FROM SCHOOL-CENTERED TO LEARNER-CENTERED

The year 2020 was a whirlwind. Seemingly overnight, educators had to shift from in-person to remote teaching, leaving well-established resources, tools, and procedures behind. It felt as if the ground was being pulled out from under us. Gone was the schedule that kept us all in place, guiding our curriculum as we moved reliably from class to class, from year to year. Gone was the security in a predictable system that allowed us to feel safe going through the motions. Many of us rarely questioned this process because the structures that kept the system in place looked more or less the same for a hundred years.

But sometimes a shock to the system is exactly what it takes to bring about much-needed change. As the Irish poet Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Without structure, nothing can exist. Without chaos, nothing can evolve."[1] The chaos of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 forced us to come up with new strategies and models to educate our students. It was not easy, and it will have a lasting impact on every aspect of our lives, but if we are open to it, there are lessons to be gleaned. There is an opportunity to rethink our practices, intentionally leave behind those that don't best serve all learners and educators, and be more intentional about incorporating what matters most: relationships, connection, purpose, flexibility, agency, and authentic learning. The pandemic created an opening for us to free ourselves of preexisting norms and expectations and enter the realm of possibility.

I want to be clear: This is not a book about the great pandemic and the chaos of the 2020–2021 school year. This is a book about expanding our mental models of what is possible so we can best meet the needs of all learners—anytime, anywhere. In my previous book, *Learner-Centered Innovation*, I focused on a greater vision for an education system and how professional learning could support key shifts for educators. Consequently, this book offers a deeper dive into how we can harness new technologies, learning sciences, and pedagogy that center learners and learning. We'll explore practical tools for creating a learner-centered, network-age model of education characterized by connection, flexibility, agency, and contribution. My hope is to share learner-centered practices that both validate and push your thinking, inspire you with ideas and examples, and fuel your purpose and passion to create learning experiences that truly enable all children to reach their full potential.

From School-Centered to Learner-Centered

When we look to learners, we can see what's working and what's challenging, and ultimately, we can start to envision what's possible. Evolution in education is about using insight from our own experiences, research from the field, and new tools and approaches to adapt our practice to best meet learners where they are. I have two children, Abby and Zack, who are both unique individuals with their own strengths, challenges, and goals. What matters most to me as a mom is that my children know that they matter for who they are and who they are becoming. I want them to know how to learn when no one is telling them what to do, how to fight for something that matters to them, how to communicate their ideas, feelings, and dreams. I want them to have the skills to work with others in diverse and complex situations to solve problems that matter to them and others. I want this for *all* of us. And that's where learner-centered education comes in.

Learner-centered education puts learners at the center of their own education in order to create more purposeful, personalized, authentic,

and competency-based experiences that help them develop skills that empower them to learn, grow, and solve problems that matter to them and others. It's a paradigm shift that changes how we *see* learners and how we assess which learning experiences are most effective for each individual. This shift begins with an awareness that if we truly want to develop knowledge, habits, and skills in students, we have to know them, love them, and help them see the full beauty of who they are and what they can become.

Some people may read the above and think, *Well, we can't just let students do whatever they want. What about the basics?* I believe the dichotomy between learner-centered practices and the "basics" is a false tension. In a learner-centered ecosystem, the basics are critical to developing expertise, and students need instruction, practice, and feedback as they develop these foundational skills. At the same time, when these skills are necessary for learners to solve meaningful problems in a relevant context and are purposeful for them, students become much more motivated to learn and integrate these skills now and in their future.
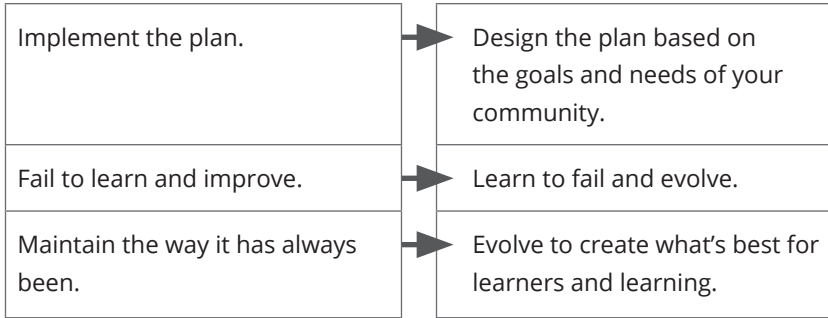
When students struggle to acquire necessary skills, a learner-centered approach asks us to reframe the way we look at the problem. What if creating rigid structures and standardized learning experiences doesn't allow for students to develop the skills and practice necessary to solve problems, communicate, and collaborate effectively? What if students who aren't seen for their unique gifts and talents, who don't have opportunities to participate in fun and meaningful school experiences, are the ones who become disengaged? What if the ways we have traditionally expected students to learn in school is fundamentally misaligned with what we actually know about *how* we learn?

Shifting to a learner-centered paradigm is not just about adding more. Fundamentally, it is about changing our way of thinking about and how we see learners and what is possible in education. The following chart, adapted from Education Reimagined's report "A Transformational Vison for the US," breaks down the basic components

of a shift from school- to learner-centered education that each chapter will focus on.[2]

From School-Centered	To Learner-Centered
Teach to the average and manage expectations.	Variability is the norm, and the uniqueness of learners is something to build upon.
Relationships and SEL are secondary to learning.	Relationships and SEL are the foundation of effective learning communities.
Learners are sorted and ranked.	Everyone is capable of learning and contributing in meaningful ways.
Success is defined by GPAs and standardized test scores.	Success is defined on an individual basis; each learner has their own unique strengths, interests, and goals.
Focus on the most effective teaching.	Focus on producing the most effective learning.
Learners follow a standardized path, place, and pace to assess proficiency.	Learners move at their pace and follow the path that allows them to demonstrate a mastery of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.
Learners adapt to the standardized system.	The system adapts to meet the needs of the learner.
Learners must be compelled to learn.	Learners want to learn.
Education is done to the learner.	Education is done by (and with) the learner.

Implement the plan.	→ Design the plan based on the goals and needs of your community.
Fail to learn and improve.	→ Learn to fail and evolve.
Maintain the way it has always been.	→ Evolve to create what's best for learners and learning.

To address these shifts, this book is broken into three essential questions:

PART I: WHAT ARE OUR ASPIRATIONS FOR LEARNERS? I share an overview of what it means to start with a holistic understanding of each learner as an individual rather than emphasizing averages and standardization. We'll look at what it means to get to know each learner and treat each one as if they are capable of learning and contributing in their own, meaningful way. And we'll explore what it might look like to redefine success and expand measure beyond GPAs, standardized tests, and traditional methods of assessment.

PART II: HOW MIGHT WE CREATE THE MOST IMPACTFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES? In this section, we'll explore key elements of learner-centered education: the art and science of learning, competency-based learning, personalized learning, purposeful learning, and authentic learning. We'll look at real-world examples that I hope will validate you, push you, and inspire you to take action. It's not about changing everything; it's often the smallest shifts that can ignite change and lead to a great impact.

PART III: HOW MIGHT WE CREATE THE ENABLING CONDITIONS TO SHIFT TO A LEARNER-CENTERED PARADIGM? While the first section will delve into how we see learners, and the second will focus on the key practices, the final section will zone in on how we can shift our mindset. We will look to human-centered design to consider the ways we might bring about more widespread, systemic change. We will explore

examples and practical tips to challenge the status quo and create the experiences our students deserve.

This following graphic represents each section of the book, and you will see it at the beginning of each section. I often refer to this as the learner-centered ecosystem, represented in three concentric circles. They all are interdependent, but we start at the center with learners and the desired outcomes, then design the learning experiences that align to our desired outcomes, and finally, ensure the enabling conditions are in place to support what we want for learners.

Enabling Conditions

Learning Experiences

Learner Outcomes

From Beliefs to Practice

In *Learner-Centered Innovation*, I challenged educators to ask themselves the following questions:

- Am I improving students' lives?
- Am I working to make the world a better place by creating more thoughtful, compassionate, creative, and skilled individuals?
- Am I providing opportunities for individuals to contribute positively to the local and global communities with which they interact?

I still believe these are the right questions for teachers to ask themselves, but I also know working on our beliefs and aspirations is only the first step. Truly evolving education requires each and every teacher to take concrete action. This book will offer you examples, strategies, and frameworks to help you evolve in your practice.

Along the journey, I will share insights as a mom, an educator, and a learner. I am also the daughter and wife of amazing teachers. I see the world through all of these lenses, so you will read stories about my family in the coming pages, especially my children, Abby and Zack. You will learn about the educators and students I have met as I walked the halls and visited thousands of classrooms all over the world. I have been in schools with high poverty rates and extreme wealth, from urban to rural, and although each context varies, the potential that exists in each of the students and communities does not. In each context, I've encountered amazing educators who are meeting their students where they are and creating learner-centered experiences that expand opportunities for their futures.

A fundamental shift in education is within reach. In fact, it's already happening all around us, possibly in your own teaching practice. As you read, I hope you feel validated and can celebrate what you've already done to positively impact those you serve. I also want to push your thinking about what's possible, address the barriers (perceived and real) that hold you back, and inspire you to learn, fail, and pick yourself and others back up as you work together to make amazing things happen for young people and for us as educators. Each chapter has questions at the end for you to jot down your ideas and "Put It into Practice," then share them with your team or with all of us using #EvolvingEducation to expand your community and impact. I can't wait to learn with you and see the learner-centered experiences you create.

Let's get started!