important? What is most transferable? What is most relevant? Refocusing on what matters most has inevitably made us rethink homework.

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JOINING FORCES TO BE CONSISTENT

There's no doubt this reduction in homework has been a team effort. Within the English department, we have all agreed to allot reading time during class; across each grade level, we're monitoring the amount of homework our students have collectively; and across the whole high school, we have adopted a framework to help us think through assigning homework.

Within that framework, teachers at the school agree that the best option is for students to complete all work during class. The next best option is for students to finish uncompleted class work at home as a homework assignment of less than 30 minutes. The last option—the one we try to avoid as much as possible—is for students to be assigned and complete new work at home (still less than 30 minutes). I set a maximum time limit for students' homework tasks (e.g., 30 minutes) and make that clear at the top of every assignment.

This schoolwide approach has increased my humility as a teacher. In the past, I tended to think my subject was more important than everyone else's, which gave me license to assign more homework. But now I view my students' experience more holistically: All of their classes and the associated work must be considered, and respected.

As always, I ground this new pedagogical approach not just in what's best for students' academic learning, but also what's best for them socially and emotionally. 2020 has been traumatic for educators, parents, and students. There is no doubt the level of trauma varies greatly; however, one can't argue with the fact that homework typically means more screen time when students are already spending most of the day on their devices. They need to rest their eyes. They need to not be sitting at their desks. They need physical activity. They need time to do nothing at all.