How Education is Transforming in America

Learning Outpost
Stand Together photo by Gina Danals

One can't help but notice that education is transforming in America. Unconventional learning during the pandemic expanded families' awareness and willingness to try different education models. While many of these models of education existed before the pandemic, research, innovation, and funding for them has gained momentum.

Here's an overview of the state of education transformation in America today.

Surveys indicate desire for individualized education is more than a pandemic blip.

This conclusion comes from a survey conducted by Tyton Partners and funded by Stand Together Trust and the Walton Family Foundation. Tyton's *School Disrupted 2022* surveyed 6,000 K-12 parents about enrollment dynamics, learning preferences, and the future of traditional and student-centric school models.

According to Tyton's research, more than half of parents prefer:

- Learning in small groups of less than 10 students
- Multiple learning sites outside of the classroom
- A flexible daily schedule driven by the student's needs

These preferences can be found in microschools and other models that blend learning options from public and private schools. Tyton found, however, that even though awareness increases the likelihood of enrollment in alternative school models, parents prefer the convenience and perceived lower cost of public schools.

This finding should inspire community leaders to reimagine how schools in their communities can meet parents' preferences.

You can read more about the *School Disrupted 2022* publication at the Stand Together website.

Populace, a nonpartisan non-profit, recently released the Purpose of Education Index — "a first of its kind, multi-year, nationally representative study designed to understand the American people's priorities for K-12 education today."

Key findings from the survey reveal that "individualized education is the future, one-size-fits-all is the past." Specifically, respondents prioritize customization in education like letting students learn at their own pace, providing unique support over standardized elements like standardized testing, and providing all students with the same number of resources.

The Populace survey also reveals that the American perspective on college shifted following the COVID pandemic in that most people think college attendance shouldn't be the end goal of K-12 education. According to the survey:

> "Before COVID, respondents ranked being prepared to enroll in a college or university as their 10th highest priority for K-12 education. In a post-COVID America, this is no longer the case. When given 57 priorities for children's K-12 education, Americans ranked college preparedness as #47. However, they believe it is other people's third highest priority, demonstrating a deep societal misunderstanding of one another."

Perhaps most significantly, 71 percent of respondents believe more things should change than stay the same in the K-12 system, with 21 percent of those respondents saying, "nearly everything needs to change."

Americans want "different not just better" in K-12 education. "The 100-year focus on creating a standardized path for all, prioritizing cramming for tests, and using education to rank and sort students has failed," says Adam Peshek, senior director and senior fellow for Education at Stand Together Trust, writing in *Real Clear Education*. "It does not recognize the world we live in today, let alone the world students will inhabit: a world where a chatbot can ace a Wharton MBA exam."

Yet, there is growing research on what different, promising education models can look like, too.

Transcend, a national organization focused on innovation in school design, with funding from Stand Together, studied alternative school models to understand them better, and shared key findings from innovators and educators in the current system.

Transcend's report "Lessons from Communities Creating Their Own Schools" by Ali Picucci, PhD and David Nitkin, PhD, released in 2022, identified key trends and strategic opportunities for families and educators to lean into as education continues to transform in America. After surveying more than 100 out-of-system education providers and talking with more than 20 experts, Picucci and Nitkin identified "instructive lessons for extraordinary learning."

Particularly, they found that the most promising models shared a few qualities:

- Promising education models were fueled by powerful agreements about what families wanted for their kids and connected learning to the assets, knowledge, needs, and opportunities in their communities.
- Promising education models prioritized flexible, meaningful, customized, and experiential learning.
- Promising education models creatively navigated physical, scheduling, regulatory, financial, and other constraints.

You can read more about these findings at the Stand Together Trust website.
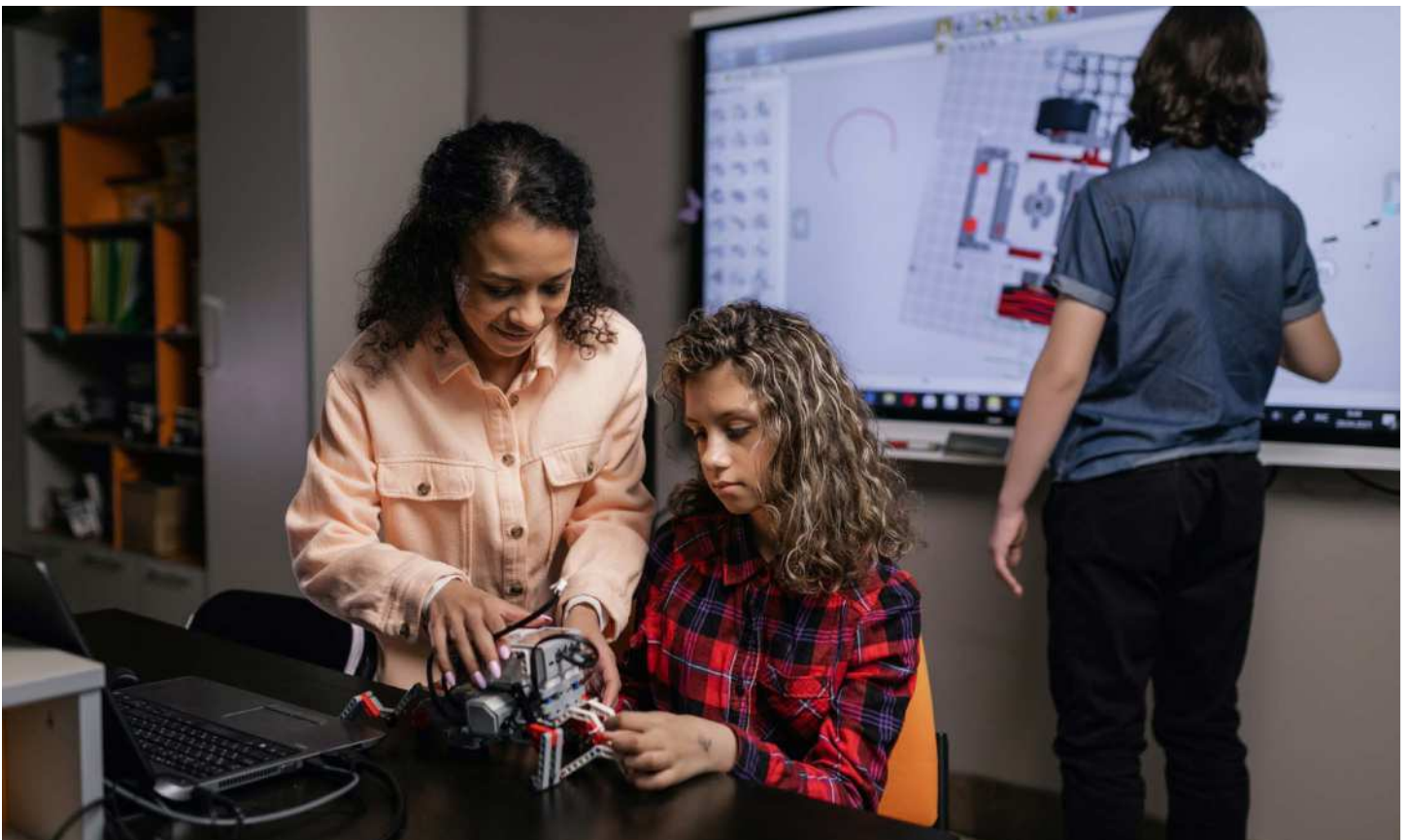
Policy recommendations abound for creating an environment conducive to individualized education.

Stand Together Trust has funded thought leadership reports that provide policy analysis and suggestions for transforming education today.

The Manhattan Institute published a set of reports on microschooling — focusing particularly on policies that can help or hinder the growth of microschooling.

"It is impossible to fully understand the status and future of microschools and related small-school approaches without appreciating the influence of the COVID era," writes Andy Smarick, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. "Forced by the pandemic to rethink their schedules and experiment with online learning — and given the opportunity to take advantage of existing supplemental services and create new offerings for themselves —

> many families were intrigued, if not excited, by the possibilities of the new and different."

While the entire series of papers is worth reading, Stand Together Trust identified high-level insights for policymakers, funders, thought leaders, and others as we continue to transform education into models that help each student unlock their unique potential.

The Reason Foundation published a report "Public Schools Without Boundaries: A 50-State Ranking of K-12 Open Enrollment" that provides best practices for open enrollment and a ranking of each state on their open enrollment policies.

"While various education resources indicate that 43 states explicitly have open enrollment," the report says, "most of those policies are null or ineffective since they are overly deferential to school districts." School districts can "game the system to exclude students who don't reside in their boundaries," "make program participation voluntary," or "disincentivize transfers by charging non-resident students the full cost of tuition or exorbitant fees."

Reason's best practices promote accountability, transparency, and free and fair public schooling for all students. You can read a summary of the best practices here.

Bellwether, a national nonprofit working to transform education so that systematically marginalized students achieve better outcomes, is elevating policy suggestions to create more equitable school systems through their project, Assembly. Assembly wants students and families to be able to "access more learning, including academic courses, internships, dual enrollment opportunities, athletics, art, music, and more." In short, the transformation Assembly envisions will allow students to combine classes, tutoring, extracurriculars, and other experiences into a custom-made learning path that empowers students to discover, develop, and apply their unique gifts and talents in society.

Several publications released by Assembly offer suggestions for how this system transformation in education could happen. These include reports about the role of public policy in transforming education norms, the infrastructure needed to support a system that offers more flexible and equitable options for students, and research on how other industries are creating customized experiences and what education can learn from them.

Advisory board members of Assembly include Adam Peshek, senior director and senior fellow, Education at Stand Together Trust, and several Stand Together grantees and partners.

More and more education entrepreneurs are innovating outside the traditional school model.

As technology advances and the workforce demands a more agile and globally-minded worker, foundational schooling should prepare people to meet this new reality.

> **"The American K-12 education system is out of date and was designed to serve an imagined 'average child,'"**

says Adam Peshek, senior director and senior fellow at Stand Together Trust. "It was designed for a time that no longer exists — a time when it was thought the back of the school should lead to the front door of the factory."

We live in the world of individualization, and education needs to catch up.

The Big Idea, a project of Education Reimagined that received funding from Stand Together Trust, is a space for educators, parents, and learners to imagine what the future of learning looks like.

At the heart of The Big Idea's learner-centered proposal is the suggestion that a typical school day doesn't need to take place in a school building in order to be effective.

Ecosystems of learning, as The Big Idea calls them, could connect young people to learning experiences across their communities, allowing them to experience in real time how their unique gifts contribute to fostering a healthy society.

VELA Education Fund is surfacing and accelerating alternative education models that could play crucial roles in the ecosystems of learning The Big Idea envisions.

Founded in 2019 in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and Stand Together Trust, VELA has given away almost $24 million in grants to everyday entrepreneurs innovating learning models outside the traditional system. From 2020 to 2022, these models have reached 6.56 million learners and families, and include homeschool co-ops, microschools, afterschool programs, and much, much more.

VELA believes "parents and communities are best positioned to deliver learning models aligned to learners' and families' values and priorities," and through funding and promoting their partners, they empower them to do so.

Take for example, Electric Girls — an education program designed to empower young girls in STEM. The afterschool program and two-week summer camp gives girls the opportunity to design, build, and present their own creations in areas of science, electricity, robotics, technology, and other STEM-related fields.

Watch this video to see these projects in action.

Changemaker insight:
Fundraising isn't everything

Suzanne Torregano, executive director of Electric Girls, says "listening to the community" is an essential ingredient to their success — and should be a crucial principle leaders adopt if they want their education programs and non-profits to succeed.

Another VELA-supported school, Bloom Academy, has made this principle of listening to the community a bedrock of their model. Founded by educators Sarah Tavernetti and Yamila De Leon, Bloom Academy doesn't have a mandatory curriculum, they don't give homework or standardized tests, and students aren't separated into typical grades. Instead, five to 14-year-olds all interact with each other, with adults helping but not directing learning.

To many, this sounds like not enough structure for learning to happen. Yet, Bloom Academy is seeing success with students who weren't learning well in a conventional setting. Take the story of Xilo, a Bloom Academy student, highlighted on the Stand Together website.

Bloom Academy student Xilo was struggling at his conventional school. Having difficulty with reading, traditional learning strategies — sight words, flash cards — were not helping. At Bloom, Xilo was able to learn at his own pace rather than having to conform to a one-size-fits-all curriculum, and without grades and tests applying constant pressure.

> He was able to use his love of music to help him read. "He would just start listening to books," De Leon says. "And slowly start to read some small words, like song titles."

By encouraging Xilo to follow his interest in music, he continued to improve in his reading, becoming fairly proficient within a few months — his love of learning in one subject helping him learn another, on his own. Ask him how he learned to read, and he'll tell you he did it on his own.

Micro schools

Sarah and Yamila point out that kids learn how to walk and to talk by observing and experiencing the world around them — why can't they continue to learn that way throughout their school years, too?

Sarah and Yamila share more of their journey and give an inside look into Bloom Academy in this Stand Together video.

What role are you going to play in the transformation of education today?

It would be impossible for anyone to deny — K-12 education is changing in America. The question is not "are you on board with the transformation of K-12 education?" The question is "is there a role you could be playing to help make different and better learning paths for K-12 students?"

The Stand Together community is partnering with some of the most innovative leaders in education today. Founders of new education models, policymakers, educators, funders, storytellers and journalists, parents, and even students, are paving new learning paths for themselves and others. We're grateful you are part of this movement!

Individualized education is gaining ground. For the sake of our society, it can't happen fast enough.