



 Transcend + newschools
venture fund

THE COLLABORATIVE

**WHAT WE LEARNED FROM BRINGING
EDUCATORS TOGETHER TO REIMAGINE SCHOOL**

OCTOBER 2017

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Teams' materials are representative of their thinking as of the close of the program in May 2017. Many have continued to iterate and have evolved their work since that time.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a shared vision for building innovative new school models worthy of students' potential and aspirations, our two organizations joined forces to launch the Transcend + NewSchools Collaborative. This ten-month, cohort-based program engaged educators from ten school districts and charter networks in exploring user-centered design, learning science, innovative learning environments, and best practices in R&D in an effort to accelerate change within existing school systems. The Collaborative had four core elements:

- ▶ **Three in-person convenings** provided the opportunity for shared learning, design work, and visits to innovative schools.
- ▶ **Customized coaching** facilitated the work of local design teams.
- ▶ **Self-paced resources and design tools** aided teams' work.
- ▶ **Funding from NewSchools** covered all program costs, provided travel funds, and offered grants of up to \$50,000 to support learning and innovation.

Some participants just wanted to learn more about innovative approaches in school design, while others were working on immediate redesign projects. We learned alongside them how to catalyze new ways of thinking and support the development of robust visions and plans for breakthrough models. Together we surfaced six key lessons:

1. Equity matters as a critical outcome of school redesign and is integral to the design process itself.
2. Productive dissonance catalyzes creative thinking and meaningful paradigm shifts.
3. Innovation spurs innovation—seeing innovation in action fuels creative thinking.
4. Customized coaching and support that meets educators and systems where they are fosters thoughtfulness and accountability.
5. Teams have to be innovation-ready and well-supported to make real traction.
6. When designing and leading a program like the Collaborative, it's difficult—but essential—to walk the walk by modeling the practices participants are exploring.

In this report, we share our vision behind the program; how we designed and evolved it; our key results; what we learned; and the stories of four participating teams (District of Columbia Public Schools, Gestalt Community Schools, Hiawatha Academies, and Spring Branch Independent School District.) We hope the work captured in this report will offer something of value to all those who are striving to ensure that our nation's schools play a meaningful role in preparing our students for whatever lies ahead.

“When you really wrestle with what the world demands
of students today vs. what school is set up to achieve,
it creates an imperative for change.

You can’t go through that and then go home
and do the same thing.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

TRANSCEND + NEWSCHOOLS COLLABORATIVE 2016-2017 COHORT





PART 1: A VISION FOR ACCELERATING SCHOOL INNOVATION

All children deserve schools that are worthy of their unlimited potential and that prepare them for the 21st century. Unfortunately, we know most schools are not designed to achieve these outcomes. They look strikingly similar to those that existed 100 years ago, and yet advances in technology and communications are paving the way for more innovative and adaptable learning environments across the sector. Further, we know that schools in our country were not originally designed to serve all students. Vast educational inequities along lines of race, class, and gender persist, demanding that we reimagine schools to intentionally interrupt this legacy. This reality fuels our work at [NewSchools Venture Fund](#) (NewSchools) and at [Transcend](#). And, it is what brought us together in the spring of 2016 to engage educators in a ten-month program to rethink school design.

In our 2015 report, [Dissatisfied Yet Optimistic](#), several leaders and board members of our two organizations shared thoughts about America’s current model of education that is proving insufficient for students—and how to change this. As we researched change efforts and deepened our involvement to support school innovation, we began to explore how we could fuel change more broadly and at a faster pace. What would it take, we wondered, to catalyze a pipeline of “innovation ready” public schools within both school districts and charter networks? How could we support more school leaders to think more boldly about school design?

We envisioned a program that would capitalize on the power of cohort-based learning, gain some economies of scale, and meet the needs we heard from school and system leaders. Our initial idea was to combine a few simple ingredients: exposure to innovative and provocative examples of learning environments, direct support of locally-based design teams, engagement in learning science and design thinking, and funds to make exploration and implementation possible. From this kernel of an idea, the Transcend + NewSchools Collaborative was born, and in the fall of 2016, ten charter networks and school districts from around the country joined our first cohort. What follows is the story of how our journey unfolded, what we learned, and what lies ahead.



PART 2: BUILDING THE TEAM

In March 2016, we invited educators across the field to come learn and build with us in this pilot project. We wanted to cultivate a cohort that represented a variety of school and system models, across different grade levels, from a wide range of community contexts, and with a spectrum of needs, interests, and questions they were exploring. Ultimately, about a dozen school systems and charter networks were invited to complete the application process.

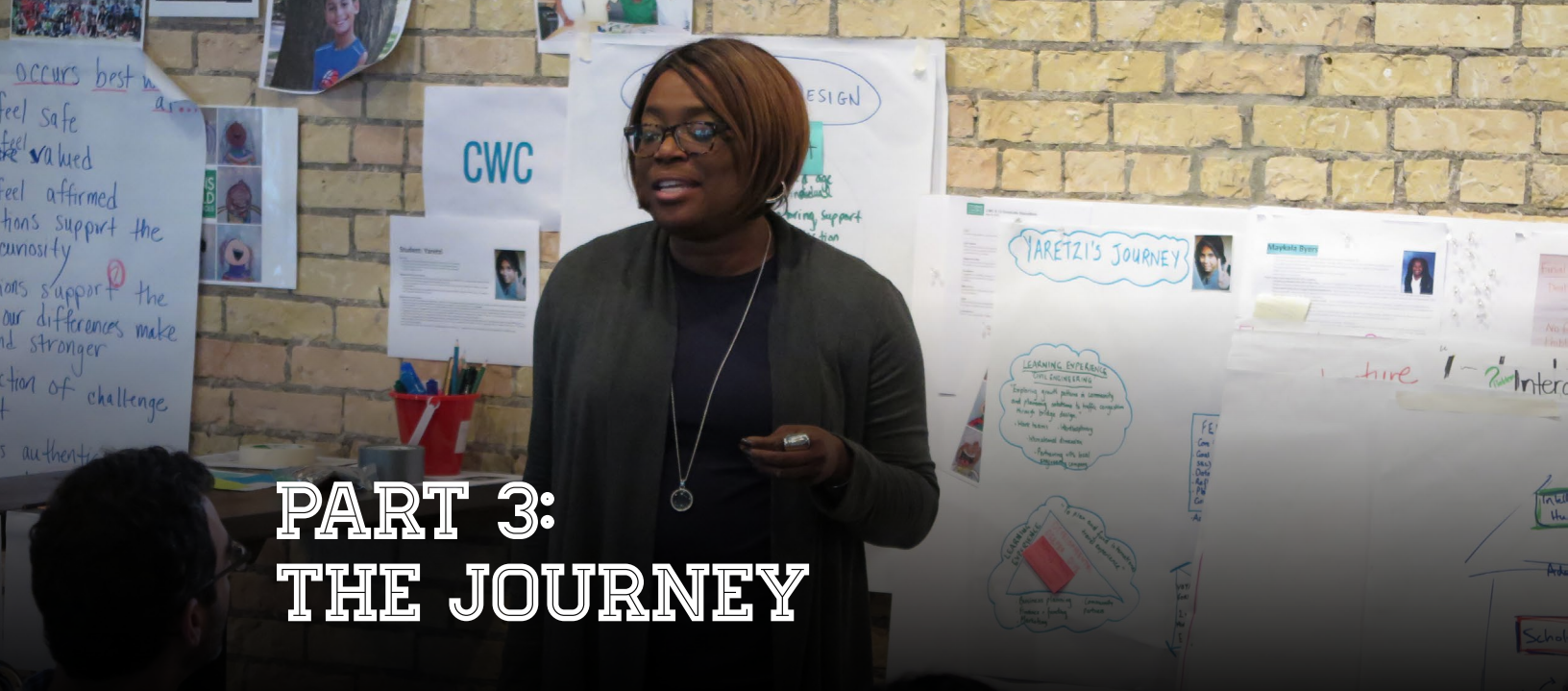
By the end of April 2016, we had selected a diverse group of ten district and charter school operators to participate in the ten-month program. They came, quite literally, from across the country: California, Oklahoma, Texas, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C. Three of the teams were traditional school districts while the remainder came from charter school networks. As a group, they brought a wide variety of school redesign ideas spanning elementary, middle, and high school. All wanted to learn more about fostering system-wide innovation.

Beyond differences in schools and communities, the participants formed a diverse group in nearly every way. Of 43 participants, 18 worked in their district or network's central office, 10 served as Superintendent or CEO, and 15 worked directly in schools. The group was racially diverse—almost equally divided between people of color and white participants—and 26 participants were women. Though the majority of group members were seasoned educators with classroom and/or school administration experience, the cohort spanned from newly-minted educators to those with two to three decades of work in schools and school systems.

Participating schools, networks, and districts had rich and varied reasons for engaging in the Collaborative. For instance, KIPP Houston came with a focus on redesigning its charter middle school to accelerate learning and, potentially, to pilot and scale new approaches to other schools in their network. For them, the program offered space for a middle school

leader with “a big, different vision” to gain the partnership needed to operationalize it. Tulsa Public Schools came with a broad charge. Starting with two elementary schools, they were working to design a district-wide ecosystem of school innovation. The program was a chance “to practice implementing innovation and to understand more about how to pilot and scale it.” Excel Academy’s focus was more targeted. Having run three middle schools for some time, they had recently launched a high school. The Collaborative experience was, for them, a way to gain expertise, exposure, and perspective as they put pen to paper on designing the last two years of high school and a capstone experience that would support their aims for Excel graduates. At Citizens of the World Charter Schools, the team was aligned on the purpose of schooling and the student dispositions they were working to cultivate—but when they matched these aspirations to the day-to-day work in their schools, they could see a real disconnect. Said one of their team members, “We knew the gap wouldn’t be closed by tweaking around the margins. Serendipitously, this opportunity with Transcend and NewSchools emerged to support us in thinking about our whole school with our ends in mind.”

Our pilot teams entered the program from a variety of starting points and with a range of destinations in mind. With those varied goals and a common aim of expanding their perspective and emerging with refreshed clarity, inspiration, and new skills, these teams came together to build the first year of the Collaborative.



PART 3: THE JOURNEY

To fundamentally reimagine learning in their context, we aimed to support the Collaborative's participants in building

- ▶ Conviction that change in school design is urgently needed
- ▶ Clarity around their own communities' needs and the elements of school design that address them
- ▶ Coalition with other local and national educators exploring and leading change
- ▶ Capacity for bringing a vision of innovation to fruition

ONE JOURNEY, TWO PATHWAYS

Given the wide-ranging needs of the participating organizations and individuals, the program had to be designed with diversity in mind. No single set of activities or outcomes would be relevant to everyone, and adaptability would have to be “business as usual.” The Collaborative itself would have to practice what it was preaching: flexible pathways, customized support, and personalized learning.

As one means of meeting these varied needs, the Collaborative offered two pathways: a “vision” pathway and a “canvas” pathway. Both were designed to support and push teams to

- ▶ **Better understand the future of learning**, the need for new models, and what is being tried and learned from the most interesting new approaches
- ▶ **Engage in a learning journey** to clarify core beliefs about education
- ▶ **Inspire and inform a future vision** for a new model
- ▶ **Build capacity for design thinking** and ongoing innovation

The canvas pathway also supported teams to

- ▶ **Develop a “dream canvas”** for a specific new school model to be created or piloted locally
- ▶ **Build organizational and community commitment** to this new school model
- ▶ **Create innovation and change management plans** for bringing this model to reality

The **vision pathway** was designed for teams coming to the program with a more exploratory stance. While they may have been launching new schools or redesigning pieces of existing ones, they weren’t intending to undertake massive shifts. Indeed, two of the four school operators participating in vision pathway described themselves as “risk-averse” and “rarely early adopters.” One said, “We are aligned around our challenges, but we have lots of thoughts about potential solutions and no clear agreement on what to do.” Still, they came to the program to fuel their own thinking by learning more and getting a better sense of how other schools were innovating. Of those in the vision pathway, D.C. Public Schools was thinking about an elementary school design, Excel was looking at the latter part of their high school, and YES Prep and Camino Nuevo were thinking and learning about school design more broadly.

The six teams in the **canvas pathway** were already actively engaged in the process of redesigning a school and/or their district or network’s approach to schooling. They came to the Collaborative committed to making significant change, eager to learn how to do it most effectively, and open to a wide spectrum of possibilities for better serving their students. On the canvas pathway, teams worked to design a “dream canvas”—a concrete design for a new school model—as well as an innovation and change management plan to bring it into being. The six teams that joined the canvas pathway saw the program as a way to garner support, perspective, structure, and resources to bring their plans more fully into view and then into fruition. Tulsa Public Schools was focused on elementary school redesign while Hiawatha Academies, Spring Branch, KIPP Houston, Gestalt, and Citizens of the World were working on middle schools. And each of these, concurrently, was using these targeted efforts to envision, fuel, or strengthen their innovation strategy across their system.

BUILDING THE ROADMAP

We provided a Collaborative [Journey Guide](#), which laid out the vision and structure of the program, to help participants understand the commitment and plan their work. The program had four main parts:

- ▶ **Three in-person [convenings](#)** brought the cohort together in September, January, and April to work in structured ways and with expert facilitation and hands-on design support. They also included thought-provoking learning visits to schools and organizations in the Bay Area, Austin, and New York and direct engagement with experts through whole group presentations and small group workshops.
- ▶ **Local design processes were led by each team with [customized support provided by Transcend](#).** Customized support included coaching, facilitation, planning, and design assistance.
- ▶ **Self-paced resources and design tools** were available through the cohort's website, including a "[playlist](#)" of readings and videos and a toolkit for user-centered design.
- ▶ **Funding from NewSchools** made the ten-month program available to teams at no cost, provided travel grants of \$25,000 to support the costs of attending convenings, and offered grants of up to \$50,000 per team to learn more about ideas and questions "sparked" by participation in the Collaborative. In addition, teams had the opportunity to apply for follow-on funding from NewSchools to further their efforts after the program ended.



FALL 2016: CONVENING 1 AND THE START OF LOCAL WORK



In September 2016, we brought the group together in the Bay Area for our first convening. Before arriving, participants completed about 6–8 hours of [pre-work](#) including student interviews, a reflection on why they do this work, and recommended readings and resources about major trends shaping the future. For those who wanted to go deeper, we also invited them to explore a [“playlist”](#) of additional resources.

As we prepared for the first convening, we used human-centered design principles to create the space and to structure pre-work and hands-on activities. We made the physical space welcoming (complete with a “comfort station” and designated space for each team to return to throughout the week), inspiring (including quotes posted throughout the space and a variety of planning and creativity aids on tables), and restorative (with both indoor and outdoor space and aesthetically pleasing design elements). We also engaged in exercises to build relationships and trust. All of this helped us create a safe space for creative thinking and risk taking. We structured teams’ work experiences to begin with and return often to their “users.” By conducting empathy interviews with students, staff, and families and by envisioning the student experience in a redesigned school, they stayed grounded in the real needs and aspirations of real people.

This first in-person convening focused on the purpose and possibilities of schooling in the context of a rapidly changing world. Participants examined all the ways school has not changed despite how much the world around it has and will continue to evolve. The gap

between what schools were designed to accomplish and what the future will demand was stark. After visiting a set of innovative learning environments, participants heard from Jeff Duncan-Andrade, founder of Roses in Concrete, who challenged the group's assumptions about relationships with community, and from Diane Tavenner, who shared her journey in transforming Summit Public Schools. They also spent time working in teams on early-stage design ideas, with consultants close at hand to support them. At the end of this first convening, the words most used when asked how they were feeling were *inspired, energized, focused, grateful, motivated, and curious*.

Between the first and second convenings, the work of the Collaborative was taking place back home. Teams continued to deepen their understanding of students' and families' needs (conducting empathy interviews, shadowing students, holding focus groups) and to refine a set of graduate aims and a first draft of a new student experience that aligned to those outcomes (by, for example, describing "a day in the life of a student"). Many of our teams assembled broader design teams (including additional staff, students, families, system leaders) to support this work. Our coaches were highly responsive, supporting teams "on demand," with requests ranging from regular phone conversations or co-created meeting agendas to facilitated design sessions.

WINTER 2017: CONVENING 2 AND EMERGING DESIGNS

The second convening, held in January 2017 in Austin, TX, focused on cognition, motivation, and identity development. Through research-based sessions with Bror Saxberg, Jenn Charlot, and Veronica Benavides, participants explored learning science with topics such as accessing long-term memory, the importance of practice and feedback, and how central identity is to the learning process. They discussed how the traditional school model contradicts this research and generated new ideas for their emerging school designs. Through these reflections—as well as through provocative learning visits to Montessori for All, tango classes, and elsewhere—participants articulated their own core beliefs about learning and converted these into "design anchors". While participants said that the content of this convening was highly relevant, they also challenged us to make our methods more personalized and consistent with the level of agency we promote for all learners. Ironically, while trying to provide an in-depth look at the research behind cognition, motivation, and identity development, and the implications of this research on learning environments, we'd over-relied on traditional delivery models.



As we were rolling up our sleeves to design the third and final convening with a renewed commitment to personalized learning, our participants were hard at work with their local design teams to further develop their dream canvases and innovation plans. They iterated on their design anchors and student journeys alongside their broader design teams and began to map out what the path forward might look like (budgeting options, considering hiring needs, etc.). As teams continued down different paths, our coaches continued to differentiate their support as well. For example, Camino Nuevo doubled down on building organizational will for change, leveraging their coach to lead a professional development session with school and system leaders to define the case for innovation. Hiawatha Academies moved to prototyping concrete ideas such as teaching math through gamification, building critical consciousness through inquiry, and beginning each day with meditation, art, or reflection. Other teams leveraged their coach for targeted support in revising their canvas or in facilitating design team meetings to prioritize critical ideas emerging in their new vision.

SPRING 2017: CONVENING 3 AND CHARTING THE PATH FORWARD

We brought the group together for the final time in New York in April 2017 to focus on change management and leading innovation, which is as important as any technical aspect of school model design. Taking the feedback from Austin to heart, this convening was highly personalized. Teams set goals on the first day for how to use flexible time together, including making requests for Transcend's coaches and outside experts to join them at key inflection points. A wide variety of opt-in workshops on configuring for innovation, securing funding

for R&D, leading and sustaining change, and lean prototyping let teams and individuals spend time where it was most needed. Learning visits again helped teams see the possible in action as they selected those most relevant to their evolving visions. And, before heading home, teams shared final presentations highlighting their most critical takeaways from the experience. Participants appreciated the choices they had about how to use their time, and they set and met goals for the week that were most important to fueling their work. Said one participant, “I’m impressed and grateful for the thoughtful way in which this convening lived into the ideas raised for the future of learning.”



By May, we had followed our Journey Guide through to its end, staying on course even while navigating some unanticipated twists and turns. Each team had laid the foundation for their continuing work—some of them including ongoing direct support from Transcend or follow-on funding from NewSchools. One participant said of her experience, “I have to admit that at the outset that I was not sure what we would gain from the Collaborative. Now, after numerous thoughtful sessions, school visits, discussions, and coaching conversations, I am 100% bought in to the importance of this experience for school leaders across the country.”

SPOTLIGHT: COLLABORATIVE CONVENINGS

CYCLE 1: Orient and Prepare ▶ August–September

CONVENING 1—BAY AREA

The Purpose and Possibility of Schooling

▶ [Pre-work](#)

▶ [Guidebook](#)

LEARNING VISITS

Alt School
Brightworks
CHILL—Curiosity Hacked
Independent Learning Lab
Khan Academy Lab School
Lindsay Unified School District
New School of San Francisco
Roses in Concrete
Summit Shasta

PARTNERS AND SPEAKERS

Alice Chen, *Wayfinding Wisdom*
Jon Deane, *Chan Zuckerberg Initiative*
Jeff Duncan-Andrade,
Roses in Concrete
Michelle Molitor, *FREE, Fellowship for Race & Equity in Education*
Christine Ortiz, *Equity Design Collaborative*
Adam Pisoni, *Abl Schools*
Oliver Sicat, *Ednovate*
Diane Tavenner, *Summit Public Schools*

CYCLE 2: Listen and Imagine ▶ October–January

CONVENING 2—AUSTIN

The Science of Learning: Cognition, Motivation, and Identity

▶ [Pre-work](#)

▶ [Guidebook](#)

LEARNING VISITS

Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders
La Esquina Tango
Montessori For All
The Thinkery
Umlauf Sculpture Garden

PARTNERS AND SPEAKERS

Nicole Beechum,
University of Chicago
Veronica Benavides,
Bank Street, Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching
Sara Cotner, *Montessori For All*
Bror Saxberg, *Kaplan*
Angela Valenzuela,
University of Texas

CYCLE 3: Refine and Plan ▶ February–May

CONVENING 3—NEW YORK CITY

Leading Change and Innovation

▶ [Pre-work](#)

▶ [Guidebook](#)

LEARNING VISITS

Blue School
Manhattan Country School
MS 88 + New Classrooms
St. Benedict's Preparatory Academy
WHEELS—Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School

PARTNERS AND SPEAKERS

Veronica Benavides,
Bank Street, Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching
Katie Bowen, *Consultant*
Jon Deane, *Chan Zuckerberg Initiative*
Nishita Gupte,
Achievement First Greenfield
Jeff Imrich,
Achievement First Greenfield
Saskia Levy Thompson,
Carnegie Corporation
Ross Lipstein, *Summit Public Schools*
Lisa Minott,
Achievement First Greenfield
Nik Namba, *Lindsay Unified*
Chris Rush, *New Classrooms*
Wendy Smith, *University of Delaware*
Dacia Toll, *Achievement First*
Eric Tucker, *Brooklyn Lab School*





PART 4: OUR RESULTS AND IMPACT

We launched our partnership with a clear, over-arching aim of building a pipeline of "innovation ready" school systems and networks. Since measuring a long-term goal like this can be tricky, if not impossible, we aligned around three simple, near-term impact indicators. We wanted to know the degree to which the Collaborative fostered the development of breakthrough models, drove broader impact and action, and engaged the cohort in a catalytic learning experience. At the end of the year, based on surveys, interviews, observations, and close engagement with teams, we believe the Collaborative met or exceeded each of these goals.

GOAL 1: FOSTER BREAKTHROUGH MODELS

Aim: At least 2 -3 teams have constructed a "dream canvas" that represents a potential breakthrough model and are poised to begin the building process.

Several of the Collaborative's pilot teams are now undertaking deeper and more intense work to develop and build out the holistic model that better aligns their school design to both their graduate aims and to 21st century demands. The summary of team progress on pages 19-20 offers a glimpse into the change efforts that we've been privileged to collaborate on this year. And, as we move into the Collaborative's second year and continue learning alongside our participants, we will further sharpen our understanding of what innovations represent truly breakthrough models.

GOAL 2: DRIVE BROAD ACTION AND IMPACT

Aim: 80 percent of partners have piloted or are on the path to piloting innovations by October 2017.

Every single one of the teams in the cohort is actively piloting some form of school innovation, with the majority of these pilots aligned toward bringing an entirely new school model to

fruition. For example, at Van Ness Elementary School in Washington, DC, Collaborative participants have already used grant funding from the program to acquire makerspace resources and a sensory room, convinced and affirmed through their experience in the program that hands-on sensory materials need to be as accessible throughout elementary school as they are in early childhood education. Camino Nuevo recognized, through their experience in the Collaborative, that school-level innovation must be rooted in innovation at the system level. They have already started re-organizing and shifting the structure of their system, aiming to enable change across individual campuses. Spring Branch is on a path to personalizing learning and redesigning all its schools over the next five years, with [Spring Branch Middle School](#) piloting innovations this year. Even teams not pursuing a sizeable overhaul or innovation are piloting elements that resonate in their context and that they believe will support their students' success. For example, Excel Academy is looking at implementing "circles" to support students' social-emotional growth, similar to those they observed in action at Valor Collegiate Academy while on a grant-funded learning visit there. A summary of what each team has taken on follows on pages 19-20.

GOAL 3: DELIVER A CATALYTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Aim: Participant surveys reveal a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 75 with no gaps by ethnicity, gender, or role.

When asked the question "Would you recommend the Transcend + NewSchools Collaborative to a colleague?" on a holistic Net Promoter scale of 100, the end-of-program score was 76.3. While this may sound "average," the reality is that a net promoter score above 0 is good and above 50 is excellent. (For reference, top companies like Amazon, Apple, and Costco tend to score in the 70's.) Across multiple surveys throughout the experience, participants, by and large, described it as one that has been critical both to their own professional development and learning and to the work they are doing within their campuses and systems. According to one participant, "Honestly, this has been one of the most impactful professional and personal experiences of my career. The learning was top-notch but so were the people, processes, and culture. I simply cannot say enough as to how this has impacted me." Interestingly, the responses that were not as strong came from teams in the vision pathway and with a caveat that they would recommend the program to schools in a particular context. Said one such participant, "I would score a '10' if my colleague was in the process of designing or redesigning a school. For schools that are more interested in exploring the landscape and seeing what's out there, I would recommend with some reservations." Or, put even more simply by another, "This would be a 10 for the right organization at the right time."

“I was pushed to think, grow, and develop as an educator, parent, and agent of social change. Additionally, I have been able to turn around and incorporate my learning into the school setting almost immediately.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

“This experience...has changed our trajectory as an organization, and shifted my own beliefs as an educator.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

As in education broadly, the ultimate impact of the Collaborative won't be known for some time. While we are already seeing exciting pilots and shifts in curriculum, structures, and learning experiences, the enduring impact for students, families, and communities will be years in the making. What innovations will participants make on campus or across their districts or networks? Will these innovations represent substantive change? To what degree will the innovation seeded in the Collaborative lead students to be more successful in navigating the demands of the 21st century? On these questions—ultimately, the most critical ones—time will tell. Still, in the nearer term, all indications are that change is underway.



SPOTLIGHT: TEAM INNOVATIONS AT-A-GLANCE

Vision Pathway



**DCPS/VAN NESS
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Van Ness Elementary School is piloting innovations in social-emotional learning and creative problem solving.

This year they are testing new structures for relationship and community-building, trauma-informed practices throughout the day, makerspaces, and more.



**CAMINO NUEVO
CHARTER ACADEMY**
LOS ANGELES, CA

Camino Nuevo Charter Academy has focused on orienting and organizing their system to better support innovation. They

have worked with leaders across schools and the network to refine their graduate profile and will be launching new professional development for school leaders. Next year, they will continue their system redesign efforts, including hiring a head of innovation, and will undertake ethnic studies and college access pilots at the campus level.



**EXCEL ACADEMY
CHARTER SCHOOLS**
BOSTON, MA

Inspired by Compass Circles they observed at Valor Collegiate thanks to their grant from the program, Excel Academy

Charter Schools will adapt the protocol to build something similar for grades 9-11 next year. With the aim of developing students' self-awareness, purpose, and agency, they plan to eventually implement this across the high school experience.



**YES PREP PUBLIC
SCHOOLS**
HOUSTON, TX

YES Prep will begin piloting ideas, including makerspaces and more holistic assessments, at two of their high schools in Houston. Moving forward, they are continuing to evolve their

"college-ready profile" as an organizational strategic initiative this year while exploring where that may require innovation in their program design.

Canvas Pathway



HIAWATHA ACADEMIES
MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Hiawatha Academies will open its fifth school in fall of 2018 in an entirely new middle school model. They are assembling a “build team” to construct the student and staff-facing programmatic materials needed to support the implementation of a model rooted in student agency, interdisciplinary curriculum, and critically-conscious action.



GESTALT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
MEMPHIS, TN

Gestalt is working to transform Nexus Middle School into a highly personalized and adaptive STEM school, which will serve as inspiration for the network more broadly. Next year, they will test and implement personalization in Math, where students will develop “passion projects” to pursue their interests while positively impacting their community. Gestalt is also designing a dashboard to help integrate various pieces of their new STEM model and to monitor progress in a robust and ongoing way.



CITIZENS OF THE WORLD CHARTER SCHOOLS
MULTIPLE CITIES

Citizens of the World Charter Schools is continuing to reimagine the middle school experience toward a more developmentally-appropriate model that combines the best of personalized learning, social-emotional learning, and interdisciplinary studies. Next year, they will begin piloting key elements of that design, including cross-content courses, a fellowship experience focused on social-emotional and leadership skills, and voyages that help students apply their learning outside of school.



KIPP HOUSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
HOUSTON, TX

KIPP Houston is launching a series of pilots at their flagship middle school in Houston, which include flexible groupings for targeted math instruction, cross-disciplinary units that focus on increasing cohesion and relevance for students, and increasing the equity focus of content.



SPRING BRANCH INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT/SPRING BRANCH MIDDLE SCHOOL
HOUSTON, TX

Spring Branch ISD has a strategic plan to reimagine and personalize learning across the district. They are launching a micro-school at Spring Branch Middle School to begin testing key elements of their future design, including interdisciplinary learning, personalized supports, and increased opportunities for student leadership. The district will also launch a Collaborative-like cohort experience to bring other schools through a redesign process.



TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS/ ANDERSON & HAMILTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
TULSA, OK

Tulsa Public Schools is doubling down on Summit Learning Program, a robust platform to support more individualized learning and increased student agency and self-directedness. Two schools—Hamilton and Anderson Elementaries—will lead the way in implementing Summit in alignment with a robust new canvas and vision for student learning.



PART 5: WHAT WE LEARNED

We believe mining and sharing lessons across our work is key to accelerating innovation within the education sector, so we have been deeply invested in learning over the course of the year. We surveyed participants at the end of each convening, and we made changes to ensure the program evolved and improved over the year. During the spring, we conducted 1:1 interviews with more than half of our cohort members, spanning every participating team, as well as with Transcend and NewSchools staff and program consultants. And, throughout the program, every six weeks we reflected on each team's progress and made adjustments to support individual teams and/or to refine program elements across all the teams. Notably, all of this feedback revealed consistent themes that illuminated the ways we can carry this work forward.

Drawing from Transcend's [learning agenda](#), we were interested in surfacing practice-based learnings in two areas:

- ▶ The most effective ways to **cause and sustain a paradigm shift** among adults from a school-centered paradigm to a more student-driven, learner-centered paradigm
- ▶ The best processes and methods to enable school operators to **develop a robust vision and plan** for innovative school models

WHAT WE AFFIRMED: ENABLING FACTORS

We suspected—and our data strongly affirmed—that there are some critical enabling factors that undergird and spur new ways of thinking and support the development of robust innovations and plans. And, we think it's worth mentioning these ahead of everything else we learned because, we believe, without these kinds of enablers, our efforts and our teams' work might not have yielded the outcomes they did. The importance of **space**—the physical learning environments in which the work happened—cannot be underestimated. Open, bright, and flexible spaces helped our participants focus and engage. And, these spaces let us use walls for displays and workspace while adapting easily to the learning, working, and collaboration needs of the whole group, teams, and individuals. Beyond physical space, **the ability and willingness to step away, together**, absolutely enables this kind of work. Being together in a different place, protected from the day-to-day pressures and distractions of running a school or district, is essential to asking the questions, catalyzing the insights, and sustaining the hard work needed to envision and create something different for school. Without sustained, face-to-face time, dreaming big is a big challenge. The value of **high quality logistics** clearly supported the cohort in rolling up their sleeves and getting things done together. In addition, **clear, consistent communication** throughout the program and **learner-centered, collaborative facilitation** were key to making the most of the experience. We were lucky to have a talented facilitation team of staff and consultants to nurture a positive and productive community where cohort members and their local design teams were able to gain insight, take risks, and make progress. And, finally, we heard time and again the ways in which **money** mattered. Even while schools and districts may value innovation and learning, in tight budget contexts these are often understandably viewed as luxuries. The fact that cohorts could access the program at no cost, and that they had the opportunity to seek additional grants from NewSchools to further their efforts, enabled them to prioritize innovation and learning and helped them stay on course throughout the year.



WHAT WE LEARNED: KEY INGREDIENTS

Beyond having the chance to affirm some things we suspected were important, we also surfaced insights around a few key ingredients for shifting paradigms and constructing visions and plans. Here is what we learned.

- ▶ **Lesson 1: Equity is essential to school design as a critical outcome and an integral part of the design process itself.** From the outset, we believed advancing more equitable learning environments was a fundamental aim of school redesign. We emphasized and modeled our conviction that equity is not just the outcome of a robust design process but that the process itself can distribute power and model truly equitable learning. This grounding showed up throughout the program: it was a through-line in the texts and content that participants explored; facilitators were highly skilled in integrating conversations about race and equity throughout the experience; we featured guest speakers with expertise in ethnic studies, asset-based pedagogy, racial-identity development and more; and, we visited schools where dismantling inequity is a central objective and design anchor. Our participants voiced appreciation for the content, learning, and community that centered around creating a highly supportive and rigorous experience conducive to deep and vulnerable work together. In fact, it was this expressed value and appreciation that also illuminated for us that—though we did good work—there is still more work to do, and it's work that matters greatly. As we move into design for our second year, one of our highest priorities is to build on what worked and to tighten our approach to equity across the entire learning experience.

"I strongly believe our school design AND our change management process will be stronger as a result of having done this work with a strong lens toward equity and inclusion. And, we could absolutely not have done the equity-focused design work that we've done without the grant we received from NewSchools."

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

“The visit to Roses in Concrete led to a discussion we had not had before and elevated the role of equity in our design. When we first started thinking about school innovation and design we saw equity as a separate thing. Our experiences in the Collaborative pushed us to merge equity and design so that equity is a core outcome of any school design, parallel with learning.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

- **Lesson 2: Creating productive dissonance accelerates and intensifies learning.** Leading significant change in school design first requires significant change in one’s own thinking and beliefs. To foster this, the program drew on core content and experiences that introduced new and different perspectives and exposed participants to relevant research. Todd Rose’s book “The End of Average,” assigned at the outset of the experience, provided a different vantage point for considering individuality and potential, and several participants cited this as having fundamentally changed the way they think about schooling. A session during the first convening, “The Probable vs. the Possible,” was also noted as being extremely powerful, in particular catalyzing many participants to think about their school’s target outcomes, whether their school was designed to meet them, and whether, given the emerging future, those outcomes will ultimately be relevant to students’ fulfillment or success in career and life. Said one participant of this session, “When you really wrestle with what the world demands of students today vs. what school is set up to achieve, it creates an imperative for change. You can’t go through that and then go home and do the same thing.” Indeed, it was the structured, supported “wrestling” that made the dissonance productive and not just provocative or troubling. As new ideas were introduced across the year in a scaffolded way, participants had the chance to process them together, as teams, across the cohort, and with coaches. This structured processing helped participants identify concrete elements or ideas that were most essential to evolving and strengthening their schools—and helped ensure that innovation felt within reach, without leaving them discouraged or disheartened. At the end of the program, one participant reflected, “I had never before considered the value and purpose for reimagining school, beyond ending an ‘achievement gap’. Truly, I feel incredibly mission-driven to create a school system that thinks toward the future after this experience.”

“The entire premise of this program—really, really re-thinking schooling vs. just tweaking—has been powerful. I’m risk-averse and my team and I have all worked in very traditional, urban, public schools our whole careers. Just being able to think about different ways of doing things—removing grades or doing away with age-based cohorts—has been immensely helpful.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

“I’ve seen a lot of models and trained hundreds of leaders. Being pushed to see learning differently and seeing schools and spaces I’d never have gone to—like AltSchool or the Thinkery—engenders a level of thoughtfulness that is unparalleled. It makes you think ‘at this moment, what do we need to be doing?’”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

- **Lesson 3: Reimagining school is easier to do when you see what is possible—and what is actually happening—in innovative learning environments.** Carefully curated learning visits, which also fostered productive dissonance in many instances, sparked new ideas and enabled this group of educators to rethink what is possible in their own schools and communities. Transcend’s team worked closely with visit hosts to hone in on key activities and provided structured opportunities to debrief learning within and across teams. For the most part, participants were able to choose the sites they visited, allowing them to pursue experiences most relevant to their work. On these visits—most to schools but some to other learning spaces like museums and even a tango lesson—participants described having the experience of realizing “they didn’t know what they didn’t know” and of seeing new possibilities for school design that might not only meet but actually might exceed the outcomes their schools were already hitting. As one participant described it, “I entered the Collaborative with the intent of strengthening our current school model. I leave the Collaborative with the tools, courage and the inspiration to create a model that doesn’t exist.” Another said, “Having the opportunity to see innovative schools has enabled me to see school leaders taking risks and thinking outside the box to create great experiences for kids. These on-site visits have encouraged me to be

courageous and bold as I lead our campus in the design process.” One principal may have best captured the deep value and impact of these learning visits when she said, “You can envision something you haven’t seen. But we saw it. That put us in a different place.”

“When we saw *Roses in Concrete* and talked with Jeff Duncan-Andrade it created a moment of dissonance when we realized some of the choices we were making at our school were actually creating oppositional issues for our kids. As a result, we are focusing first on belonging and what it would look like for kids who are really marginalized to truly belong in a school.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

“When we went to Montessori for All, it pushed our thinking around our core beliefs and design anchors and totally changed our conversation.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

- **Lesson 4: Customized coaching and support in the design process fosters thoughtfulness, efficiency, and accountability.** Ongoing coaching and support provided by a knowledgeable and skilled expert who has access to other thought leaders, a knowledge base that supports the “why and how” of school innovation, and the skill to help construct and facilitate school redesign work on the ground made a huge difference for participants and their teams back home. Our coaches are connected to schools across the country as well as to experts in education, design thinking, organizational change, educational equity, and more. As a result, they were able to learn each team’s context and help them identify models and resources that might be best suited to their setting. They could capture common needs and make relevant learning experiences

accessible to the full cohort. In addition, the team had the skills required to help each design group construct its design process (like [this](#) example from the design team at Spring Branch Middle School), to stay centered on core elements like graduate aims and design anchors, and to help plan and facilitate local design sessions. This hands-on, highly-adaptable, and expert support was critical to helping teams surface questions, identify opportunities, and envision new possibilities they might not have considered on their own. And, participants told us time and again that Collaborative coaches were invaluable in keeping them accountable and on track both in terms of pace and as far as maintaining the integrity of their vision. One participant described the impact of having an ongoing partner in design work this way, “Our coach was the glue of this entire experience for us. Truly, he impacted the present and future of this district. I will never again question the impact that an external thought partner can have on our day to day work.”



“The support of the coaches was critical in terms of actually getting work done, making a work plan, holding us accountable to micro-pilots, and ensuring we were designing intentionally.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

“Our coach provided outside perspective for us on risk areas we may not be aware of in terms of process and design ideas. She told us when we were going too slow and showed us big ways to up our game that others weren’t seeing.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

- **Lesson 5: Having a good process and toolkit matters mightily, but teams themselves bring the “secret sauce” to model building.** Engaging in a human-centered design process and being armed with an effective set of tools helped teams get to flashes of insight, experience “a-ha” moments, and construct a compelling new vision. There is no doubt that the process and toolkit we shared were meaningful elements of the program, especially given that most participants had never used these sorts of design resources in their work. What’s also clear is that all teams had access to the same facilitated, supported process and the same toolkit—and, yet, some got further down the path than others. As we explored this, we both observed and heard from participants themselves that there were a few key factors that set apart the teams that made the most progress during their Collaborative experience:
- **Assembling a strong guiding team.** While we are still learning about what the “right” team to lead school redesign looks like, we could see that the teams that made the most progress had a balance of campus-based members with an up-close view of a school’s challenges and opportunities and top-level district or network leaders who were able to bring a system-wide perspective.
 - **Having a time-bound, relevant outcome for school design.** The most robust visions came from schools in the canvas pathway who joined the Collaborative with a concrete and time-bound target. Because they had an immediate project underway, their work together was anything but a thought exercise. This purpose and immediacy brought focus and accountability into the process and that helped several teams operate with more urgency than teams that were more exploratory or working on a longer timeline or smaller pilots.
 - **Being product-focused and iterating repeatedly.** The teams whose visions and plans are most robust drafted and re-drafted again and again, following a build-iterate-build process in which the act of building let them see and quickly evolve their thinking. In fact, the sooner teams saw their dream canvas as something they could and would actually use, the sooner they moved into the kind of deep, purposeful work that catalyzes new ways of thinking.

- **Being highly resourceful.** Teams that made the most progress engaged their Transcend coaches and our broader team meaningfully and consistently throughout the experience. They asked for time, passed the pen, and shared their thinking openly so that coaches could help capture, refine, and quickly evolve their thinking. They used grants in targeted ways to further their work, bringing in additional consultants or taking local groups on relevant school visits.
- **Distributing power and decision making.** The teams with standout visions at the end of the program tended to have deeply engaged more people—and a more diverse group of people—in their design process. They recognized that creating a new vision was not the purpose of the four-person team participating directly in the Collaborative’s cohort but was a responsibility shared by students, teachers, parents, and community members “back home.” As they leveraged these diverse groups, they were more likely than other teams to hear new insights and questions, to be pushed in their thinking, and to get the kind of reality checks needed to ensure their plans could move off the paper and into the building.
- **Exhibiting a “learner mindset” and an openness to new ideas.** Those teams with a tendency to be more curious and less critical seemed to take more away from learning visits, interactions with guests and experts, connections and time with one another, and exploration of core content. The teams that thrived were those willing, as one participant said, to “look for the nugget” to take away from each piece of the program.

“So often, we are taught to design backwards, to begin with the end in mind. Transcend is saying ‘Begin by assuming that you don’t have the answer, but that your kids and community have the answers and you need to design for them’. This made me realize why some design processes I’ve been involved with in the past have under-delivered.”

COLLABORATIVE 2016-17 PARTICIPANT

- ▶ **Lesson 6: It’s difficult—but essential—to ‘walk the walk’.** Ultimately, we were asking organizations to build fundamentally different learning environments—places of intense belonging, self-direction, rigor, and social consciousness. There was no more powerful inspiration for this than us being able to create a learning community that modeled those values. We set off with this intention, but honestly learned its importance through some

meaningful missteps. It was a visceral shift (for us and for participants) during our second convening when we slipped into some sit-and-get pedagogies. We heard and saw the dip in engagement and internalization of content. On the flip side, we saw the power of choice and scaffolded self-direction in New York when shifting to the personalized workshop/coaching model during our third convening. More than anything, we affirmed over and over again the need to set clear design anchors, hold to them with discipline, and be ready to adjust course when you veer from that vision.



These six lessons surfaced as truly instrumental in helping participants see school design in a new, and different, light and facilitating their visioning of and planning for what they—and we—hope will become breakthrough models in education. Of course, we learned so much more than this from and with our pilot cohort, and those more granular learnings and wonderings are also informing our design of “Collaborative 2.0” as we move forward.



PART 6: LOOKING FORWARD

As we reflect on our work this year, we are using what we've learned to strengthen our efforts to build a pipeline of innovation-ready schools, districts, and networks. We're incorporating program design shifts based on our most powerful learnings and tweaking in smaller ways to evolve the program in its second year as we prepare to launch with a new cohort. We're also pulling what we've learned into school design work that we're continuing to do with some of our pilot teams. And, of course, there is a lot that we are still wondering about. What are the system-level conditions for change? What does a truly "breakthrough" model look like? What kinds of teams are best suited to a program like the Collaborative and when is deep, customized partnership a better avenue?

What matters most, though, is not what we do with the Collaborative or what shifts we make to the program. The most important work ahead is happening right now in schools and across districts and networks as each design team processes its learnings and works within its own community to make school what our children need—and deserve—it to be. It is their work with thousands of children across the country that gives us inspiration and hope as we watch it unfold.

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www.newschools.org

A person with short brown hair, seen from the back, stands in front of a large wall covered in various papers, sticky notes, and handwritten notes. The wall appears to be a workspace or a research area. The person is wearing a dark jacket. The wall is covered with numerous papers, some of which are pinned or taped. There are also many handwritten notes in various colors (red, blue, green, black) and styles (cursive, print). Some notes are written on sticky notes, while others are written directly on the wall. The overall scene suggests a complex project or research process, with the person likely involved in organizing or analyzing the information on the wall.

PART 7: FOUR TEAMS' UNIQUE JOURNEYS

SPRING BRANCH INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT AND SPRING BRANCH MIDDLE SCHOOL—HOUSTON, TEXAS

The team entered the program with two charges: 1) to go through a robust design process to re-envision Spring Branch Middle School (SBMS) and 2) to solidify a philosophy and plan for how to do school redesign across the system in the coming years. Over the course of the program, they balanced these two altitudes consistently. They assembled a middle school design team of teachers, administrators, system leaders, and families who engaged in a [process](#) of listening, brainstorming, and piloting. That process of iteration reinvigorated educators who were part of it (one teacher reflected during a design team meeting, “this is reminding me why I originally joined the profession”) and led them to a new [dream canvas](#) for the middle school.

This school year, they will open the doors to a “[micro-school](#)” to pilot and refine this dream canvas with a group of about 50 students and their families. The pilot aims to build rigorous academic skills, strong habits, and deep connections to self, the school community, and the real world. A typical day will be one in which students continuously reflect on their personal leadership with a small group of peers, drive toward personalized learning goals, engage in rigorous project-based, interdisciplinary units, consistently bring their learning into the real world, and leverage technology to foster anytime/anywhere learning.

On the system front, this micro-school represents one of many new models the district hopes to nurture in the coming years. For the campuses that are eager to take on the work that SBMS has begun, they will be launching a Collaborative-like cohort to support them in building their own visions of what the future of education will look like for their students. Each of these efforts will work together toward the district’s recently announced 20/20/20 innovation goals for the 2017-18 school year with the aim of seeing 20 percent of schools develop a design canvas and change plan for 2018-19; 20 percent of teachers implementing personalized learning approaches; and 20 percent of students engaging in personalized learning. Innovation goals for the following school year are 50/50/50.

In reflecting on the year, members of the Spring Branch team shared that the biggest catalysts for their learning were the convenings—especially the school visits—and working with their coach. Said one participant, “Being pushed to see learning differently and to see schools and spaces I’d have otherwise never gone to has been amazing.” Another spoke about how much she valued hearing Lindsay Unified’s principal share personal student stories, seeing the Khan Lab, and listening to Jeff Duncan-Andrade’s powerful presentation



at Roses in Concrete. She said, “Everything wasn’t perfect at any school, but with each visit I’d think ‘What can we pull from that place?’” And, every one of the four team members spoke about their powerful work with their Transcend coach. Said one team member, “He’s pushed our thinking and helped us look at our work with a bigger lens and scope.” Another teammate agreed, saying “I don’t think we’d be where we are now without him.”

Looking ahead, the Spring Branch team is inspired to carry the innovations forward and see them grow across the community. Said one team member of this experience, “When I go to work every day, I think about the 35,000 kids in my district. Transcend is helping me do more for them. This has been a huge opportunity to do a lot of good.”

“We want to build a skyscraper, and the higher you go the better your foundation has to be. The work we did this year was about preparing the system to support schools. Too often we say, ‘You’re innovative, go!’ when the system isn’t actually ready for change—and so the innovation fails. We were scared that could happen. So we’re building in the infrastructure so that our district will be fluid, ebbing and flowing to meet schools’ needs.”

SPRING BRANCH COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPANT

WASHINGTON, D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND VAN NESS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL— WASHINGTON, D.C.

When Cynthia Robinson-Rivers became head of school at Van Ness Elementary School, she saw a huge opportunity for her students, families, and faculty. Being at a new school, she knew her community wasn’t yet “habit-driven.” She and her team would have the chance to get to know their students and to envision the kind of community that would best support them and their success. Coming from a background in early childhood education, she brought a focus on hands-on, learner-driven experiences and a deep awareness of the impact of social-emotional factors on students’ ability to engage and succeed in school. Her team developed a school-wide approach to behavior that emphasizes teaching students appropriate behaviors, giving them skills to gain composure when upset, and cultivating compassion amongst students and staff members.

Despite this, she could see that, though the school's approach was successful with most children, there was a small subset of students who had more intensive socio-emotional needs and required additional support. Her team began to build programming for a small number of children who were struggling the most. Despite the demands of leading a new school while trying to ensure that these students' needs were met, when she heard about the Transcend + NewSchools Collaborative from Aylon Samouha, she recognized what an opportunity it represented. She reached out to DCPS Chief of Human Resources, Jason Kamras, to get his support and involvement in the application process and program, and he joined the team.

Their team's learning began as soon as they received the pre-work for the first convening and read Todd Rose's "The End of Average." They'd been working hard to craft meaningful interventions for a targeted group of students, and this book made them realize that every child has deeply unique needs and what they were doing to personalize for some would be valuable to all of their students. If they put the physical and emotional needs of all their learners at the center of their school design process, they realized they'd have a better shot at building this new school well from the outset—not just for that small group of children, but for all children at Van Ness. They began to imagine ways to incorporate more movement into the day for all children, rather than only for those who visibly struggle to sit still in class, given the learning and productivity benefits that come from physical activity. Similarly, they thought about how to expand their work with students who have experienced trauma to help all students learn strategies to de-escalate conflict.



Throughout their experience in the Collaborative, the team deeply appreciated both the opportunity to visit innovative schools and models and the chance to work together through a guided design process with ample support via both coaching and funding. They found school visits to be inspiring and affirming—not always because they were seeing something new but sometimes because they were seeing the kinds of things they were already doing. Said one of their team members, “The school visits were what we looked forward to as they let us see what other schools are doing that is considered innovative. And, we often left feeling like ‘Hey, we are doing those things!’ The visits affirmed that we are on the right track, and that’s really helpful to see.”

“At its core the Collaborative helped our team figure out what our kids will need in a 21st century world. It gave us space and tools to think bigger and outside the box about our own biases and how we might reimagine school. It pushed us to think about inequity in a really tangible way and at the design level. And, it pushed us to take the time to revisit the voice of the stakeholders—the kids and families—and gather what they think is important. In fact the interviews have been so helpful we keep doing them over and over—they keep us grounded!”

DCPS COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPANT

The design process and customized coaching support were also critical. The team hadn’t had a way to gain student perspective, and the empathy interviews that then informed graduate aims and student journey planning enabled them to think differently and helped solidify their vision. In being pushed to articulate their core beliefs about learning, the team discovered that they were often using the same language but meaning different things. Said one team member, “Unpacking our own thinking, together, has prompted real light bulbs to come on.” The added benefit of having a dedicated coach enabled them to really see things differently. Through posing hard questions, their coach helped them think more innovatively about what they were learning and how they were building that into their design. And, having regular connections with a coach provided the added benefit of keeping them on track despite the demands and priorities they were balancing day to day.

At Van Ness Elementary next year, children will be engaging in new ways throughout the day, using makerspace materials for hands-on learning, enjoying movement breaks, and

having spaces where they can go to calm themselves independently. As Cynthia and her team continue to build the school, from the [dream canvas](#) they started in the Collaborative, they are doing so with the future in mind in ways they never had before. Said one member of the team, “Our experience in the Collaborative gave us such a strong WHY for doing all of this. Our school has a new sense of urgency as we think about evolutions in technology and all that is changing about what will be asked of our children.”

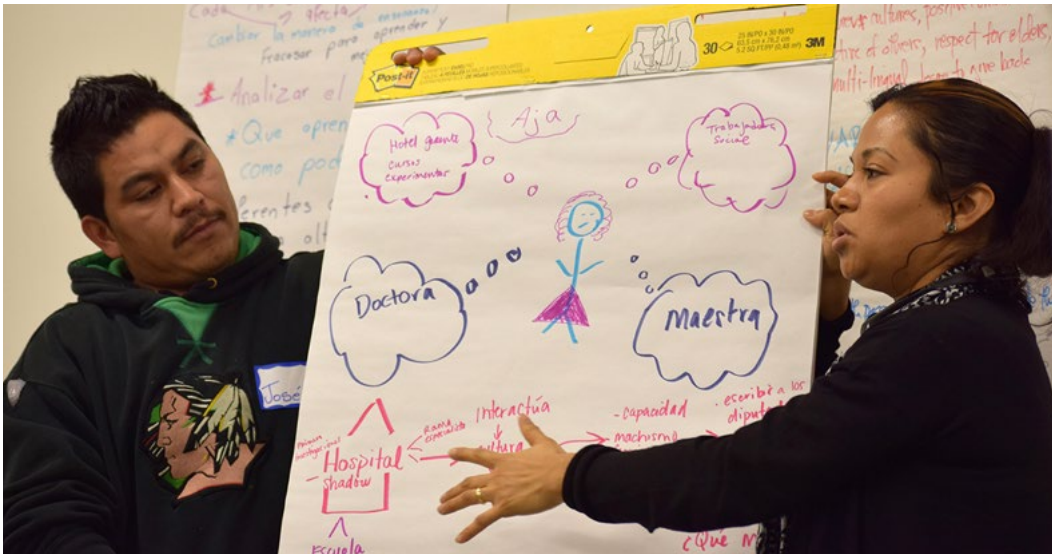
HIAWATHA ACADEMIES— MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

In Minneapolis-St. Paul, Eli Kramer, founder and Executive Director of Hiawatha Academies, was on the verge of opening a fifth school in the network. As a piece of the network’s [Reimagine Possible 2016—2020 strategic plan](#), he and his team were eager to start with a blank slate to envision a new way of teaching and learning that might help each student capitalize on his or her infinite potential. While he wanted to build on the success they’d seen across their schools to date, as a parent of school-aged children himself, he was eager to explore new ways to remove structures that might be limiting students in favor of designs that might unleash their boundless curiosity and motivation. When he learned about the Transcend + NewSchools Collaborative, he jumped at the opportunity to take advantage of the resources, expertise, and structured process it offered to support the significant innovation at the heart of his team’s vision.

“We know that we are not currently doing exactly what we think we should be doing in our schools. We have big dreams and ideas that would push us beyond what we’re doing. We’ve known those things for awhile, but we haven’t made sense of what to do about that. The opportunity to be part of this Collaborative let us step back and work with a blank slate as opposed to having dissonance and just staying there, unmoved.”

HIAWATHA ACADEMIES COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPANT

At the very first convening his team hit a turning point. They realized that real innovation would not spring forth from this small team of four people sitting with a white board and dreaming up a new school. Rather, change was going to happen best when students, parents,



teachers, and community members worked to reimagine school together. “We realized the burden was not uniquely ours—that we needed a process that would help answers emerge from a more robust, user-informed approach,” said Eli. This led them to form a larger design team, which was representative of the Hiawatha school community on a number of dimensions. The team met monthly—conducting rigorous empathy work with students and parents, engaging in design thinking methods to spark creative new ideas, and prototyping promising concepts along the way.

This set them on a course toward a new school design—but also set Hiawatha back months from where they initially thought they’d be. The team had to adjust course and account for the extra time it takes to engage in a more collectively-led process of school design. Hiawatha leveraged Transcend’s support throughout, taking advantage of every moment together at convenings, all the time they could get from their Transcend coach, and each local design team engagement. They utilized their grant to hire a designer, formerly with IDEO, who provided guidance and coaching to the team. This helped them move more quickly without sacrificing input and insight.

For the Hiawatha team, involvement in the Collaborative has been invaluable. They ended the program with a solid [dream canvas](#) for the new Middle School, which has continued to evolve around three core design anchors: student agency, rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum, and critically conscious action. In the new school model, students will engage in interdisciplinary labs that culminate with demonstrations of learning. And, they’ll continuously stoke and reflect on their interests and passions with the support of peers and adults. With this vision as a backbone, Hiawatha Academies is well on their way to welcoming students to a reimaged Hiawatha Academies Middle School in August 2018.

GESTALT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS— MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Gestalt Community Schools began in 2008 with the launch of Power Center Academy and has scaled to five schools since then. Its newest school, Nexus STEM Academy Middle School, opened in Fall of 2016 with its first class of sixth graders. The unique hope for this campus compared to Gestalt's other schools was to build students' critical thinking and problem solving skills through rigorous engagement in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. Having established a strong reputation for academic performance, Gestalt felt ready to invest in R&D and to take the risks inherent in developing a new model that might better prepare its students to meet the demands of a changing world.

Gestalt began some light-touch work with Transcend through a consultant who supported the team in the months leading up to the school's opening. Through that exposure and coaching, the team began to realize the intensity and focus that would be required to truly reimagine the school model and develop something that would be fundamentally more relevant, challenging, and supportive for students. The Collaborative felt like the perfect opportunity to take this work to the next level as the school adds a 7th and 8th grade in the years to come.

Throughout the 10 month Collaborative experience, Gestalt particularly valued visits to innovative schools including STEM contexts locally and nationally, the seed funding that allowed them to deepen their work with a consultant, and ongoing coaching support, which contributed to the team's learning throughout. Additionally, the team deeply valued the structure provided by the dream canvas and design process. "We don't know what we don't



know, and so we value the guiding questions, the templates, and having the dream canvas as a foundation for innovation,” said one member of the team.

The push to “just try it” created a real tipping point for Gestalt. So much of what they learned, said one team member, came from being encouraged to pilot new ideas, study them carefully, and iterate along the way as opposed to over-investing in lengthy planning processes without seeing their ideas play out with real students and teachers.

Tonya Randall, Nexus STEM Academy’s founding principal reflected on her experience in the Collaborative this way: “We talk about the difference between me as school leader at Nexus and other school leaders we work with. Others have the opportunity and autonomy to be innovative. But, I sit in a different place. I’ve got the autonomy and the go-ahead, but you’ve also equipped me. I’m not out here doing it by myself. I’ve got this group of people with a set time during the year in which I’m intentionally doing work and being supported.”

Moving forward, Gestalt Community Schools is on an ambitious path to reimagine its core school model. The team, alongside community members, has developed [an initial design](#) for Nexus STEM Academy, which will take a more expansive view of student success. It strives to develop critical and creative thinkers, lifelong, self-directed learners, community collaborators, and personal historians.

In the new school model, learning will happen inside and outside the classroom. Scholars will engage in rigorous, interdisciplinary learning arcs, focused on a challenge or issue present in their own community. And, family members and community partners will be present throughout a scholar’s educational experience. To realize this ambitious vision, Gestalt will staff a small team of “builders” to develop the curricular and school culture artifacts necessary to bring the model to life and will continue partnering with NewSchools and Transcend to build their R&D capacity to learn and innovate over the next 3-5 years.



THE COLLABORATIVE

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