

Chapter 1

From Threat to Opportunity

Dr. Ball slumped down at her desk after the bell rang. She couldn't help but feel like that's what the school was in: a slump.

How had it happened, though?

The summer after the pandemic started, she and the other school principals in the district, along with the central office staff, had hunkered down. They worked tirelessly to get remote learning in place and improve it in accordance with the state's mandate.

Then they worked to develop a reopening plan that would keep students and teachers safe and healthy—and able to learn—once the state started allowing people back into the buildings, which didn't happen until the spring. The team developed in-person options with rotating schedules for the students to reduce building density. They created mask rules. New air filtration systems were installed. They partnered with other districts to continue to offer a full-time virtual option for those whose parents for, whatever

reason, didn't feel comfortable sending their children back in person at all. They built testing protocols, and they prioritized the most essential learning standards.

And then they detailed all their efforts in a comprehensive 70-page reopening plan that they circulated to the community. The plan had sections on everything from health, safety, and well-being to facilities and from equity and student engagement to technology. There was a section detailing plans on school personnel and staffing, professional development, and family partnerships and supports. They held several feedback sessions and iterated more.

The principals and central office staff even included a section on reimagining teaching and learning. In truth, however, Ball had always felt that that hadn't been the most urgent and immediate of their concerns—and the writing reflected that. There were a lot of buzz phrases about differentiation and equity but nothing concrete on how they would fulfill those aspirations.

The whole effort, though, had been nothing short of Herculean. To get back to normal. Whatever that was.

"Normal is good. Discuss," she muttered.

Her phone buzzed. It was a calendar alert, but it prompted a different thought. In the months after the start of the pandemic, Ball remembered how hard it had been to get in touch with some families. It had actually always been tough, if she was being honest.

But then she remembered the day in early May when she and her team stopped trying to send long emails to every parent and guardian and instead she sent a couple short text messages to the parents. She remembered how Jeremy's mom, who had never come to any school events, had texted her back within minutes.

Ball found the conversation. "Thank you," Jeremy's mom had texted her in June. "It was so nice to have heard from the school."

But then when the district sent out the 70-page plan in the fall, Ball heard nothing from Jeremy's mom. Crickets.

Why was that? Ball felt like they had been building a rapport.

She struggled to think back. Her team had been so busy. No one had any time to reach out. And then the fights with parents began. Arguments over everything, and it was all hands on deck.

But never a peep from Jeremy's mom. Jeremy didn't return to in-person school until the year after that, sometime in November. What had happened all that time?

Ball decided to text Jeremy's mom, when, seemingly out of nowhere, Julia's parents startled her by knocking on her office door.

Now here were two parents from whom she had heard plenty. She blinked her eyes, straightened her jacket, and popped up from her desk wearing her biggest smile.

How was that for a transition?, she thought. The text would have to wait.

"Mr. and Mrs. Owens. It's so nice to see you again!"

* * *

In the wake of COVID-19 shattering the traditional routines and plans of so many schools nationwide, many understandably felt a great sense of loss. Their ways of life were under assault. The threat was clear.

In response, schools' priority was safety. District and school leaders—a group that I often shorten to “schools” or “school leaders” throughout the book for brevity and simplicity—focused on how to reopen schools by digging deep into the logistics and operations to figure out how to create safe, hygienic environments for students, teachers, and staff. Schools focused on how to offer a hybrid arrangement of schooling—with a mix of in-person and online, remote opportunities. They debated whether students should rotate by attending two days a week or every other week. Could there be Saturday schooling so students could attend three days a week? They pored through the data and politics around mask wearing; would they require students to wear them? What was the latest from the CDC? What about when they

were indoors versus outdoors? Could they do more schooling outdoors? What was the maximum number of students allowed inside a classroom anyway? Were there other ways to decrease the density of classrooms? Did they have to upgrade their air filtration and ventilation systems or leave the windows open all the time? And what about busing and sports?

This work was important, but it was also insufficient.

What much of the conversation missed was what should *learning* look like? That is, regardless of where students learn, how can schools innovate to move past an instructional model designed to standardize the way we teach and test that worked well for the industrial era but is a misfit for today's world?

In too many cases, schools have sought to replicate the traditional classroom in a new format. A striking 42 percent of teachers, for example, reported in a nationwide survey by the Clayton Christensen Institute that they replicated their typical day in a remote format during the pandemic.¹ Schools alternatively offered a subpar learning experience in which students, like Daniel whose story I told in the Introduction, didn't receive the supports they needed.²

Why have schools remained stuck? How could they move beyond just focusing on logistics to asking deeper questions about the model of learning itself?

THREAT RIGIDITY

Balancing multiple concerns amid limited resources, restrictive policies, and work contracts that often limit educators' responses helps explain some of the struggles to innovate. Research by Clark Gilbert, previously the president of Brigham Young University Pathway Worldwide and BYU-Idaho, suggests another important set of factors—as well as a pathway forward.

In Gilbert's research, he found that when there was a “discontinuous” change—an abrupt event in the environment—if an organization framed it as a threat, then it was able to marshal far

more resources to meet the challenge than if it framed something as an opportunity. That means that saying that the COVID-caused disruption is an opportunity to reinvent schooling is unlikely to gain traction. This echoes the findings of Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky that individuals are typically more willing to commit financial resources to something when they perceive it would otherwise result in a loss rather than a gain.

But there's a further insight.

Although framing something as a threat caused an organization to marshal the resources to tackle a challenge, it also caused organizations to respond with something called “routine rigidity,” or “threat rigidity.” When this happens, an organization doubles down on its existing processes or routines. That results in more top-down control; reduced experimentation—at precisely the time that an organization needs to be experimenting a lot, given the new circumstances; and a focus on an organization's existing resources, rather than questioning what else it might use to respond to the threat. When Gilbert studied this in the newspaper industry, he found that organizations that saw the Internet as a threat marshaled resources to invest in the Internet, but “most sites simply reproduced the newspaper” online.³

Sound familiar?

This is, in many ways, what schools did during the pandemic. Amid a flurry of headlines and studies around the learning loss of their students and questions about how schools would deliver learning online or, better yet in most cases, be able to get students back in the classroom, there was no question that schools would see the moment as a threat. Many marshaled resources to meet that threat. Most schools battened down the hatches and just sought to get things running without asking more fundamental questions around what the teaching and learning experiences should look like. They typically replicated the existing assumptions around the classroom, teaching processes, educator roles,

the curriculum, content, and so forth—and merely modified them for the circumstance and modality, meaning whether they were online, in person, or in a hybrid format.

In other words, framing the pandemic as a threat has been important to marshal resources. Gilbert's research suggests that framing concerns around learning loss have been important to galvanize the unprecedented levels of federal investment into schools.

But leaving it in that threat framing created an inflexible response that was bound to traditional processes, rather than imagining what schooling could be. This isn't all that different from research that shows that it's difficult for individuals to feel curious while feeling threatened.⁴

Chapter 4 delves deeper into why a shift away from the initial framing of learning loss is important and what that should look like within schools. But Gilbert's work suggests a more generalizable, structural way to escape threat rigidity.

After defining something as a threat to muster the required resources, it's then important to shift responsibility to a new independent group that can reframe the threat as an opportunity. In this case, that opportunity is to reimagine the schooling experience. As Gilbert noted, having both a threat and opportunity framing was "hard to maintain in an environment in which operating responsibilities for the [existing organization] predominated."⁵

Another way to think of it is that if there isn't at least one person in the organization whose full-time job is to focus on the opportunity at hand and innovate, then it's no one's job. That's because the day-to-day priorities of the organization will drain energy away from any efforts to create something new and different. In other words, the urgent and immediate tasks in front of someone—even if they aren't important in the long run—will almost always drown out the important but less urgent work of long-term transformation.⁶

AUTONOMY

Exactly how independent must a group be for it to be able to reframe a threat as an opportunity, escape the gravitational pull of the existing organization, and innovate successfully? Gilbert's research highlights the benefits of an organization creating a separate entity that has ties back to the parent group for the sharing of certain resources. To calibrate more precisely what this might look like, here is a framework to help guide school leaders.

Every organization has resources, processes, and priorities.

Think of resources as being things like teachers, curriculum, classrooms, technology, books, and so forth.

Processes are ways of working together to address recurrent tasks in a consistent way. They cover everything from how teachers take attendance to how they lesson plan and teach to how the school creates its master schedule and conducts professional development.

Priorities are what an organization must accomplish.⁷

Once you understand an organization's resources, processes, and priorities, you can see what it is capable of doing—but also what it is incapable of doing. Any innovation that fits into an organization's resources, processes, and priorities will be readily adopted, but any innovation that doesn't fit neatly into all three will either be twisted and morphed to fit the organization's existing capabilities or ignored and rejected.

What's key when trying to reframe a threat as an opportunity is to create a new organization that has enough freedom to rethink a parent organization's resources, processes, and priorities. This doesn't mean that it will discard all of those things. It may very well borrow things from the parent organization, particularly resources, which are the easiest of the three to share without ruining an independent group's chances of creating something wholly new.

If total transformation is the goal, then the rule of thumb is that a leader must not allow the parent organization the ability to impose its existing resources, processes, and priorities on the autonomous group. The independent team must have the freedom to make the decisions as to what it will and won't take from the parent.⁸ The more freedom it has to rethink the parent organization's processes and priorities, the greater the level of innovation possible.

That means that the leader's job is twofold: to make sure the existing entity recognizes its critical role of continuing to execute on its priorities while the new group innovates and to protect the independent team.

THE TOYOTA PRIUS

The story of how Toyota created the Prius, the first commercially successful hybrid car, shows how to bring together a group of individuals with functional expertise in a new team with the flexibility and freedom to rethink the resources and processes for building cars.⁹

Amid a flurry of interest in boosting the fuel efficiency of automobiles in the 1990s, Toyota became interested in building a hybrid automobile that would use both gas and electricity. When Toyota developed its Prius hybrid car, however, it could not use its existing functional teams and hierarchical rules of production because the hybrid constituted a completely different architecture.

Toyota had to develop new components that interfaced with each other in novel ways. The internal combustion engine had to share responsibility for powering the car with an electric motor, and each had to hand off that responsibility to the other in different circumstances. The brakes didn't just slow the car; they also needed to generate electricity. This, in turn, completely changed the role the battery played in the system. With the components performing nontraditional functions, the engineers needed to find alternative ways of integrating them into a coherent whole.

To solve these problems, Toyota pulled key people from each department and put them together as a separate team in a completely different location. Although these people brought their functional expertise to the team, their role was not to represent the interests or needs of their respective departments. Rather, their role was to use their expertise to help generate a completely different architecture for the automobile.

This separation and clarity of mission—and sense that they were creating something for the future rather than guarding against a threat of higher fuel standards—gave them the ability to trade the interests of one group against another's: to add costs in one place so they could improve performance or save cost in another; to combine certain components, eliminate others entirely, invent new ones, and so on. This team structure facilitated the creation of an elegant machine.

In contrast, most of Toyota's competitors designed their hybrid cars using their existing departmental structures and hierarchies. Their cars did not perform as well as the Prius, which had superior performance and much higher sales than did the other hybrid offerings.

Toyota kept its team intact for the second-generation Prius to refine the architecture and ensure that it knew how the pieces of the system worked with each other. As its engineers learned clearly how the system worked, they began to codify exactly how to make each component, and how each component had to interface with all other affected components. By doing so, in the next generation the engineers could design the Prius back in a new departmental structure that they could then use for other new automobiles they would create.

SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY

The logic of forming an independent team to solve a pressing problem hasn't just been borne out in industries outside education. Southern New Hampshire University has used it extensively

in designing its own responses to what at first were seen as deep threats before it turned them into opportunities.

If you haven't heard of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), today it's one of the largest, most successful universities in the world, with over 160,000 students enrolled. But it wasn't always this way. When its current president, Paul LeBlanc, joined SNHU in 2003, it was a threatened institution. Its enrollment was declining. Its finances put the university on the brink of survival.

One interesting asset the University did have was an online offering, but it was small and not growing. With its survival at stake, it wasn't hard to make the case that investing in online learning was critical. But it was LeBlanc's move to separate the online division and create a governance structure different from the one that oversaw the brick-and-mortar campus of the University that proved critical.

With a separate organization in place, the University was able to change everything about its online division. The team first noticed that the students who were enrolling in the online programs were different from those coming to the on-ground ones. In the latter case, they were typically high school graduates looking to take the next logical step in their educational journey. In contrast, the students coming to the online programs were typically adults in the working world looking to step it up in their careers. They had had all the life experience they could handle, as LeBlanc said, and what they wanted was the most efficient pathway to gain new skills. To serve both groups well necessitated very different sets of processes.

For example, for the 18-year-old students it served, SNHU would inform them about general, basic financial aid information during their junior year of high school. Not having specifics for at least a year worked fine for both the student and the University. Any student inquiry would take weeks to resolve because there was no urgency on either side.

But for older students who had an urgency in their lives to step it up, they needed answers on financial aid right away. Their time to act was now or never. Waiting hours, let alone weeks, to respond was too late.

What had to change at SNHU? “Pretty much everything,” LeBlanc told the authors of the book *Competing Against Luck*.¹⁰ He gave the online team the ability to rethink not just SNHU’s resources and processes, as in the Toyota example, but also the organization’s priorities, which resulted in innovations that dramatically departed from the status quo at SNHU.

Prospective students needed quick responses to inquiries about financial aid. They also needed to know within days whether previous college courses would count as credit toward an SNHU degree. And they needed to know quickly after applying whether they were admitted—otherwise they would look somewhere else. The months-long admissions process that was routine for high school students wouldn’t work online.

SNHU realized that it was not enough just to enroll students; it had to support them to and through graduation. That meant focusing on the emotional and social dimensions around a student’s journey. SNHU’s online school began assigning students a personal advisor, for example, who would stay in constant contact with students and pick up on red flags, in many cases even before students would.

This also changed how SNHU measured success at each step of the student journey. For example, SNHU would have formerly measured how it responded to student inquiries in terms of how many packages were mailed out. It would then wait for the interested students to call. But now SNHU Online’s goal was to call a prospective student back in under 10 minutes.

The move to give the online division autonomy allowed it to see online learning not just as something to try and stave off an existential threat, but as a great opportunity for SNHU to serve

the millions of working adults from around the world who need more education to improve their lives.

The team seized that opportunity. From serving roughly 500 online students in 2010, SNHU grew to serve roughly 17,000 students in 2012, 35,000 students by 2014, 60,000 in 2016, and over 130,000 by 2018. What's more, the success also helped the brick-and-mortar campus grow from roughly 2,500 students in 2010 to 3,913 students in 2018.¹¹

When COVID hit, LeBlanc decided to seize the pandemic as both a threat and an opportunity. The threat to traditional brick-and-mortar campuses was clear. LeBlanc intended to use that threat as an opportunity to reinvent the collegiate brick-and-mortar experience, which in his view had been flailing for years and was increasingly out of reach and unsustainable from a financial perspective for both students and the colleges themselves.

The team at SNHU had long been convinced that there must be a way to reinvent the campus experience. The goal was still to allow students to enjoy the coming-of-age experiences that college is so good at providing, but also to leverage online, competency-based learning—in which, as explained in the Introduction, students would progress based on mastery of the material, not seat time—to create a more robust learning experience. In so doing, LeBlanc also wanted to dramatically lower the sticker price of college, a stop sign for so many who question whether college is right for them.¹² COVID allowed SNHU to accelerate and inject urgency into planning that had been under-way for some time.

In April 2020, SNHU announced that all of its incoming freshmen would receive a one-time “Innovation Scholarship” that would cover their full first-year tuition. In turn, the freshmen would take all their courses online while living on campus (assuming it was open during COVID) and participating in college activities.

After the first year, SNHU's plan was to relaunch its brick-and-mortar program with a \$10,000 per year price tag—a 61 percent reduction from its previous rate of \$31,000 per year—and offer a program that mixed in-person with online, competency-based learning. The free first year would give faculty the opportunity to develop and test the program before relaunching the brick-and-mortar campus experience. It reopened ultimately with programs offered at two price points: one at \$10,000 per year with a significant component of project-based learning and a second price point of \$15,000 per year that would offer more traditional in-person instruction.¹³

To accomplish this, LeBlanc said that they pulled people from their day jobs and assigned them to the campus transformation team. The team was led by one of their deans, who was released on an interim basis from his previous responsibilities. SNHU also took its dean of students and placed her on the team full-time—and replaced her role on an interim basis. From there, SNHU added three project managers. All the roles were full-time so that the individuals could concentrate completely on the new experience, although LeBlanc recognized that some members of the team might transition ultimately back to their old jobs or to new assignments once SNHU entered full implementation mode.

The autonomy was critical so that the individuals would have the time, space, and freedom to design the new offerings—and not be weighed down with simultaneously balancing the demands of their prior jobs, which would always present themselves as more urgent and pressing given the day-to-day needs of existing students, faculty, and staff.

The pattern is straightforward. A threat galvanizes resources, but a leader must not stay in that framing. Creating an independent team to take on the threat enables the organization to reframe it as an opportunity. That allows the organization to escape a top-down, command-and-control response and reinvent the experience.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE IN K-12 SCHOOLS

When talking to K-12 education leaders, this framework can feel overwhelming and even impossible. How could administrators possibly grant the required autonomy short of forming a wholly new school? That's what the Hawken School, a prestigious private school near Cleveland, did, for example, to pioneer mastery-based learning. It created a school called the Mastery School of Hawken. And it's what another prestigious private school, Lakeside School in Seattle, did to launch a new microschool, the Downtown School, at a significantly lower price point.

Is this strategy out of reach then for public schools?

No.

In K-12 schools, an autonomous team could take many forms. A superintendent could free a group of educators in a district from their day-to-day roles and task them with reimagining what they might offer. This group might function as a separate team within a school and pioneer either a new classroom model or a novel way of offering a particular subject or grade. The independent group could also exist as a school within a school, a microschool, or a learning pod. It could also create a new school entirely.

The charge might be to design a more compelling experience that focuses less on the time students are taught and more on helping each child develop character and habits of success, like agency and executive function skills; ensuring each child has a strong social, emotional, and health foundation with a reservoir of social capital; and rather than simply focusing on the teaching of academic knowledge and skills, making sure each child learns

and masters those that are critical and allows them to build passions and develop their unique potential. The traditional hierarchy in a district could continue to focus on operating schools as we've known them, while this group focuses on implementing different innovations designed to give teachers and students more support.

This model suggests a new way for districts to engage with microschools and learning pods. Many districts have viewed these emergent schools as threats to the way they have always operated or things that will create inequity. But the threat-opportunity perspective helps us see that districts could reframe microschools and learning pods as something they themselves could operate to make sure that all children have deep and healthy social relationships. They could envision them as part of a mosaic of offerings so that they are able to provide an array of options that fit the different circumstances of all students and families. And they could see them as ways to offer personalized learning experiences for children's particular needs so that children don't fall behind in learning to read or doing math or in the exploration of coherent bodies of knowledge.

The key is to escape threat rigidity by arming a relatively independent team of educators absolved from their existing responsibilities. However it's done, the autonomy and focus is critical.

As Jeff Wetzler, cofounder of Transcend Education, a school design consultancy, said, "[The work is] time consuming. We have yet to find a way for this to work without some protected time and space. If you just try to jam it into the existing schedule, it just doesn't happen."

Or as Tavenner said, "School doesn't stop. Usually educators think 'I get one week to do my master visioning' in the summer and that's it."¹⁴ That's not enough time to rethink the possibilities for an already-antiquated schooling model and view it as a true greenfield opportunity.

We dig deeper throughout the book on how to rethink schooling, but there's one final observation in Gilbert's findings worth highlighting.

In his research, an outside party wielded significant influence with each of the newspapers that moved successfully from seeing the Internet as a threat to viewing it as an opportunity and tasking an independent group to chase it. A board member, associate, or someone new to the organization would say that the newspaper must question its fundamental assumptions around what their online site and the supporting structure should look like rather than simply replicating what they already had—just online. As Gilbert wrote, “Involving outside influence when deciding how to respond to discontinuous change will increase the likelihood that managers will structurally differentiate a new venture from its parent organization.”¹⁵

In schools, that implies that school boards and the broader community have a critical role to play in giving permission to or pushing school and district leadership to create relatively independent entities that pioneer new ways of schooling—whether those arrangements are new schools, schools within schools, micro-schools, or learning pods. As Gilbert wrote, “Outside influence, structural differentiation, and opportunity framing [that] combine to relax routine rigidity in a new venture” were consistently critical in times of discontinuous change.¹⁶ Examples from real districts help show what that arrangement and sequencing can look like.

Mastery School of Hawken:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ2Pk6TcQCU>

Kettle Moraine

About 30 minutes outside Milwaukee sits the Kettle Moraine School District. A suburban school district with 11 schools that

serve just under 4,000 students who hail mostly from middle- and upper-income families, the district was considered relatively high-performing, with over 80 percent of graduates enrolling in postsecondary education and training each year.

Beneath the positive results, however, there were opportunities to improve. Only 45 percent of students were completing their postsecondary programs—below the national average. With a threat identified, the district marshaled resources to address the challenge.

The district didn't maintain the threat framing. Once it had galvanized resources, it moved to create a variety of independent environments in which to personalize learning through microschools—schools within schools in this case—of no more than 180 students. Each had its own unique spin. Kettle Moraine authorized three charter schools on its high school campus and one at one of its elementary schools to help implement a mastery-based model that personalizes learning, along with seven “houses” in its middle school.

Within each learning environment, educators implemented comprehensive, data-rich learner profiles and customized learning paths for each student in which students' progress is contingent upon their performance. Its elementary micro charter school, for example, centers around projects. Students use the projects to demonstrate mastery of the required competencies. Another microschool at the high school level allows students to earn nursing and emergency medical technician certifications.

With a high degree of accountability in place, the innovations appear to be working.¹⁷ Results on the PISA exam, the OECD's Test for Schools, would rank the district among the top countries in the world. According to *Education Week*, the students in the district's traditional high school performed as well as students in Canada, Finland, and other European countries, while its students in its charter school performed in the same ballpark as that of Singapore—the second-highest-ranking country at the time—with very high engagement in the learning.¹⁸

Kettle Moraine School District:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhuTgnAz6fQ>

Microschool Movement

Many school districts looked upon the rapid growth of micro-schools and learning pods during the pandemic as something akin to students signing up for the Russian School of Mathematics outside of school hours. They thought it was something certain families were doing to give their children a leg up on the other students around them. They wished these new schools would disappear.

But some districts took a different perspective.

As Eric Gordon, the CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District, said, “Suburban communities were forming pods on their own. Why shouldn’t my kids have those benefits?”¹⁹

The district leveraged new resources by working with a variety of community organizations—the Cleveland Foundation, MyCom, Say Yes Cleveland, and United Way of Cleveland—to open 24 pods during the pandemic and serve 808 of Cleveland’s most vulnerable students.²⁰

Cleveland was among the 11 percent of school districts, according to a national survey by the Clayton Christensen Institute, that operated “learning hubs” in the Spring of 2021. According to the survey, 5 percent of districts intend to continue operating pods postpandemic.²¹

The Center for Reinventing Public Education worked with TNTP, a nonprofit education consultancy, to create more in-depth partnerships with six school districts that would lead to something more lasting and transformational out of the pod movement.²²

The DeKalb County School District in Georgia, for example, is using pods to reinvent alternative schools, which serve students who have dropped out or transferred from traditional schools. Given that many alternative schools have traditionally struggled, it's a place where the district thinks pods can help make a difference.

Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina launched learning hubs during the pandemic to help students connect to online classes and receive in-person support. District leaders discovered that families valued increased flexibility around where and when learning happened, so they worked with students and teachers to design a “spoke-and-hub model.” Long-term, the district hopes this model will offer a new approach to school that builds stronger connections between school and community. In this more hybrid future of schooling, students would enroll in a brick-and-mortar or virtual school for the “hub” of their experience, and then elementary and middle school students would join “spokes”—or interest-based groups—for the other time. High school students would receive tutor-like support and work at paid positions or internships.

Guildford County Public Schools, which is also in North Carolina, is looking to craft school days in which high school students learn for three hours in person and then have more flexible time out of school to engage in a variety of activities, including completing assignments, working, or receiving tutoring or other enrichment opportunities. The district envisions this as part of a greater overhaul of their high schools that weren't serving many students effectively, even before COVID.²³

Cleveland Learning Pods:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=826632394829967>

What If a District Doesn't Have Enough Internal Capacity?

Given scarce resources, overtaxed educators, and constrained work arrangements, many districts will not have the internal capacity to do what Kettle Moraine did.

But just because a given school or district doesn't have the time or resources itself to do this work, it doesn't mean it can't execute on these ideas—nor is it necessary to build from scratch. There are countless schools around the world that have already put in place many innovative ideas from which schools can borrow and adapt. To build the capacity to execute, schools can look to outside groups—be those unpaid community members, parents, consultants, or seasoned service providers—who can fully dedicate time to innovate.

For starters, districts can leverage the significant infusion of federal dollars from the CARES Act. Many have expressed concerns that these dollars may be used to add roles or services that are not sustainable after the funding dries up. But using the money to temporarily stand up an autonomous team like SNHU and Toyota did in order to create a lasting innovation that can roll back into and transform traditional schools is a great use of these recovery dollars.

Wetzler suggested that schools look to things like release time for teachers, after school and summers for intense design sprints, and the use of outside support that can do everything from facilitating design sessions, synthesizing research, or operating as a project manager.

Ashis cofounder at Transcend Education, Aylon Samouha, said:

In other industries it's worth remembering that that protected time and space for R&D is often not put on the practitioners themselves while they do their jobs. Doctors who were on the front lines of the COVID pandemic were not charged with coming up with the vaccine.

To bring capacity to the table, one approach, according to Samouha, is for an outside group to help a team from a school or district brainstorm for an hour. Even if the team doesn't have the ability to devote hours to the follow-on work, if an outside consultant can do 15 hours of work after the session, then a district starts to get the kind of capacity it needs to fully seize these design efforts as opportunities, rather than remain frozen in place by the threat of what it could otherwise represent.²⁴

Spring Grove Public Schools, a small school district of about 370 students in southeast Minnesota in a town of about 1,200 people, has just one school for all of its K–12 students. Yet it was able to execute significant innovations during the pandemic. One key to its success has been having outside support in the form of a consulting firm, Longview Education, that was there to do everything from compiling research around different design options to helping connect strands of work across the school into something larger and more transformational.

Similarly, microschool providers like MyTechHigh and Prenda Learning partner with districts and schooling systems to help them quickly stand up learning pods with curriculum and teacher support. Prenda Learning, for example, creates groups of five to 10 students in grades K–8. Its enrollments quadrupled during the first year of the pandemic. MyTechHigh, which partners with public schools to offer a full curriculum for K–12 learners at no cost to families, experienced similar rapid growth. As of September 2021, it served more than 18,000 students across seven states—Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Arizona, Wyoming, Indiana, and Tennessee. Some of its more robust partnerships range from the Tooele County School District in Utah to the Vilas School District in Colorado and from the Oneida School District in Idaho to Putnam County Schools in Tennessee and Cloverdale Community Schools in Indiana.

Likewise, there are a multitude of providers that can help stand up full-time virtual schools—or hybrid variations—like Arizona

State University Prep Digital, Stride, or Connections Education—or individual courses with teachers, like those just mentioned plus Outschool, Florida Virtual School, Edmentum, New Hampshire Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, and others.

Spring Grove Public Schools:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6A_Is6JuCU

MyTechHigh:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9iYz4njgdE>

Prenda Learning:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZPWw0wojIw>

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The threat of COVID is no longer new. Early on, schools and policymakers did a good job of marshalling resources. Without the initial threat framing, the massive infusion of federal and local resources and attention would have been impossible. COVID aside, there are many discontinuous changes that educators can frame as threats to seek greater resources, from a specific challenging situation to a new education innovation that has appeared in schools or a changing reality in society or the region.

But framing something as a threat is insufficient. If the goal is to better serve all students, then schools must create an independent team that can shift from seeing the situation as a threat to viewing it as an opportunity. Then this autonomous group will be able to rethink the resources, processes, and priorities of schooling to chase that opportunity. What schools should bear in mind as they do so is where our tale takes us next.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When something occurs that will negatively impact schools, framing it as a threat is critical to marshal resources and tackle the threat.

- Leaving it in that threat framing, however, leads to “threat rigidity” and a “top-down, command-and-control” response, rather than innovation.
- To reframe the threat as an opportunity to innovate and reinvent, it’s necessary to create an independent group. The key measures of independence revolve around resources, processes, and priorities. Team members must not be weighed down by the responsibilities of their prior job.
- Schools and districts can set up an independent group by establishing a school within a school, a separate classroom model or band of teachers, a microschool or learning pod, or a new school.
- Even if a district or school doesn’t have enough internal capacity to execute on this set of ideas, there are other strategies that leverage external resources.

NOTES

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2. Sarah Carr, “For Schoolchildren Struggling to Read, COVID-19 Has Been a Wrecking Ball,” *Boston Globe*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/19/magazine/schoolchildren-struggling-read-covid-19-has-been-wrecking-ball/?p1=StaffPage>.
3. Clark Gilbert, “Unbundling the Structure of Inertia: Resource versus Routine Rigidity,” *Academy of Management Journal* 48, no. 5 (October 1, 2005), <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amj.2005.18803920>.
4. Amanda Ripley, “Complicating the Narratives,” *Solutions Journalism*, June 27, 2018, <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63> (updated January 11, 2019).

5. Gilbert, “Unbundling the Structure of Inertia.”
6. Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Miami, FL: Mango, 2017), p. 206.
7. A more complete rendering of this idea showcases that organizations have four components that make up their core operating model—their value proposition, resources, processes, and revenue formula—how they bring in dollars to support their resources and processes, which allow them to deliver on their value proposition. Although it would be ideal for educators to also be able to revisit their revenue formula and focus on models that don’t just allocate money based on the number of students who enroll and/or show up to class in the form of average daily attendance or other such measures of seat time and instead paid some portion for the actual learning progress students made, the ability to directly create these models is not one most public schools possess. There are experiments along these lines—like New Hampshire’s Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS)—but it is largely the exception that proves the rule.
8. Scott D. Anthony, Clark Gilbert, and Mark W. Johnson, *Dual Transformation: How to Reposition Today’s Business While Creating the Future* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017). In Chapter 4, the authors describe the concept of a “capabilities link,” which connects the efforts of the autonomous group to the parent. The link should contain three things: capabilities that will help the new, transformational effort but not burden it; a way to manage interferences through clear decision rules; and a leader there to protect the new group and arbitrate disagreements.
9. To be clear, the team designing the Prius didn’t have the freedom to rethink Toyota’s priorities, so the result was still a car for which they were able to charge higher prices than their traditional automobiles. In other research, we call this a heavyweight team.
10. Clayton M. Christensen, Taddy Hall, Karen Dillon, and David S. Duncan, *Competing Against Luck: The Story of Innovation and Customer Choice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 50–56, 156.
11. Bob Moesta with Greg Engle, *Demand-Side Sales 101* (Carson City, NV: Lioncrest, 2020), p. 54.

12. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, college enrollment rates rise for those who believe their family can afford college. "College Affordability Views and College Enrollment," U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, January 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2022/2022057/index.asp?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=200841088&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8XWSHcWPCXwpBBo6TQE0JP60FrQYbAtC07jTTOoPniZbEUOL8JYNMtnwcJpk8rD5Pj6rFgsDuJrDs82eeZQutd-XDr6g&utm_content=200841088&utm_source=hs_email.
13. Natalie Schwartz, "Southern New Hampshire Sets Annual Tuition at \$10K and \$15K for In-Person Degrees," Higher Ed Dive, December 16, 2020, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/southern-new-hampshire-sets-annual-tuition-at-10k-and-15k-for-in-person-d/592310/>.
14. "Transcending Today's Schools through Design," *Class Disrupted*, Season 2, Episode 16, April 6, 2021, <https://classdisrupted.wordpress.com/2021/04/06/season-2-episode-16-transcending-todays-schools-through-design/>.
15. Gilbert, "Unbundling the Structure of Inertia: Resource versus Routine Rigidity."
16. Ibid.
17. Across the schools, Kettle Moraine has embraced interdisciplinary learning and a focus on developing students' ability to drive their learning, communicate, collaborate, think creatively and critically as they work through academic content, engage actively as a citizen, and be resilient.
18. Kettle Moraine School District, GreatSchools.org, <https://www.greatschools.org/wisconsin/wales/kettle-moraine-school-district/#students>, accessed August 9, 2021. Learning Without Boundaries, Kettle Moraine School District, <https://www.kmsd.edu/domain/479>, Accessed August 5, 2021. Chris Sturgis, "Kettle Moraine: How They Got Here and Where They Are Going," *CompetencyWorks* blog, December 4, 2017, https://aurora-institute.org/cw_post/kettle-moraine-how-they-got-here-and-where-they-are-going/. Michele Molnar, "Personalized Learning in Practice: How a Risk-Taker Tailored Learning in Her District," *Education Week*, February 22,

2017. <https://www.edweek.org/leaders/2017/personalized-learning-in-practice-how-a-risk-taker-tailored-learning-in-her-district>.
19. Michael B. Horn, "Schools Squandered Virtual Learning," *Education Next* 21, no. 3 (Spring 2021).
 20. Michael B. Horn, "Some Pods Will Outlast the Pandemic," *Education Next* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2021), <https://www.educationnext.org/some-pods-will-outlast-pandemic-students-parents-appreciate-support/>.
 21. Thomas Arnett, "Carpe Diem: Convert Pandemic Struggles into Student-Centered Learning," Clayton Christensen Institute, August 2021.
 22. "We Will Never Return Back to the Old Normal: District- and Community-Driven Learning Pods," Center for Reinventing Public Education, <https://www.crpe.org/current-research/community-of-practice> (accessed November 13, 2021).
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 24. "Transcending Today's Schools through Design," *Class Disrupted*.