



What made them SO PREPARED?



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RESEARCH FINDINGS | LESSONS & STORIES from a Year of Exploration with 70 Schools and Districts

Three Key Factors that Made Them So Prepared

What can we learn from public schools and districts whose learning models and cultures made them genuinely prepared for the challenges of COVID? The Prepared project found three key factors from among the 70 participating schools and districts that reported their organizational cultures, systems, and learning models served them well, or at least aided in their response.

Symmetric, Forward-Leaning Orientation

The operating norms in many of the participating schools and districts can be described as *adaptive agility*, at all levels—and for most of them, that includes students. This forward-leaning orientation has two key dimensions: 1.) Organizing school/district life around a 21st-century vision of student success: resilient, innovative, collaborative, self-initiating, problem-solving lifelong learners; and 2.) Tuning both the learning model and the adult/professional environment to that vision of success by enabling and distributing agency.

Healthy Culture

The strength of relationships, shared values, and mission-driven beliefs in the participating schools and districts helped them navigate the daily challenges and opportunities they faced during the early months of the COVID crisis. This includes how individuals “show up” in their interactions with each other. At many of the schools and districts, the culture extends out into the local community, far beyond school personnel and students.

Strong and Flexible Systems

The participating schools and districts that had strong yet flexible systems were used to adapting to change, at least to some degree, which helped them navigate the daily changes brought on by the pandemic. Their policies, structures, and conditions enabled them to shift and pivot as needed, and they relied on constant, clear communication and deep, broad, embedded use of technology.

A Different Narrative about Schools' Response to COVID

Imagine if every school truly prioritized values like resilience, agility, and strong relationships—and not just in words on posters but in core systems, cultures, and practices? What if these were hallmarks not just for the learners, but also for the leadership and staff as well as the governing board?

These attributes are what the hand-selected, next gen schools and districts we studied for this project say helped them meet the daunting challenges presented to them by the COVID pandemic. **They are modeling these attributes—as well as others that many of them hold up as aspirations for their graduates—for their students, families, and communities. They are demonstrating the importance of living their vision of success for students out loud.**

We surveyed 70 schools and districts identified by the project's nine partners, to collect information about their responses to COVID. Three core factors emerged:

Symmetric, forward-leaning orientation

Healthy culture

Strong and flexible systems

From listening to and learning from the 70 schools and districts participating in the project's research pool, we found that these factors surfaced over and over again. While distinct, each of these factors shows up in interconnected and mutually reinforcing ways. Although schools and districts of all kinds and with a wide range of learning models may assert that they have built healthy cultures and strong systems, the first dimension—the forward-leaning orientation of these schools and districts, with intentional symmetry between the adult and student environments—has been particularly crucial during these unsettling times.

Explore Each Key Factor

- [Symmetric, Forward-Leaning Orientation](#)
- [Healthy Culture](#)
- [Strong and Flexible Systems](#)

Use These Findings

- Visit [Why This Project](#) for guidance on matching the project's findings to your own goals.
- Then see [Use This NOW!](#) for accessible, bite-size strategies to apply within your school or district.

About the Project Schools and Districts

The nine Prepared project partners are organizations that are deeply immersed in work with educators who are developing different versions of whole-child, student-centered, personalized, deeper learning, tuned to [21st-century definitions of student success](#). This is what lead partner NGLC calls [next gen learning](#). Each organization hand-picked districts and schools from its own network to invite to participate in the Prepared project, based on what was known about those schools' and districts' depth of commitment and execution over multiple years—some as long as 15 to 20 years. The 70 participating schools and districts then self-reported the extent that their learning models reflect certain next gen learning characteristics, based on the [LEAP Learning Framework](#) developed by project partner LEAP Innovations. (For more on project methodology, go to [pages 21-23](#) of this report.)

The Prepared project findings are based on self-reported data, reflections, and narratives, but at least one of the nine project partners is familiar with the work and outcomes of each participant. *All* of the participants would say that COVID challenges have been extremely tough to navigate. This report, however, focuses on their degree of fluid inventiveness and systemic, distributed personal agency, which offer lessons well worth studying by schools and districts across the United States.

Project Partners



The Deeper Learning Dozen

Symmetric, Forward-Leaning Orientation

COVID presented every school in the world with challenges that required complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, effective people management, high degrees of collaboration, good judgment, and flexibility. These are exactly the “21st-century” skills we see named in many school and district visions of success for their graduates. The schools and districts we learned from in this project see that vision—in some cases explicitly, in others, less so—as a set of attributes to be pursued, developed, and practiced throughout their community. They have worked hard, some for more than a decade, to develop adult working cultures and systems that align with their aspirations for kids.

Over and over, the schools and districts we studied made reference to these attributes in describing their response. Where the norm for educators in many districts was “waiting for direction” (from the state, from the school board, from district headquarters, from the principal), the operating norms in most of the participating schools and districts prioritized what we might characterize as *adaptive agility*, at all levels—and for most of them, that includes students. We defined this forward-leaning orientation as having two key dimensions:

1 Organizing school/district life around a **21st-century vision of student success:** resilient, innovative, collaborative, self-initiating, problem-solving lifelong learners.

2 Tuning both the learning model and the adult/professional environment to that vision of success **by enabling and distributing agency.**

Organizing School/District Life around a 21st-Century Vision of Student Success

The visions of student success that many of these schools and districts were working toward before the pandemic were embodied in everything that they did and continued to do during the worst of the pandemic right through to today. This is their “throughline”—the way to organize every aspect of school and district life around a central set of aspirations that everyone can understand and support.

Some of the *Prepared* project participants described quite explicit uses of their graduate profile to guide their response. Faced with having to redesign the district’s assessment and grading policies, Pat Deklotz, then superintendent of Kettle Moraine School District (KMSD) in Wisconsin, told us,

“We went back to the graduate profile, thinking about all of the kinds of evidence of learning that could indicate how students are developing the attributes in the profile. The process ended up being a good test of our ability to lean into the graduate profile and use it the way we intended. As an example: one teacher told a story of a KMSD high school student, living with his grandparents and working in the healthcare industry, who moved into the garage of their home to protect them. That goes straight to the attributes in our profile of self-direction and creative problem-solving. We include that in what we’re calling ‘the preponderance of evidence’ of student growth.”

CONTINUOUS LEARNER

- Takes ownership of learning, continuously pursuing and demonstrating knowledge and skills throughout life
- Understands how to apply learning to new situations and challenges
- Explores areas of interest for academic, career and personal success

COMMUNICATOR

- Communicates effectively in multiple ways - verbal, written, electronic and visual
- Shows purpose and thoughtfulness in communication
- Remains open to communicating with a variety of people, familiar and unfamiliar

COLLABORATOR

- Actively listens, empathizes and contributes thoughtful, meaningful ideas that support common goals
- Understands the importance of roles and responsibilities within a collaborative process/organization, and has the ability to lead formally and informally while collaborating
- Is flexible, open minded, confident and adaptable when working with and receiving feedback from others

CREATIVE & CRITICAL THINKER

- Reflects on past learning and experiences when faced with new situations and challenges
- Questions, reasons and weighs evidence to reach conclusions
- Innovates to solve problems

ENGAGED CITIZEN

- Demonstrates integrity and leadership through positively influencing outcomes
- Acknowledges, understands, interacts with and respects diverse individuals, perspectives and cultures
- Applies individual talents to serve others in the local and global community
- Understands how to make ethical, moral and financially responsible decisions

SELF-DIRECTED & RESILIENT INDIVIDUAL

- Maintains a positive work ethic and strives for self-improvement
- Understands how to manage time and priorities
- Sets short- and long-term goals for success
- Overcomes adversity through persistence, perseverance, self-advocacy and a growth mindset
- Reflects on one’s decisions and actions, remaining flexible and open to new ideas

Kettle Moraine School District uses its graduate profile as a touchstone to make virtually all critical decisions, including in crisis, and as a set of aspirations for the traits students and adults alike strive to bring to their work in the schools.

Credit: Kettle Moraine School District

Another project participant, Sunnyside Unified in Arizona, also explicitly walks its own graduate profile talk, as described by Pam Betten, the district’s chief academic officer, during the 2021 Assessment for Learning Conference held virtually in May:

“Identity, purpose, and agency—these are all from our district’s graduate profile. These attributes are more than just a poster, they are how we *live*. From the district to principals to teachers to the kids—it is all a constant, at every level.”

Tuning the Learning Model and the Adult/Professional Environment to that Vision of Success

Arcadia Unified School District, a 10,000 student district northeast of Los Angeles, places its values—for students and adults alike—on a 20-foot-high wall facing the district headquarters’ front door. *Collaborate. Think Critically. Be Creative. Offer Empathy. Learn from Failure.* Said Greg Gazanian, the district’s chief strategy and innovation officer,



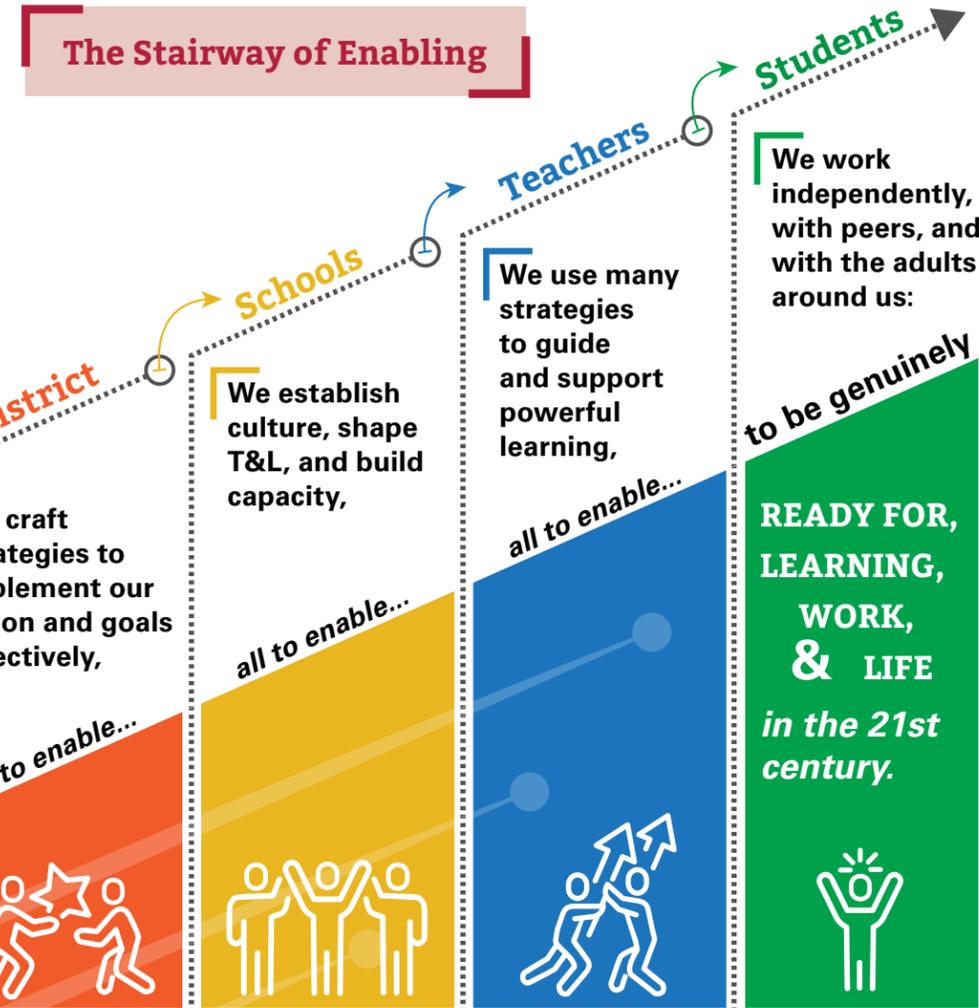
“These values are there for a reason. They are reminders of who we are and how we have all agreed to work. That turns out to be pretty important, when tempers are high. This past year, our board has pointed to those values and it has helped us avoid some of the angry scenes playing out in many communities across the country.”

One way that districts make this symmetry work is by striving to set certain mindsets and practices at each level—governance, management, school leadership, teachers, students—that define its key roles. We call this a *a stairway of enabling* that characterizes the relationship of every level in a school/district hierarchy to the one above and below it. Adults at each level define their jobs as enabling the people they are responsible for (at the next level) to do their best work. That carries all the way to the learning-centered relationship that teachers, or learning facilitators as they are called in some of these places, have with students. In this way, *the learning model is the organizational model.*

In some ways, this is a deeper and more broadly embedded version of what’s widely referred to as “distributed leadership.” As one CMO leader told us (separately from this project), the ultimate goal is to have *everyone*—at every level in the “cascade”—feeling confident that *they* are the owners of the most important work going on in the whole enterprise. The teachers see it as a primary goal to enable the students to feel that way; the principals view their role as enabling the teachers to feel that way; and onward, up the cascade.



Photo courtesy of Da Vinci Schools



The Stairway of Enabling in Practice

In a genuinely human-centered school district or CMO, the learning model—defined as enabling learners to undertake, explore, and manage the best work they can possibly do—is also the organizational model. Every level defines its job as empowering and enabling those at the next level to do the best work they can possibly do.

Credit: NGLC Graphic

Vista Unified School District, California

In three weeks in March 2020, the district enlisted principals to establish a community-wide [Vista Virtual School](#) that reimagined their entire learning model and service delivery systems. “Almost every principal in the district,” said Nicole Allard, the executive director of innovation and educational excellence, “led a district-wide project as part of this effort. It has been all about giving people at all levels permission to try things out. That’s the only way we could have gotten something like this done.”

Shelby County Public Schools, Kentucky

The district launched “Shelby Speaks,” a reimagining of professional learning that empowered any teacher in the district to post [short videos](#) of successful strategies in remote project-based learning. The vlog-platform was a hit with teachers eager to learn how to make project-based learning work remotely. Not coincidentally, this whole approach is a reflection of the district’s [graduate profile](#).

For many of the educators we surveyed and interviewed over the course of this study, the point they wanted to emphasize the most, within this overall category, was the readiness of many of their students to respond with poise and agility. They reported that their students already had experience in classroom environments that asked them to take ownership and responsibility for their learning. That experience helped them adjust, amid so much trauma, stress, and isolation, to the increase in ownership and responsibility that remote learning—and all of the subsequent hybrid variants—demanded.

This was as true for elementary-age kids as it was for high schoolers. Washington Learning Community, to name one example, is an elementary environment within Lindsay Unified School District in California. Washington's young learners took the transition to remote learning in stride, as described in an [article](#) by project partner Education Reimagined:

“Lindsay USD has a well-documented story about [their community Wi-Fi project](#) and ‘1 to World’ technology initiative that aims to offer every Lindsay learner and family access to free internet and personal technology devices. When the pandemic forced schooling to happen from home, ‘Some learners felt like, “What’s the big deal? Let’s just move it along. Why are we having to wait even a day? I’m ready to go,” noted Cinnamon Scheufele, Washington’s former principal (up until July 2021) and now Lindsay USD’s executive director of curriculum and instruction. ‘That is the beauty of our system. Because we’ve been on our transformational journey since 2007, many of the things other districts are battling with during the pandemic aren’t the things we struggled with.’”



**MORE STORIES OF
WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
IN ACTION**

[This Epiphany Changed These Schools and Districts and the Lives of the Families They Serve. It Could Do the Same for You](#) by Emily Liebttag, Education Reimagined, and Andy Calkins, NGLC. Is your school or district truly living your graduate profile? Among students and adults? If not: shouldn't it? The stories of these schools' response to COVID vividly demonstrate why.



**STUDENT-CENTERED
LEARNING MODEL**

**was a critical factor in their
response**

Leaning into Their Visions of Student Success

“The school’s unique, student-centered model, which promotes independent learning skills, has been beneficial to our community when the pandemic required that we shift to remote learning. Students had a foundation of self-advocacy and were able to navigate a remote learning environment with fewer issues than most schools.”

—Katie Speth, Principal,
Disney II Magnet School, Chicago Public Schools

This is a recurring theme of the Prepared project’s findings: in different ways, participating schools and districts reported that they were leaning into attributes that could be found in their reimagined visions of student success. While many schools and districts might rhetorically claim that their entire organizations work in ways that reflect their graduate profiles, their rhetoric might not meet with much agreement among the staff members actually doing the work. Based on our review of the project’s findings and the partners’ understanding of the state of K-12 education in the U.S., we estimate that the participating schools and districts are among the leading 10 percent of schools and districts that have significantly shifted their learning model to align with a next gen vision of student success.

Taken together, this selection of student success visions from Prepared project schools and districts provides a rich array of how student success can be reimagined to better serve students and enable them to develop the skills and competencies they need to thrive in learning, work, and life. They also provide hallmarks of school and district life, defining how they should operate and how the adults in them should be conducting their work.

- Kettle Moraine School District (WI): [Learning Without Boundaries](#)
- One Stone (ID): [Growth Transcript](#)
- Springhouse Community School (VA): [Vitality-Centered Education](#)
- Burlington High School (VT): [Expectations for Learning](#)
- Vista Unified School District (CA): [Building a Performance Framework and VIDA Arc of Learning](#)
- SAU 24 (NH): [Portrait of a Learner](#)
- International High School at Langley Park (MD): [Our Phoenix Skills](#)
- Henry County Schools (GA): [Priority Student Outcomes](#)
- 360 High School (RI): [Profile of a Graduate](#)
- Abbotsford School District (British Columbia): [BC Core competencies](#)
- Latitude High School (CA): [Graduate Profile](#)
- Cajon Valley Union School District (CA): [World of Work Framework](#)
- Forest School (GA): [Our Approach](#)
- e³ Civic High School (CA): [e3 Academics](#)
- Shelby County Public Schools (KY): [Profile of a Graduate](#)
- Lindsay Unified School District (CA): [Strategic Vision](#)
- Two Rivers Public Charter School (DC): [Dimensions of Student Achievement](#)
- Sunnyside Unified School District (AZ): [Profile of a Graduate](#)

Healthy Culture

Every single school and district participating in the study pointed to healthy culture as instrumental in pivoting effectively during the pandemic. That a healthy working culture, shaped by the strength of shared values and beliefs and how school and district personnel show up and interact among the learning community, is a key factor in responding to any kind of emergency makes sense. These schools and districts prioritized culture-building, pre-pandemic, and they benefited from that commitment and hard work when the crisis unfurled.

As Michael Rubin of Uxbridge High School, a district school in Massachusetts, put it,

“The school deliberately constructs an adult learning culture to parallel its student learning culture—and extends that adult learning culture to include parents and caregivers as key learning resources. I think things would have gone badly pretty fast without a trusting and collaborative adult culture. But with that culture in place, Uxbridge demonstrated greater resilience and adaptability in a high pressure situation.”

We heard from many project participants about two dimensions of culture in particular:

1 Priority on **strong relationships**

2 **Mission-driven** spirit and habit of **agility and adaptation**

Priority on Strong Relationships

Most schools and districts would probably describe themselves as “building strong relationships.” And yet, it’s hard to find evidence of that priority in typical education budgets, schedules, staff allocations, or accountability requirements. Strong relationships may be a crucial part of most schools’ aspirations, but explicit support for developing and strengthening them rarely shows up in the ways they state their goals and prioritize time, money, facilities, and people.

Most of the Prepared project participants, however, could point beyond rhetoric to steps they had taken to structurally and systematically support strong relationships among staff and students. Those steps showed up in the ways these schools and districts prioritized time (e.g., deep commitments to student advisory programs); money (e.g., investments in various forms of all-school events and interest-based



STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

as a component of **healthy culture** was a critical factor in their response

activities); and people (e.g., encouraging and recognizing staff for fostering strong relationships with students and with each other). Educators told us in no uncertain terms that the relationships they had prior to COVID have been crucial to their ability to respond effectively.

For example, the relationships that exist between the adults and the teens at Springhouse Community School in rural Virginia is one of deep trust and appreciation. This trust extends so far that teachers and learners co-create and co-teach courses. The existing priority on co-generation and deep relationships allowed for productive, sometimes vulnerable conversations about what was needed during COVID. Like many project participants, Latitude High School in Oakland, California, leaned more deeply into its student advisory program to reinforce strong relationships. For example, the school collaborated with outside partners to create [a bank of culturally-relevant SEL topics](#) and lessons that teachers then used in advisory sessions.

Caitlyn Scales, director of strategy and development (until summer 2021) for One Stone, a high school in Idaho, declared that their school’s swift and sure pandemic response was almost entirely due to two school-wide priorities:

“Culture and relationships. By far. If we did not have that in place and students didn’t feel empowered and trusted prior to the pandemic, we would have had less success in the pivot. Families, students, and staff have all said many times that our strength and focus on community and social-emotional support is what helped us pivot quickly and successfully.”

As Jeremy Walden of Mission Vista High School in Vista Unified School District put it:

“Culture amongst the staff was crucial for persevering through so many changes and plans over the last 13 months. As a leader, I invested heavily in taking care of staff needs so they could in turn take care of student needs. Students who felt connected to an adult on campus did well in the distance learning environment.”

Mission-Driven Spirit and Habit of Agility and Adaptation

Every day since the pandemic started, it seems as though there has been a new challenge for educators to respond to. Disruption and change have been omnipresent. Frequent policy changes at the community, state, and federal levels have caused uncertainty across all aspects of the system. Learners’ and families’ needs have fluctuated seemingly by the hour. Educators have faced it *all* during the pandemic.

The Prepared project participants kept pointing out that change, flexibility, and fluidity were cultural traits they embraced before the pandemic—they were nothing new (though not in this extreme form). In their interviews, participants *prided* themselves in their adaptiveness, both within their learning model and in the ways the adult staff viewed their roles. While COVID presented an immediate need for unprecedented, and unimaginable, changes, most of the participating schools found that their staff were equipped with the mindset and skills to pivot when needed.

Da Vinci Schools, a charter network in California, named adaptivity and autonomy as crucial in their response. DaVinci Institute director Megan Martin said:

The most important factors for Da Vinci were our flexible and adaptable learning model(s) and the healthiness of our organization. We have a high degree of trust in one another and believe in a ‘people first’ approach.

They were prepared to handle the relentless emergencies because their culture and their learning model are designed to be adaptive, and enabling, and to prioritize inventiveness and agency over passivity and compliance.

For some participants in the study, the pandemic was a crucible that tested, and ultimately reinforced, mindsets that school leaders had been working with their staff to build. Jennifer Charlot reflected about RevX (Revolutionary Experiences), a provider that works with schools in the Bronx, New York, and elsewhere:

Educator mindsets are fundamental to liberatory learning environments like RevX. Our educators recognize that shifting to a self-directed, learner-centered model is a process that requires an open and patient mindset, not only with learners but with themselves as well. They embrace that they don’t have to know everything and are learning alongside their young people. This orientation continues to help them to release fear and be more agile.

MORE STORIES OF WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

IN ACTION

[Adult Learning Culture: An Underrated Ingredient for Success in Uncertain Times](#) by Chelsea Waite, Christensen Institute, and Beth Rabbitt, The Learning Accelerator. Three next gen schools demonstrate why it’s so important to invest in adults to build a learning culture that’s strong enough to weather any storm.

[How Two Schools Went Remote but Stayed Connected](#) by Elina Alayeva, Springpoint. Systems and practices that prioritized relationship-building with students and staff helped these schools stay on-mission and keep students healthy, engaged, and learning during the pandemic.

[Three Schools that Found the COVID-19 Pandemic to Be “Business as Usual”](#) by Alin Bennett, Lindsay Ogawa, and Paul Haluszczak, Education Reimagined. During the pandemic, three learner-centered environments have doubled down on what they were already up to: providing learner-centered experiences focused on relationships and the conditions for each child to thrive.



CREATIVE ADAPTABILITY

as a component of **healthy culture** was a critical factor in their response

Caring for Staff

Pasadena, TX

Over and over, Prepared project participants mentioned the deep priority they placed on caring for the adults in their organization during this time of crisis. This was nothing new for them; many had long-established cultures and practices that prioritized staff wellness. Their strategies simply took on new urgency and new forms during the pandemic. Here’s one story from Diane Phelan, the principal of San Jacinto Intermediate School in Pasadena, Texas.

Staff had opportunities to come to school to grab “drive-through meals” several times at the beginning of the pandemic. They also immediately had access to supplies to create home offices. The school was open when teachers needed to “get away” and work alone in their room. Free counseling was offered for all staff members that were needing mental health help.

In our district, many resources were offered to maintain the well-being of our teachers. Counselors presented to staff about this information, sent emails, and, when needed, met one-on-one with teachers to find the best resource for a teacher’s individual needs. Counselors and administrators also presented ideas for self-care to the staff and gave staff the opportunity to practice and have fun with these different ideas. Staff have access to the

“Oasis,” a safe place they can retreat to when they feel the need to step out of class at any time. The room is quiet, dimly lit, and equipped with things a teacher may need such as medical and personal supplies.

Staff appreciation has been a theme for the year. Staff have been fed many times throughout the year. Random drink and ice cream deliveries were made at times the stress levels seemed high. Cookouts on the patio were a way to connect and have lunch in a safe way throughout this year. Time to reflect and connect has happened at various staff meetings. Making connections with each other was a priority at the beginning of the year. Guest speakers were brought in to specifically address “self care” for all staff. The campus created an outdoor space for all stakeholders to enjoy when we need some fresh air and time

away from the classroom. Teachers take time to walk outside and participate in “rainbow walks” to de-stress or meditate as needed. Breathing and calming practices are part of our daily announcements for staff and students.

The entire campus also practices “wishing well” each day. This moment of silence is spent wishing well for people at school, home, or in the community. This is a uniting time for our campus to be reflective and offer empathy to others. Staff had several opportunities to participate in surveys or “chats” with the principal to let us know what was needed. Giving them voice and choices helped to facilitate needs on the campus. We believe practices like this help us to work together for the greater good of our community and help our overall wellness.

Strong and Flexible Systems

You don't build a beautiful and innovative culture on a weak foundation. We've been on the journey to become future-ready for 14 years now.

—Jackie Kapushion, deputy superintendent in St. Vrain Valley Schools, a regional district serving six Colorado towns and 32,000 students

For St. Vrain Valley Schools and superintendent Don Haddad, that has meant building strong systems, a strong culture, and a [whole new narrative and relationship](#) between the communities and their public schools.

Their experience reflects the third prominent takeaway from our study of the 70 participating Prepared project schools and districts. Willingness to be agile, prioritizing relationships and culture, and a forward-leaning learning orientation and vision of student success may have all played important roles in their response to COVID, but without well-designed, high-functioning, flexible, and broadly understood systems in place, effectiveness of response would have been significantly undercut. The suddenness and severity of the COVID crisis—and the challenges that persist—have exposed and exacerbated the system fault-lines in every sector in the U.S., and public education was no exception.

Kapushion and Haddad describe St. Vrain as a true “school system,” rather than a “system of schools.” It is the strengths of the common systems that enable the district’s 60 schools to develop strong, individual cultures and identities. As Kapushion noted in our interview:

If I had to point to one thing that helped us be poised in this crisis, it's longevity—both in our superintendent and our vision. The whole team has bought into that forward-thinking orientation. The district has a lot of credibility in our community, and there's a deep, wide belief here in the importance of strong public schools. Because we know our own systems inside and out, we could sit down and say: here's what current systems can do, and here's what we need to have happen, and here's how we can fill that gap.



LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

was a critical factor in their response

Strong and Flexible Systems in Practice

What do “strong and flexible systems” look like in practice? Let’s take St. Vrain as an example. Kapushion points to the following indicators, among others, of the district’s ability to leverage its foundational strengths in a moment of crisis:

Communications
The district’s deep commitment across many layers of community outreach for more than a decade really paid off when COVID hit and has continued ever since.

Technology
A long-term commitment and robust IT infrastructure and support capacity, such as learning tech coaches available to every school and classroom, along with widespread tech familiarity among staff and students, especially in grades 6-12, made switching to remote and hybrid learning relatively seamless.

Finance
The district’s carefully-developed reserves and strong financial basis meant it could immediately hire 40 new teachers and purchase 3,000 iPads when the need arose.

Curriculum & Instruction
For years, central office provided extensive curricular and instructional support to school-based staff, including project-based learning and design thinking—which became even more deeply sought-after hallmarks of high-quality teaching and learning in their remote and hybrid learning models.

Infrastructure
“We instantly became,” Kapushion says, “the food bank for the entire community.” St. Vrain served a half-million meals in the pandemic’s first three months—many times its normal output. Providing food was crucial to the district’s efforts to stay connected with the valley’s most vulnerable families.

Fluid Operations
Across all departments, the district has developed a strong, collaborative expertise in planning, executing, reviewing, and refining operations and instructional practice. The board, district leadership, and school staff have leaned on that expertise throughout the pandemic. Staff were frequently reallocated to take on different roles as new roles suddenly became necessary. According to Kapushion, this all took place without pushback or controversy. She says it’s all fueled by the district’s “unwavering focus on the importance of public education” and the vital, positive impact schools have on the community’s students and its collective future.

St. Vrain Valley Schools, Colorado

St. Vrain emphasized their priorities on strong and flexible systems more than most project participants. But we observed common elements across all of the Prepared project's surveys and interviews. A number of participants also said that they have used the pandemic to re-examine and re-invent some systems that proved out of date, and had long seemed that way. Quoting from an [article](#) by Prepared project partner, Deeper Learning Dozen:

In another district, a longstanding state policy that mandated that students missing a certain number of classes get automatic failure grades was quietly discarded, a move the district had wanted to make for several years as a part of shifting to a mastery grading system. In fact, several districts that had been on the cusp of redesigning their grading systems to be more fair and equitable, and to focus more on students actively demonstrating their learning, used the opportunity that the COVID crisis created as a 'blameless disruption' to enable them to move forward with their redesign. We also personally witnessed numerous students stepping up to take initiative in helping their teachers figure out the technologies that supported virtual and distance learning, as well as helping co-design lessons and engaging activities for their peers, using those technologies. As one teacher put it, 'Kids are always capable of so much more than we think they are.'

In our analysis of the responses provided by the 70 school and district participants, we identified two kinds of systems as especially crucial during COVID:

1 Constant, clear communication

2 Deep, broad, embedded use of technology

Constant, Clear Communication

Typically relying on communication that was more routine (such as weekly newsletters) and dependent on some degree of in-person sharing of documents, many schools and districts had never needed crisis communication plans in the way that COVID demanded. Close to 70 percent of our survey respondents strongly agreed that constant, effective communication was a critical factor in their response to COVID. Many of these schools and districts worked to provide constant, clear communication using strategies developed in the moment—especially online strategies including social media, Zoom forums, text messaging, email, podcasts, blog posts, and significantly reimagined use of school and district websites.



AGILE, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

was a critical factor in their response

Utilizing online tools more than ever before, these educators made sure to stay connected and to broadly share whatever it was they were learning, even when it wasn't good news. Entire districts worked to figure out both site-based responses as well as district-wide updates.

Vista (CA) Unified School District, known for using design thinking in the area of teaching and learning, applied this practice to rethink its communications along with many other systems during COVID. Through design thinking, the district developed a new approach to inform its community of district services and options, and it found a way to maintain its longstanding practice of constant *listening* to its community. Nicole Allard, executive director of educational excellence and innovation, said that in the end,

more than 18,000 voices informed our work and helped us provide continuous community updates.

Deep, Broad, Embedded Use of Technology

One pervasive narrative about education that has emerged from the pandemic—partly fueled by technology companies—is the vital importance of strong district-wide IT infrastructure, one-to-one access to devices, and comfort in using technology. The tech companies aren't necessarily wrong, but they may be over-emphasizing the importance of hardware and software investment. In a more nuanced narrative, the Prepared project participants generally pointed to technology's "to-what-end?" dimension. Participants frequently pointed to a history of prioritizing technology use as a factor in their preparedness to meet pandemic challenges. But they couched their observations about tech use in the context of an overall forward-leaning vision of learning and student achievement. Most Prepared project participants are heavy tech-users, for sure, but for them, technology is a means and not an end.

For example, the Envision Education charter network in California's Bay Area designed its tech-enabled remote learning model around the findings of a curriculum and instruction team composed of teachers and students (described in [a short Youtube video](#)). After listening carefully to Envision students and teachers, the team designed a remote learning model that emphasized depth over breadth. They cut the number of classes taken at one time down to 3 from the usual 5-6, and they added more options for varied engagement by students working from home.



Photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages, CC BY-NC-4.0.

At 45,000-student Henry County Schools (HCS) in metro Atlanta, Georgia, director of innovative design Carrie Edwards noted that widespread tech use to support learning over many years made the district's transition to varied forms of distance learning readily achievable.

“Our 1:1 technology was essential in our success and ability to continue to remain connected to students and families. In addition, we were able to supply a large number of hotspot devices to ensure that our students had access to Wi-Fi. The resource acquisition that we recently went through in the district provided an even playing field for all of our teachers and students. In the fall of 2020, our district leadership, with a week’s notice, designed and executed a HCS professional development conference with over 300 optional sessions for teachers to support hybrid/remote instruction. The ability to continue to support our teachers through the Google Meet and Zoom platforms was essential. Lastly, the willingness of the organization to become ‘upstream’ leaders, considering all of the obstacles or needs of our families in a proactive approach helped us to remain supportive instead of reactionary.”



MORE STORIES OF
WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

IN ACTION

[Clear Values, Compassionate Leadership, and a Can-Do Attitude](#) by John Watkins and Kim Frumin, Deeper Learning Dozen. These districts faced the complex challenges of the pandemic with a human-centered approach that allowed their response to be nimble and agile.

[Prepare for What Comes Next: 3 Essential Factors of a School’s Successful COVID Response](#) by Elina Alayeva, Springpoint. Distributive leadership, a collaborative culture, and student voice can keep students engaged and learning, even in the most challenging of times.



**DEEP TECH CAPACITY
AND BUILD-OUT**

was a critical factor in their
response

Envision Education in California’s Bay Area reimagined its learning model for online and hybrid learning with an equity lens that centered the needs of the people in their community who were most impacted, especially students with diverse needs. They used an inclusive process with stakeholders, as related in this story by Sarah Chostner, then-Chief People Officer at Envision Education.

It would have been easy as we were designing distance and hybrid in-person learning for 2020-21, to rotate all students through in-person instruction, giving all of them the same amount of reduced time on campus. Instead, we are seizing this opportunity to center our most marginalized students, dramatically increase teacher capacity, and advance student well-being and academic achievement. The critical questions before us were how to achieve those important goals and what shifts would we need to make to succeed?

To begin to answer those questions, we reflected on our spring distance learning, and in that process, one priority rose to the top: centering the voices of those most impacted. Led by chief academic officer Javier Cabra Walteros, we created an inclusive process for re-designing our model with our stakeholders. Javier assembled a Teacher Committee of both general and special education educators and a Student Committee of students from our five schools and students with diverse needs. Principals also engaged parents weekly to learn more about what families need. All stakeholders shared what was successful about distance learning, what didn’t work, what both teachers and students need more of, and what they want their schools to look like going forward. Those conversations contributed to a truly community-focused fall 2020 plan that we are very proud of. Here are some of the key shifts that emerged from this redesign work and that we launched this fall for all of our schools:

- **From seat time to competency instruction**
Manifested in a focus on the most critical competencies and students demonstrating progress on those competencies
- **From equality (everyone getting the same thing) to equity (everyone getting the support they need)**
Manifested in a tiered support model as described below:
 - Tier 1 Supports:** Teaching and supports that all students receive as a baseline. All students will have approximately four hours of instruction per day, either through synchronous or asynchronous instruction.
 - Tier 2 Supports:** Teaching and supports that students can opt into, if they want or need more support. For instance: Virtual Office Hours for science class, Peer Study Group for Ethnic Studies class, an Exercise Plan, etc.
 - Tier 3 Supports:** Teaching and supports given to a student as an option and/or when there is agreement between student/family and teacher that it be required. For instance: Small group instruction for 3-6 students with a focus on challenging content.
- **From breadth to depth**
Manifested in students taking 3 courses at a time, instead of 5-6, in 16-day rotations.

Reimagining a Student-Centered Learning Model (continued)

From a focus solely on academics to a focus on wellness and community
Manifested in restorative pedagogy as an instructional priority. Now more than ever, teachers must create the relationships and community that will care for students, where the foundation for healing and recovery can and must be set. Teachers and advisors must regularly check in with students and invite them to share their successes, struggles, and needs.

Without minimizing how difficult the year has been for teachers and students alike, we are also gratified to have started this highly unusual year successfully, with high attendance rates, engaged students, and dedicated teachers who continue to find innovative ways to teach in distance learning. We have been staying in close and constant touch with families, so we can hear from them how things are going, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Here's what we heard from across our five school sites:

I have never had the experience at a school where we felt SO WELCOMED

You have no idea how **THOUGHTFUL & BENEFICIAL** your extensive planning of remote learning is for our kids

School is the **ONE THING** I haven't had to worry about

My student feels like **teachers CARE AND ARE RESPONSIVE**

You've been doing a great job; your **HARD WORK** is showing

We asked Kilday Momanyi, one of the students who participated in the Student Committee over the summer, to report back to us about how the school year has been for her; [watch her response](#).

Read Envision's [Distance Learning Guidelines](#), which were updated in the summer of 2021.

Project Methodology / Why These Schools & Districts Warrant Our Attention

The origins of this project lie in a loose network of like-minded ed reform organizations that began meeting, at NGLC's instigation, shortly after the COVID pandemic hit in March 2020. The "All in This Together" coalition drew leaders and staff from roughly 20 organizations, each one focused (in different ways) on advancing student-centered learning shaped by the science of learning and development and staked to 21st-century definitions of student success. Every other Friday from April into the early winter of 2020-21, these reformers would meet virtually at the end of the day to consider how we could all be constructively helpful during this period of intense challenge for families, communities, and their public schools.

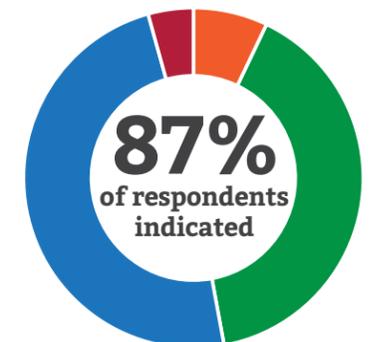
Among the projects that emerged from these discussions were a virtual film festival about the intersection of race, youth development, and school design ([This Is Our Chance!](#)), a special track in the Remote K12 Summit organized by Arizona State University and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the What Made Them So Prepared? Project, the focus of this research summary.

In our Friday bi-weekly "beer-storms," one emerging thread of discussion was the innovative responses to COVID's challenges that many of us were hearing about, anecdotally, from next gen schools and districts in our various networks. For many of these forward-leaning educators, COVID seemed to represent a test of exactly the kind of resilient, distributed problem-solving that lay at the core of their learning model and their organizational model. Out of those discussions, the nine organizations listed on page 3 of this report signed up to co-produce the Prepared project. In the fall of 2020, the Leon Lowenstein Foundation agreed to fund the project with a \$250,000 grant. The Lowenstein Foundation has for several years been a leading voice and catalyst for building the research base on student-centered, personalized learning.

From the outset, the nine partners in the project agreed that we would need to be mindful about what the Prepared project can explore (and, potentially, claim through our research), and what clearly falls beyond its scope. This is not an explicitly comparative research project; we are not claiming, based on specific comparative metrics, that the schools and districts we studied all produced measurably better outcomes during their first year of pandemic response (through spring, 2021). The scope and budget for the project did not support that kind of research, and as important, the data we would be seeking to compare don't really exist in measurable, comparative formats.

For example: one of the key indicators of success during the pandemic was student engagement in learning. But as many Prepared project participants told us, their definition of student engagement is

Redefining Student Success



A whole-child definition of success, with competencies tuned to 21st century needs, is "mature and going strong" or is "taking root"

different from the metrics being gathered by the [large national research projects](#) that we might have turned to for comparative data. One participant told us:

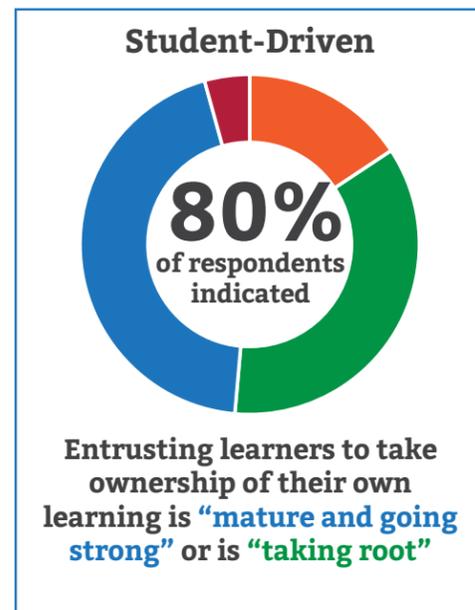
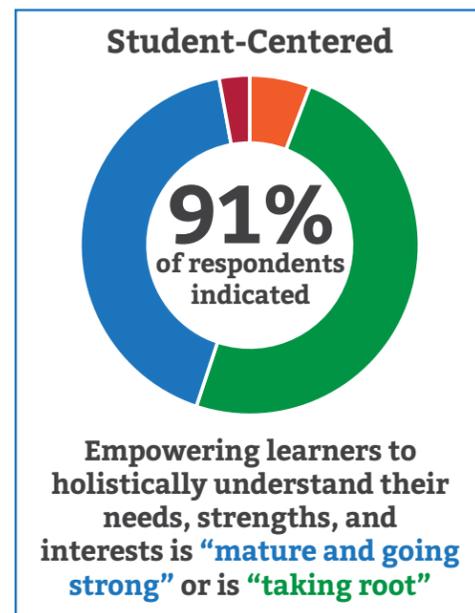
“Daily attendance and minutes logged-in to remote classes and district learning platforms tell you something but not really the most important information. To get that, we needed to carefully track the quality of student engagement by monitoring student work submission, actual participation in our remote classes, and the ways students were working together remotely.”

Midway through the project’s year-long duration, the partners also made another judgment call that has shaped what we now present to the field. We did not want to release a report that sweepingly damns the responses of public schools and districts across the country to an utterly unprecedented crisis, and holds up a club of “cool kids” that, for various reasons, responded with greater agility. Our informed though informal observation is that every school and school district across the U.S. has produced its own stories of creative, adaptive resilience and innovative problem-solving during this period, and that—as trying as remote education and masked-up teaching and learning have been for everyone involved—the sheer scale and intensity of practice redesign that has taken place in U.S. public schools since March 2020 should make all of us rethink what’s possible in education reform.

The question is: how can the field most productively build on what we just learned was in fact possible?

Policies, practices, regulations, structures, and deeply embedded mindsets: *all of these can change*. Public education just proved it. The question is: how can the field most productively build on what we just learned was in fact possible? The Prepared project provides some clues and some real-world stories that can help point the way.

What *do* we know about the 70 schools and districts that participated in this research? We know that, despite being extraordinarily tough on themselves in general, they report having committed very deeply to the approaches that characterize deeper, student-centered, whole-child



learning, staked to high expectations of readiness for life in a challenging century. In the survey that each of the 70 responders completed, they defined that level of commitment and attainment on five different attributes of student-centered, next gen learning, as shown in the pie charts presented in this section of the report. (The latter four reflect the four dimensions of the framework created by LEAP Innovations, a partner in the project.)

All of the project participants would readily acknowledge that they are still working, every day, on improving their model and their outcomes for students. But the charts demonstrate that this group of schools and districts—a mixture of urban, rural, and suburban communities, of differing income and demographic types, as well as a blend of whole districts, individual charter schools or whole CMOs, and a couple of independent schools—are living a different life than what most parents, kids, and educators experience in their public schools pursuing the pervasive, traditional model of K-12 education. The survey responses told us as much; the more than 20 interviews that the nine partners conducted with selected participants confirmed this impression, as articulated in the series of blog articles that emerged from those interviews.

The articles are highlighted in this research report and in the project website. We ensured confidentiality of survey and interview responses to elicit the most candid response, though many participating schools and districts gave permission to be identified in this report, the articles, and the project website.

We hope that everyone with a stake in this nation’s public education system—which means, all of us—reads these stories, absorbs the lessons offered in this report, and uses the suggested strategies to become more fully prepared. Not simply for the next global crisis, but more generally to be stewards for our next generation of problem-solvers. We are all going to need *them* to be deeply prepared to take on the challenges they will face over the course of their lifetimes.

