Shaping the Future of American Public Education:
What's Next for Changemakers?

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Executive Summary

American public education represents essential public infrastructure on which many people depend. Even as stakeholders grapple with how to do well by all the country's students, changemakers with an interest in influencing American public education are facing a unique moment. Social, economic, and policy factors are converging to alter both the context and nature of education reform and to bring new leaders and benefactors to the fore. The time is ripe to look ahead and examine both the course we are presently on and the ways in which the landscape of U.S. education changemaking could shift depending on how influencers engage in their work and what approaches gain most prominence over the coming decade.

Indeed, at this unique moment, we face key questions about the impacts of our collective efforts to improve American public education:

- Might the efforts, investments, and innovations of an expanding array of changemakers reflect or inspire new commitment to the promise of public education?
- Or might the myriad perspectives on how to change the system, no matter how well-intentioned, undermine or further erode collective belief in public education, threatening the social fabric that the system helps uphold?

Given these possibilities, this paper forecasts how and why education changemakers might work to influence the system in ten years' time and what effects their efforts might have. In so doing, it outlines four possible scenarios of education changemaking. A baseline scenario projects what might happen if the current course of education reform continues, with many changemakers deeply committed to their own decentralized efforts. Two alternative scenarios explore what the future of

changemaking in American public education could look like: if increased interest in collaboration led to a more cohesive change agenda than exists today; or if the increasing authority and influence of the communities most affected by education reform led to a change in the leadership and focus of education changemaking. A fourth scenario explores what might happen if other priorities captured the interest and resources of people in the position to promote and fund social change, leading to a decreased focus on education reform.

Looking across these scenarios, this paper concludes by raising strategic considerations for education changemakers and other stakeholders to explore as they navigate the myriad ways they or others might seek to influence American public education. Among them, the motivation and vision of changemakers, the scope of change, the role of funding, the nature of decision-making authority, structures enabling collaboration and coordination, and even the purpose of public education come into play.

In today's relatively open education reform landscape, there is opportunity for new players to become involved, for established actors to become more involved or to shift their approaches, and for all education changemakers and stakeholders to consider how best to engage with one another and with the learners and communities whom they aim to serve. It is time to consider whether our collective efforts to improve education are indeed pushing closer to an equitable and effective education system that serves all learners and society well and what we might do differently if they are not.

A Unique Moment

American public education represents essential public infrastructure on which many people depend. Traditionally, it has provided a common civic ground that has nourished both individual lives and community vitality. It has served as a gateway to success for many. Increasingly, it has been treated as a critical means of supporting the nation's most vulnerable children and as society's greatest opportunity to promote racial and economic equity for future generations. Given these fundamental roles, the stakes are high for U.S. public education. Yet the system continues to see uneven results, and stakeholders have more questions than answers about how public education can best serve both the individual and collective good in this complex and rapidly changing time.

Even as changemakers and stakeholders grapple with how best to address these questions and to do well by all the country's students, those with an interest in influencing American public education are facing a unique moment. Social, economic, and political factors are converging to alter both the context and nature of education reform and to bring new leaders and benefactors to the fore. The time is ripe to look ahead and examine both the course we are presently on and the ways in which the landscape of U.S. education changemaking could shift depending on how influencers engage in their work and what approaches gain most prominence over the coming decade.

KnowledgeWorks' Forecast 4.0, *The Future of Learning: Education in the Era of Partners in Code*, suggested that we are entering a new era in which our economy, our institutions, and our societal structures are shifting at an accelerating pace. It asked readers to consider one way in which education changemakers might respond to that challenge:

Tired of searching for educational options that they feel no longer work for their children, more and more highly empowered individuals will create their own schools, school models, and learning communities. At the same time, systemically motivated education pioneers will appeal to funding sources not typically seen in public education. As diverse actors take the lead in creating new educational approaches, both innovation and risk tolerance will increase. A renewed belief in collective responsibility for education could emerge, but there could also be scope for personal agendas to determine educational approaches.

This paper delves more deeply into possible ways this provocation could play out. Might the efforts, investments, and innovations of an expanding array of changemakers reflect or inspire new commitment to the promise of public education? Or might the myriad perspectives on how to change the system, no matter how well-intentioned, undermine or further erode collective belief in public education, threatening the social fabric that the system helps to uphold?

The Convergence of Social, Economic, and Policy Factors

Amid the widespread desire to improve U.S. public education, social, economic and policy factors are shifting the landscape in which more and more changemakers are seeking to impact the system. These factors have the potential to open new avenues of influence to new types of changemakers, to increase the influence of existing changemakers, or to shift how changemakers engage with the public education system and with one another.

Society: Changing Expectations of Education

A societal shift is reviving and making increasingly urgent an age-old conversation: What is the purpose of education, and how do we know if we are achieving it? This question has never left the minds of many educators and other stakeholders, but the current climate is increasing the urgency of rethinking the country's aims for, and approaches to, education. The changing nature of work, along with possible technological unemployment, increasing income inequality, increasing political polarization, shifting demographics, and the overall rapid pace of change and sense of turbulence, all have leaders inside and outside public education reconsidering the role of education in an increasingly complex and fragmented society. Exacerbating the persistent challenges of inequity and the need for public education to serve as a bedrock of American society, these external variables are changing and diversifying societal expectations about what the U.S. public education system needs to accomplish. In so doing, they are creating opportunities for new approaches and changemakers to gain traction.

Economy: Alternative Funding Sources

The K-12 funding landscapes have been in flux in recent years, with federal and state funding roles shifting, private funding sources increasing, and new funding sources emerging. The percentage of all K-12 education funding that comes from the federal government has been declining, and state and local funding have taken a larger role.[1] However, the amount of state funding going to education is below Great Recession levels in some states.[2] The percentage of total funding that comes from other sources, including private ones, has remained largely steady, though the total dollar amount from those sources has increased.[3] Between 2000 and 2010, grantmaking for national policy advocacy and research from the top fifteen K-12 education foundations rose from $486 million to $844 million.[4] Similarly, new financial vehicles, such as pay-for-success contracts – also known as social impact bonds – are increasingly being used in education. In such arrangements, a private investor pays the upfront costs to implement an evidence-based intervention that would normally be publicly funded. If the intervention is deemed successful because it achieves a positive social outcome or saves money, the government then pays back the private investor, often with interest. Though social impact bonds are being implemented to address a number of focus areas, pre-kindergarten programs and other programs supporting vulnerable youth have been of particular interest to the local governments and investors using the approach. The shifting dynamics of public funding for education, the increasing investment by private funders, and the early exploration of new financial tools demonstrate the appetite from both communities and funders to explore new ways to pay for programs that serve the public good.

Policy: Increased Flexibility to Set Goals and Design Interventions

The waning influence of the top-down, federally driven education reform efforts characterized by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and by the Obama Administration's education policies has opened the door for influencers at every level of the public education system. Under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the successor to NCLB, states have increased flexibility to set goals and design interventions, and their stakeholders are looking to support schools and students with a wide range of approaches. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has indicated interest in continuing to reduce the federal role in education while at the same time promoting mechanisms such as voucher programs and funding portability arrangements that enable families to access schools other than their assigned public schools. These shifts, some of which have been gaining ground for several years, are creating a more decentralized environment in which changemakers of every stripe have increasing ability to influence public education – and in more ways than before.

Today's Education Changemaking Landscape

We do not yet know how these social, economic, and political factors will play out in ten years' time. However, they are already influencing education reform efforts. In response to the societal shifts, stakeholders both in and beyond public systems are having more discussions about the importance of outcomes such as future readiness, equity, social-emotional skills, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Supported by various funding sources and by a more flexible policy environment, stakeholders are increasingly exploring diverse approaches to achieving those aims, among them competency-based education and other forms of personalized learning, access to college-level coursework during high school, more robust standards of learning, and alternatives to traditional punitive discipline practices.

This climate of exploration demonstrates widespread belief that change in U.S. public education is necessary. However, it also demonstrates that there is little consensus about what a successful U.S. public education system would look like, how to implement it well, or how best to measure its outcomes.

A plethora of education changemakers is taking on the challenge. In addition to the teachers and administrators working in the system every day and the state departments and state boards of education charged with supporting and governing it, a wide array of influencers has an equally wide array of positions on how to support, tweak, or transform U.S. public education. To name a few, organizations and individuals that seek to increase equity and reduce marginalization; some of the country's most powerful and well-resourced philanthropists and foundations; parents and community groups; and the creators of any number of new technologies, products, and services all see education as a crucial issue that requires urgent action. These actors are already reshaping this essential system, and, by extension, American society. The unique moment that we inhabit is affording them increasing opportunities to continue and ramp up their efforts.

Who Are Today's Education Changemakers?

The examples below illustrate some of the many forms that education changemaking can take and some of the positions from which today's changemakers are working to influence the public education system.

4.0 Schools
This New Orleans-based nonprofit provides fellowships for educational entrepreneurs who want to expand or test an idea or approach. 4.0 Schools has supported more than fifty founders of new programs and services, products, and school models.

The Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative
Funded by Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, one focus of this initiative is to build and expand personalized learning models and tools. Early investments of the initiative include a $2.25 million grant to the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation to support teacher collaboration through online professional learning communities and a gift to Chiefs for Change to fund a workgroup dedicated to aligning state- and district-level school redesign efforts.

Tiffany Anderson
Anderson, who grew up near the Jennings, Missouri, school district where she was superintendent from 2012 to 2016, garnered national press for her success in bringing the district back from the brink of being unaccredited. Under her leadership, the school district opened a food pantry, a shelter for homeless students, and a health clinic.

Possible Futures of Education Changemaking

This relatively spacious environment invites the question of how education changemakers might choose to engage as they move forward. As stakeholders consider what efforts might emerge or come to the fore in ten years' time, they must also consider how those efforts might affect this fundamental institution and the society that it supports.

To aid education stakeholders in exploring those possibilities and their potential impacts, this strategic foresight paper examines four possible futures of public education reform in the United States. In so doing, it explores the current trajectory of changemaking efforts, examines three shifts that could change that course, and then presents scenarios showing what the landscape of education changemaking could look like in ten years' time depending on how those variables play out. After exploring those possible futures, the paper raises strategic considerations to guide stakeholders in steering their own changemaking efforts, navigating those led by others, and considering how to approach education reform so that it results in a system that serves all children and society well.

A Baseline Course: The Present as Prologue

Fueled by a sense of urgency, a climate of opportunity, and belief in the power of innovation and new ideas to improve the public education system, today's changemakers are working toward numerous visions for the future and at least as many approaches to achieving them. A decentralized approach to reform, with changemakers deeply committed to their own efforts, has become the norm. Pockets of excellence keep emerging but often have difficulty spreading.

*A **signal of change** is an example, or early indicator, of how a future possibility is beginning to play out today.*

Given the increasing openness of the reform landscape, the current trajectory points toward a future of education changemaking characterized even more acutely by uneven success and by a lack of a common vision for public education. As changemakers attempt to foster lasting improvements or to transform the system, the number of efforts does not seem to be narrowing; nor the number of visions, converging. Taken together, the efforts listed below exemplify the array of tools, targets, and leaders working to change the U.S. education system today.

- Many school districts and organizations have committed to promoting and implementing specific approaches to learning, evidenced by large membership in networks such as the Deeper Learning Network, EdLeader21, and the Institute for Personalized Learning's network of member districts. This expansion demonstrates both the proliferation of approaches and a desire among some stakeholders to expand the reach of certain models.

- ESSA affords states broad flexibility to innovate and to consider new ways of improving schools and measuring success. In the plans that they are submitting to the U.S. Department of Education, states are formalizing their commitments to a wide variety of approaches – from involving parents in education budgeting processes to assessing social-emotional learning.

- An increasing amount of money is being spent on a vast range of education projects, tools, and approaches, demonstrating investors' and philanthropists' support for many different visions of education. By August 2017, more venture capital had been invested in ed tech than had been invested in all of 2016.[5] That money went to a wide range of products, including behavior management systems, online education, and test prep programs, among others. In turn, philanthropy poured $59.77 billion into education in 2016,[6] funding educator

preparation, new high school models, charter schools, higher education, and research, to name only a few of the approaches funders hope will gain traction.

- Education innovation competitions, such as XQ: The Super School Project sponsored by Laurene Powell Jobs' Emerson Collective and the Charter School Design Challenge hosted by The Mind Trust, a non-profit organization in Indianapolis, reflect the belief that surfacing and supporting the implementation of new ideas is a key approach to creating deep and lasting change in education.

These examples provide a glimpse of the dizzying array of the different, and often competing, ways in which today's education changemakers are approaching their work and the absence of any foundational agreement about what the future of education should look like.

> **Patchwork Solutions**
> Looking ahead, could the future education landscape continue to be rich with ideas but lacking a cohesive vision or commitment to a common aim?

In the absence of some significant shift, this seems to be the baseline course for education changemaking in ten years' time.

A Shift in Course: Signals of Change
Despite the strength of this current trajectory, changing external demands on the public education system – including both societal expectations and a changing employment landscape – are increasing the pressure not only for education systems to change but also for changemakers to rethink their approaches. In addition, many stakeholders believe that the system has already been struggling to change quickly enough to help

enough students and communities, particularly the nation's most vulnerable; and to sustain and spread change when it does occur. In light of such challenges, the current trajectory of education changemaking in the U.S. could shift. In particular, two present-day trends could cause a new course to emerge:

- Increasing interest in collaboration among education changemakers could lead to a more cohesive change agenda than exists today.
- Increasing authority and influence of the communities most affected by education reform could lead to a change in the leadership and focus of education changemaking.

These two trends, along with signals of change illustrating how they are manifesting today, are explored further below.

Collaborative Agendas
Some state-level leaders, nonprofits, and funders are demonstrating interest in building more multi-partner collaborations to make change. Such stakeholders are recognizing the importance of cross-sector and authentic relationships in the effort to shift the enormous system that is U.S. public education. This trend could lead to the development of cohesive state-level or regional educational change agendas on which diverse stakeholders work together. It could also lead to more, and increasingly powerful, efforts to foster national movements around education transformation. Some current signals of this change, or early indicators, illustrating the emergence of more collaboratively formed agendas in and beyond education are described below.

- Pittsburgh's Remake Learning Network has more than 200 affiliated organizations in its loosely connected but vision-oriented ecosystem. The ten-year-old organization's commitment to taking a network-based approach stems from its belief that "no one institution has the mandate or resources to take on massive, systemic issues like transforming education."[7]

- Started in 2016, Blue Meridian Partners is a collaborative of twelve philanthropic institutions and individuals dedicated to investing at least $1 billion in evidence-based programs that serve economically disadvantaged youth.[8] The contributors use shared decision-making authority and aggregate their capital and expertise with the belief that such coordination will increase effectiveness.

- Partnerships that utilize the collective impact model emphasize the ways in which different institutions and leaders – including school districts, higher education institutions, religious leaders, county governments, and more – can fit together to create change in education and to ensure student success. More than 182 such education-focused initiatives exist, with about 40 percent having launched between 2011 and 2014.[9]

- In 2017, governors of fifteen states formed the bi-partisan United States Climate Alliance, which is committed to upholding the Paris Agreement on climate change. This move signals a shift toward gubernatorial leadership and statewide collaboration in the absence of consistent federal-level leadership.

- Education Reimagined began as a cross-sector conversation about possibilities for education, with participants learning together before pursuing any particular vision or solution. Today, it is an independent organization with the ambitious goal of creating a national movement that shifts the education paradigm from being school-centered to being learner-centered.

These signals of change demonstrate increasing interest in finding points of common ground, along with a desire to break down traditional silos and collectively promote change.

Shooting for the Moon
Looking ahead, what if changemakers rallied stakeholders around a common vision for education?

Communities in Charge

Communities facing the most extreme inequity are often the focus of reform efforts, but the people most affected by that inequity rarely lead educational change. Traditional decision-makers are increasingly aware of this tension. In addition, more and more communities are rejecting external narratives of reform and are looking instead to their peers or to leaders who have lived experience of inequity and other challenges. This shift could lead to a future landscape in which communities increasingly set the agenda for education changemaking, with other stakeholders uniting behind their visions. Signals of change pointing toward increasing community leadership appear below.

- San Diego Unified School District, which serves more than 130,000 students, recently adopted a "School Climate Bill of Rights" that entitles students to restorative practices over traditional discipline measures. This Bill of Rights was put forth by Mid-City CAN, a grassroots organization based in the City Heights neighborhood, a traditionally low-income community of color.[10]

- EduColor began as a support group for self-determined advocates of color that grew into a monthly Twitter chat and newsletter. Today it is building a movement for educational equity, student agency, and culturally competent pedagogy that is explicitly and intentionally led by educators of color.

- State boards of education are becoming increasingly attentive to community input on policy decisions and are also working to increase the depth of their engagement with communities. For example, both North Carolina and Washington state are actively working to examine who is and is not at their decision-making tables and to expand their stakeholder pools.[11]

- New York City's participatory budgeting process is giving residents increased control over how education funding and other types of public monies are spent. The process allows

New Yorkers to vote on how to prioritize projects. The state plans to leverage this strategy to increase local ownership and engagement of school improvement efforts.

- Concerted efforts to bring more young people, women, and people of color into traditional leadership structures are becoming more widespread. For example, organizations such as Run for Something and Emerge America are explicitly recruiting underrepresented candidates to run for elected office. Many Silicon Valley companies are also working to diversify their leadership and workforce. In education, New Schools Venture Fund and Teach for America have pursued diversity efforts aimed at ensuring that the people most affected by their work have a voice in shaping the organizations' efforts. For example, the 2016 New Schools Venture Fund Summit was praised for its explicit focus on race and inclusion.[12] Similarly, Teach for America has been focusing on corps diversity, with about half of its 2017 corps identifying as people of color and one-third being first-generation college students (up from 39 percent and 26 percent, respectively, in 2013) and with 43 percent of the 2017 corps' having received Pell Grants (up from 39 percent in 2013).[13]

These signals of change demonstrate the increasing authority and recognition of leadership of grassroots and traditionally underrepresented actors, as well as increasing attempts at inclusion by traditional institutions.

By the People, for the People
Looking ahead, what if the communities most affected by educational inequity led education changemaking efforts with the support of other stakeholders?

A New Dynamic: Examining Assumptions
The three possible courses of education changemaking explored above reflect a crucial assumption: that the urgency and opportunity of the present moment will fuel continued commitment to education changemaking, whatever form it ends up taking in ten years' time. However, other factors could change that dynamic. In particular, education changemaking efforts could decline if other priorities captured the interest and resources of people in the position to promote and fund social change. Among other pressing social challenges such as environmental instability, climate change, and political conflicts, the aging of the U.S. population could divert attention and resources from education changemaking efforts.

The Graying of America
While education has consistently been named one of voters' most important public policy priorities, the percentage of Americans rating it a top priority has in the past dipped when other pressing issues have arisen.[14] Similarly, philanthropic and advocacy efforts have been known to change over time, particularly when urgent challenges have required increased attention. Currently, the population of older Americans is growing rapidly; the Census Bureau projects that 20 percent of the American population will be over the age of 65 in 2030. In 2010, that group made up 13 percent of the population; in 1970, less than 10 percent.[15] Education is currently states' number one expenditure.[16] However, in face of this demographic shift, state budgets and socially minded changemakers could place increasing emphasis on the needs of older adults, and education could find itself on the back burner. Signals of change supporting this shift in dynamic are described on the following page.

- In 2013, the Foundation for Excellence in Education produced a report forecasting strain on public education budgets due to the growing aging population. It also highlighted an increasing age-dependency ratio, a measure that compares the number of working-age adults to the number of adults old enough to exit the workforce and children too young to have entered it. In 2010, for every 100 working-age people, the U.S. had 59 people older or younger than working age. In 2030, that ratio is expected to be 100 to 76.[17]

- The Pew Charitable Trust's "Fiscal 50" project analyzed economic, fiscal, and demographic trends across the fifty states and identified looming challenges that could affect education budgets in the future. The analysis pointed to unfunded retirement pension costs as an increasing future cost that has the potential to "limit states' budget flexibility when the costs come due. Less money may be available to fund other priorities, such as health care for low-income Americans or education, or to cover unexpected needs."[18] The analysis also pointed to increasing state expenditures on Medicaid, which is most states' second-largest expense after K-12 education.[19] Though most of the financial pressure is projected to be felt in 2030 and beyond, some states face more pressing budget situations than others.

- In 2015, Target changed the focus of its corporate philanthropy from education to health and wellness because of a shift in customer priorities, exemplifying how funders' focus areas can shift with changing times.[20]

- In another example of shifts in response to changing social circumstances, a report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy based on surveys with 162 private and community foundation CEOs found that nearly 30 percent of those surveyed intended to modify some or all of their organizations' programmatic goals or strategies in response to the 2016 election.[21]

Despite the urgency of making change in education and the unique opportunity to do so at this point in time, other priorities may become even more urgent or offer even more opportunity over the next decade.

On Our Own
Looking ahead, what if decreased attention from external changemakers and fewer financial resources created a need for educators and communities to find and fund solutions on their own?

Four Scenarios for the Future of Education Changemaking

Given today's baseline trajectory and the shifts that could alter the course of education changemaking, this section presents four scenarios illustrating possible futures of education changemaking in 2028. These scenarios serve to guide changemakers and other stakeholders in considering strategic considerations related to their and others' approaches. The four scenarios are introduced below and are then explored in more detail.

Patchwork Solutions: Investing in Islands of Innovation
As the current trajectory continues, both the number of solutions and the amount of resources supporting varied approaches to educational change increase, leaving a fragmented landscape of reform, with pockets of transformation amid a persistent status quo.

Shooting for the Moon:
A Governor Galvanizes Ambitious Action
Picking up on the trend toward more collaborative action, a diverse network of stakeholders led by an emboldened governor commits to the slow work of transforming public education at the state level.

By the People, for the People:
A Community Pursues Change on Its Own Terms
Reflecting the shift toward community leadership, one community exemplifies a surge of grassroots education changemaking efforts that involve students and others who have traditionally been excluded from education decision-making processes.

On Our Own: Educators Bootstrap Solutions
Highlighting the possibility of a major shift in public priorities, educators and communities struggle to find creative solutions to maintain and improve their areas' public education systems on shoestring budgets and without significant support from other sectors.

Each of these scenarios explores how educational changemakers might pursue their agendas and what kinds of impact they might have on public education and, ultimately, on society. Set in the year 2028, the scenarios use the present tense, as if the education changemaking trajectories that they describe have come to pass and their impacts can be seen. Each scenario includes four elements:

- **2028 Snapshot:** A brief overview of the education changemaking landscape.

- **Headlines from the Field:** A few future headlines capturing key themes from the scenario.

- **Story of Impact:** A short narrative that details leading changemakers' approaches and some of the impacts of their efforts, including possible victories, missteps, and dilemmas.

- **Reflection Questions:** A list of questions to help readers consider each scenario and its implications more deeply.

As one would expect from any future, each scenario includes both positive and negative dimensions. Together, they represent only four of the many possible ways the future of education changemaking in the U.S. could unfold. Their purpose is to depict a range of possible futures to help education stakeholders consider their own roles in shaping the future course of education changemaking and evaluate what types of efforts might best serve both young people and society.

Patchwork Solutions: Investing in Islands of Innovation

2028 Snapshot

As the current trajectory continues, both the number of solutions and the amount of resources supporting varied approaches to educational change increase, leaving a fragmented landscape of reform, with pockets of transformation amid a persistent status quo.

Education changemaking is a hot business characterized by the influx of private resources, by interest from many kinds of stakeholders, and by an appetite for trying new solutions with little accompanying patience for waiting for results. Educators and external changemakers alike feel spurred on by the need for schools to find new tools, curriculum, and strategies to meet state-level accountability requirements, to address continuing challenges, and to keep up in a risk-tolerant and always shifting environment. In a landscape already awash with models and solutions, changemakers with a wide array of motivations fund, start, and employ an abundance of tools and initiatives – with mixed results and ongoing ethical dilemmas.

HEADLINES FROM THE FIELD

We Have More "Edupreneurs" Than Ever Before.
Is That a Good Thing?

The Readiness Race:
Tech Companies Work to Woo Selective Educators

K-12 Naming Rights Movement Takes Off:
Tradeoffs of Having a Billionaire Benefactor

Story of Impact

A chief innovation officer for a school district reflects on the variety of approaches that characterize education changemaking and the benefits and challenges of working in a diversified landscape.

Last week, I observed students working through their Recreating Historical Artifacts unit at the museum, while their teachers were analyzing their portfolios. I felt a flash of gratitude that we have The Eckerton Foundation School of Engineering and Humanities in our district. We're a public district, but that campus relies on funding from the Eckerton Foundation to make its personalized and project-based approach work. Mr. and Mrs. Eckerton dedicated their wealth to that school model to demonstrate what can be achieved when we combine outstanding pedagogy, meaningful assessment, significant resources and support, and patience for results. They persuaded the school board to let them provide seed funding for this new, innovative public school in the district. Board members were wary at first, but when they realized that the Eckertons' vision aligned with much of what they wanted to do in their other schools, they took the opportunity.

The school has been open for five years, and they are seeing results. As the district's Chief Innovation Officer, I am so proud of what the school has been able to accomplish and the new conversations it has sparked across the district. I am also frustrated that it remains one school in one district, a tiny bit of light in an entire public education system that feels fundamentally unchanged from when I started working in it. Being a tiny light is wonderful, and the school has garnered enormous attention. But I am left wondering, "To what end?" The Eckertons funded the school so that others could see what was possible, learn from its successes and mistakes, and create

better learning experiences for kids across the district, the state, and the country. Five years in, we haven't even made a dent in our own backyard.

On some levels, I understand why. The education system is enormous; even our single district serves thousands of kids and is a big ship to try and turn. And with so many new approaches and ideas cropping up – adding to the already-long list of existing approaches and ideas – it seems as if every school is doing its own thing, committed to a vision that's pretty separate from any other's. Some schools even seem to drift from one vision to another, hoping to find something that works for them. It's difficult to have common conversations about teaching and learning any more, even in our own district. The tight-knit Eckerton community and the other schools don't seem to see much reason to interact, even though sharing ideas and learning together was the entire point.

It's not that I think everyone should drop what they are doing today and mimic what Eckerton is doing. Many schools are doing great work, and the obsession with scaling up new approaches right away has rightly waned. But at this rate, where will we be in another ten years? In another twenty? And what about the kids whose schools are not lucky enough to have a benefactor that is ready to commit to meeting their needs? Or those with a fly-by-night champion du jour who wants to fail fast and shake things up but has little interest in understanding the real and complex needs of kids and the long work of transformation?

For example, I took my first central office job because the superintendent seemed as if he was going to fight for kids. He talked about innovation and taking calculated risks, and I was energized by that mindset. However, it didn't take me long to realize that he equated those characteristics with adopting whatever new ed tech platform would cause the biggest splash, not with taking the time to consider whether it was

pedagogically sound or if the company shared our values. Looking back, I am more empathetic to his situation. He was part of a rat race to prove that he was the most innovative, just to keep up with the times and with the expectations of funders and the school board. No one wanted to hear that the first step of creating change was the most difficult one.

Even though that's an extreme example, every day I hear about another local school or district adopting another tool, model, or program, entering another innovation competition, or hiring a new person who promises to transform teaching and learning. I understand that we face urgent challenges and that many people simply want to jumpstart change. And I believe that having more choices and options to create meaningful learning experiences has led to better outcomes for countless kids. Still, I worry that sometimes the same ideas get repackaged and sold as something new to make it look as if change is underway when it's not really. That doesn't serve anyone well.

I also remember how overwhelming all the talk about fostering social-emotional skills and developing more meaningful assessments was when those topics became larger parts of the conversation about how to reform education. We had only a partial understanding of how to achieve those goals. There was a strong impulse to rush to solutions without acknowledging that those new goals required rethinking dramatically the purpose and structure of school. Some of the ed tech, curriculum development, and professional development companies saw that impulse as an opportunity to appeal to districts that felt pressure to do something, to do anything. In some cases, the results were not just unhelpful but, I believe, were actually harmful to students and learning communities.

Things have settled down some since then, but those tendencies still exist. I'm thankful that I get to observe firsthand what real change can look like. At the same time, I also don't

see a path forward for that change to take hold at scale. The teachers, students, and parents at Eckerton are reaping the rewards. But I worry about the kids whose schools and teachers haven't hit this jackpot. What happens to them? Do they flounder?

Reflection Questions

- Can the presence of many diverse efforts eventually influence the entire U.S. public education system, or at least a state's entire public education system? Should that be a primary aim of education innovation?

- How might the public education system's role as a foundational civic institution shift in a more diversified landscape with an even wider range of visions, aims, and approaches than exists today?

- How might education stakeholders balance the need to increase the system's tolerance for risk and capacity for innovation while giving changemaking efforts enough time to produce results and avoiding change for change's sake?

Shooting for the Moon: A Governor Galvanizes Ambitious Action

2028 Snapshot

Picking up on the trend toward more collaborative action, a diverse network of stakeholders led by an emboldened governor commits to the slow work of transforming public education at the state level.

In 2018, as more power and influence over education shifted to the state level, an emboldened governor called for an "Education Moon Shot" that challenged education organizations and influencers to work together and make big, bold change in the state's schools. A few years into the effort, a network of groups has come together to create lasting change. Some people criticize the effort as being the next in a long line of ambitious, place-based education reforms that have failed to yield sustainable results. Others see opportunity for this collaborative effort to promote real transformation.

HEADLINES FROM THE FIELD

Growing Pains over Governor's Education "Moon Shot"

First Climate Change, Now Education: Governors Won't Wait

An Inside Look at the State Collaborative Working to Transform Education, and the Funders Who Are Writing Checks and Getting Out of the Way

Story of Impact

A governor reflects on the process and results of a collaborative statewide effort to transform education.

Back in 2018, we were exhausted by a narrative of education innovation that never led to widespread change. My colleagues on the state board felt as if they were always chasing the next new idea. I can only imagine what the superintendents, principals, and teachers were feeling, being pitched something shiny every month with no plan for how it would fundamentally change what they knew needed to shift. With the competing priorities of policymakers, funders, entrepreneurs, advocates, and everyone else who had a great idea for how to transform education, they were being pulled in so many different directions. Everyone was going to their own conferences, committee hearings, union meetings, fundraisers, and any other number of venues and talking about how to make change independently of what everyone else was doing. The energy was all there; we just needed to find a way to bring it all together. Building a groundswell of political will for system-wide, sustainable change was the only tool I had left in my toolbox, and it's not as if that's an easy one to use well.

I didn't just announce one day, "We are going to be the first state in the nation in which every student is truly receiving a 21st century education." It was conversation after conversation after conversation. I recognized that most of the different groups that care about education were using a lot of the same words and fundamentally wanted similar things, but that they had no mechanism for working together across differences to achieve those common aims. At the beginning, we had some

very difficult conversations as we developed our shared vision, but we all knew we needed that foundation if we hoped to sustain the work.

Now that we've been pursuing a common agenda for a few years, the flywheel of change is picking up steam. As an example, the education program at our state's flagship university has basically become the R&D lab for our schools. The program faculty have been very responsive to teachers' ideas and questions and have found ways to bring important research and data about learning to the classroom and beyond in ways that weren't happening before.

This shift toward more of an exchange didn't happen overnight. But now that it's well underway, the educators coming out of that university's preparation programs expect its partnerships and supports, and those who were already in schools have come to find immense value in the relationships. They're symbiotic: teachers have the time and opportunity to adapt when new research is released, and their practice informs the research. The partners trust that everyone is doing their part and pulling their weight.

Because this is an all-hands-on-deck effort, we're also seeing support and involvement from sectors that had never seen a role for themselves in education or had never had an entry point. The opportunities for student co-ops and internships have skyrocketed. We have found new funding streams and mechanisms by partnering with philanthropic institutions and by adjusting our budgets to ensure sustainability of those investments. Most districts and their teachers' unions have created new roles for teachers and other educators to reflect agreed priorities. But I am perhaps most proud of the increased levels of interagency collaboration. We set up innovative and

secure data-sharing agreements so that, for instance, our departments of mental health, public health, and education could collaborate on how to help students and families access the services that they need. Improving our educational system is the umbrella goal, but everyone has realized that, when we pull on that thread, we have to address the bigger fabric of social supports at the same time. I appreciate all the work that others who came before me did to help funders understand that crucial point. The funders who are involved with us recognize that we can't just do one thing and that nothing happens overnight.

No one is 100 percent happy, and it took a long time to build the trust and the relationships. We're still focusing on rallying organizations and communities around the common vision but are trying to avoid dictating too much. There is room for multiple approaches within the push; indeed, we need to try a variety of things to make sure we create a truly 21st century education system. What matters is that we have a common commitment and are applying our resources and efforts to back up what we say. I can see the difference all around: student engagement is up; learning outcomes are increasingly positive; our partnerships are more productive; and the community is more aligned. We are all speaking the same language about giving all of our students the very best, and it's helping bring people together in a way I didn't expect.

Often, we hear the word "transformation" and believe that it happens because of some miracle innovation from some hero or genius. For us, the transformation is in the collaboration. The ideas that our partners are pursuing are having so much more impact than anything any one of us could have come up with on our own. We just need to stick with it for the long haul and stay clear to our vision.

Reflection Questions

- What might a collaborative, commonly held vision for education reform look like?

- What are the barriers to, and opportunities for, creating collaborative networks and building collective commitment to public education? How might those barriers and opportunities differ across contexts?

- What impacts, both positive and negative, might a widespread collective effort such as the one described in this scenario have on communities? What would it take for such an effort to be inclusive of learners, parents, and other community members?

By the People, for the People: A Community Pursues Change on Its Own Terms

2028 Snapshot

Reflecting the shift toward community leadership, one community exemplifies a surge of grassroots education changemaking efforts that involve students and others who have traditionally been excluded from education decision-making processes.

After years of being handed regulations and educational approaches over which they had little input, grassroots leaders are making change on their own terms. Their efforts to ensure that traditionally marginalized students receive truly equitable educational experiences have gained traction. Younger and more diverse than ever, a new generation of political and community leaders with lived experience of educational inequity is bringing educators, learners, parents, and other community members into decision-making processes and is often following their lead. While resistance to this new power structure, along with persistent structural inequities, have kept this approach from being widely adopted, more inclusive practices have begun to work their way into the mainstream.

HEADLINES FROM THE FIELD

Nothing about Me without Me:
Young Leaders Stand Up for Their Educational Rights

Authentic Education Grows from the Grassroots

Community Plan Faces Backlash;
Residents Try to Persuade Skeptics

Story of Impact

A student describes her learning environment and her community's grassroots efforts to shape it.

My Advanced Communication and Collaboration teacher grew up on my block, so when I told her my project idea of hosting a neighborhood gathering to build awareness about the participatory budgeting reform ballot measure, she had so many ideas about the people I should talk to and how to get the word out. She hadn't planned to become a teacher, she told us on the first day of school. But a new Homegrown Homeroom program at her university had caught her attention, and she ended up coming back to teach Transitioning Leaders (what my school calls the last year of high school). I have really benefitted from her perspective, her support of me, and her understanding of my experience – her family immigrated to the United States like mine did. And I'm not the only one; a student in a very small town in the South that I met when I was investigating innovative county revenue models says she has a few Homegrown teachers, too. They make her feel much more at ease about possibly moving away from home and pursuing a career unlike anything anyone in her family has ever done before. I can relate to that.

I'm on our Community Council, and I have advocated for the Homegrown Homeroom program in our school district. I take my role as a Learner Representative seriously; I sometimes can't believe that they trust me to understand what my peers want and need and represent us all when we make important decisions about what happens in our neighborhood and city, but they do. My older cousin was the first-ever Learner Rep about five years ago. Back then, they liked having her there so they could say they were listening to young people, even though she didn't always feel heard or respected as an equal member of the council.

My family is often amazed at the opportunities we have at my school: mentors from so many backgrounds and of so many races and ethnicities; a performing and visual arts program that introduces us to artists and art from around the country and the world; opportunities to explore topics that are relevant and challenge us academically; and funding to support those opportunities even though our community isn't wealthy. My school started as a co-op school that opened in protest of school closures and sub-par education in our neighborhood. When more and more families wanted to participate and the school started getting more attention from media and potential funders, the school board invited it to become part of the district and advise other schools on how to engage their communities.

The co-op board agreed under the condition that the founders of the school, students, and other community members would have official seats on decision-making bodies. They also demanded that an Education Governance Committee, made up of some district staff but mostly residents, experts, and advocates directly selected by residents, serve as a filter for all proposals about new programs and changes to district policies. The superintendent and the mayor had both publicly stated their commitment to follow the lead of their constituents, and the co-op board gave them the perfect opportunity to deliver on that promise. Now, the people who live here have a say in the district's priorities and make sure our leaders know what matters to us.

When I was in elementary school in another neighborhood, everything seemed to be about the test, and I rarely saw anyone who looked like me in charge of anything or in any of the books we read. I'm sure the people who ran that school wanted the best for us. But how would they know if they didn't ask? Obviously, involving more people into the process makes it more complicated and sometimes slows it down, but we are all learning how to work together better. And many of the people in charge grew up here and know us, so that makes collaborating easier. Some people are being listened to in a real way for the first time, and I am grateful that they've found ways to make our school and community what it is.

Communities like mine – where the people who end up living with decisions are part of making them – are little islands. I hear about new schools and communities asking about our approach all the time, and I can feel the energy for this type of change. Still, I get impatient, and I wish the islands would spread faster. But, like we learned during our community leadership internship, there will always be resistance to change, especially if it means that people whose power has usually gone unrecognized are getting to have a say. Some of the more traditional leaders and people who liked things the way they were before were worried that they would be on the losing end when our community started to move in this direction. But most of them have come around; they realize that giving more people a voice doesn't mean losing theirs.

We still have some complex problems to tackle: our schools are still too segregated; we have to find creative ways to pay for everything that makes our school and community work because the major funding sources are still controlled outside of our community; and people find ways to sabotage good ideas by not giving them enough time when those ideas threaten what they know. But at least I can tell that what I say and do matters and makes a difference. I see it as a cycle: the more I get involved, the more I want to be involved, and the more I can do for myself and my community.

Reflection Questions

- What might a school or district look like if it were led or designed by or with the learners and communities it served?

- How might education organizations increase the level of community involvement and voice?

- What approaches might changemakers who have not traditionally held institutional authority use to influence education? What approaches are working well today?

On Our Own: Educators Bootstrap Solutions

2028 Snapshot

Highlighting the possibility of a major shift in public priorities, educators and communities struggle to find creative solutions to maintain and improve their areas' public education systems on shoestring budgets and without significant support from other sectors.

Though the sharp increase in the number of adults over the age of 65 in the United States came as no surprise, the "silver tsunami" still shocked the nation's systems and priorities. Finding new health care and livability solutions for a larger population of older adults who are living longer has become the primary focus of philanthropists and social entrepreneurs, as well as of technology companies that are searching for untapped markets. After decades of being courted and supported by private resources, the education sector now finds itself having to rely on diminished public resources, hyper-local funders, and its own can-do spirit. In face of this reduced support, a new breed of education entrepreneurs has forged ahead on their own, finding opportunities and funding where they can.

HEADLINES FROM THE FIELD

Education's Superheroes:
Meet Five Principals Doing It Their Way in Tough Times

Education vs. Health Care Spending: A Retrospective

Superintendent Defends New Partnership with Tresilient, Inc.: Detractors Say High School Curriculum Now "Basically an Employee Training Program"

Story of Impact

A parent reflects on how each community develops its own approaches now that major priority shifts have deflected attention from education.

Last night I went to the awards ceremony that honored the principal at my son's school. Her accomplishments over the past few years have been well-publicized, but hearing them listed out, one-by-one, I was struck once again by everything she has managed to do for our community and our kids.

She took the job no one wanted after our last foundation partnership ended and public funds remained depleted, leaving the district with several newly unfunded initiatives and with kids whose needs it could no longer afford to meet. But she's never focused on the bleak side of things. She is in classrooms every day, and every interaction with kids seems to inspire her. Because of this principal, my son and his classmates have art classes and access to other electives that they didn't even have before funding went downhill. When she saw the influx of retired adults moving to our community, she put out a call for artists and people with other specialty skills who might be willing to volunteer. The retirees who stepped up have been amazing and have added so much to our kids' experiences.

To help manage tight finances, the principal also set up a profit-sharing agreement with our biggest local employer. That agreement gives the school a steady stream of funding (though it's not much). In return, our community's high school students have to do an internship with the employer at some point during their four years of high school. That requirement sometimes limits the opportunities students could otherwise explore, but we all appreciate that the company is stepping up and isn't demanding more of the school, like some other "altruistic"

companies are. For example, I heard about one school that had to put its sponsor's brand on all of its materials and whose principal is regularly required to help promote the company.

Our principal also forged the relationship with our local community foundation. She was wary at first, having witnessed firsthand the challenges of trying to keep things afloat when a funding partner changed its priorities. But because the foundation is here in the community and she can work directly with them on a regular basis, she recognized the opportunity. Now, the foundation provides grants to teachers through a pooled fund to do community-based problem-solving projects with the students – almost as if they are funding a nonprofit organization to address a social issue – and it counts for credit for the high schoolers.

I don't know how she does it all, and sometimes I wish she wouldn't try to do everything herself. She has more freedom than ever before to do what she believes is best for kids, and she has no trouble walking away from an opportunity if a potential partner doesn't agree with her vision. I think she could stand to be more trusting and open to opportunities; I imagine we have a lot to learn from others who are in similar situations or who have helped forge solutions elsewhere. Our community has banded together, which has been a silver lining to the struggle, but we have also become more insular.

I see other schools bending over backwards to find money anywhere they can get it. My sister-in-law, who is an "educational funding innovation consultant," is doing very well for herself helping schools scrape together resources from the unlikeliest of places. Even though things remain challenging, I at least know that the people in this community trust one another and are willing to do what it takes to support our schools.

Beyond funding, I volunteer at my son's school twice a week. It's a lot of work, but so many of the parents at our school can't get out of work, and the kids would suffer if those of us who can help didn't step up. Parents and other community members know that their involvement is a key part of what's keeping us afloat, so those of us who can do our part, and in the end, we're all better for it. I don't think I would be as in touch with what's happening at the school and in the district if we parents weren't such an important part of the infrastructure that's making it all work. My employer understands that volunteering at my son's school is a major priority for me, so they give me and other parents the time off. The schools are so eager to have the help that they do whatever they can to accommodate everyone's schedules and preferences.

I appreciate that my son's school is run by people who really care and that we are all involved. I also know that not every child and parent has that. Unfortunately, no one has come up with a solution that works across the public education system; each community is out there on their own, working to make the best of a challenging situation.

Reflection Questions

- What do education stakeholders need to consider in regard to changing national priorities and their potential effects on public education?

- What strategies might help make newer sources of funding, or their impacts, stable and long-term? How might funders and public education leaders collaborate to promote sustainability and evaluate potential trade-offs?

- How might hyper-local, community-based education efforts fit into or work against the public education system's traditional role of promoting civic responsibility and fostering expanded social connections?

Strategic Considerations for Education Changemaking

Because any large system tends to stick to the status quo unless it has sufficient incentive to change, making the U.S. public education system more equitable, more effective, and more aligned to what young people and society need it to be will require deliberate and sustained effort. Even so, decades of education reform efforts by people working within and beyond the system have demonstrated that not every effort leads to lasting change and that not every change leads to positive outcomes for young people and communities. Indeed, many changes have proven to have been short-lived or to have had unintended consequences. Other changes have taken root, leading to shifts at the classroom, district, and state levels.

As this paper has explored, education changemaking efforts are already abundant. The scenarios demonstrate that education stakeholders will increasingly be faced with choices about how to navigate such efforts, where to exert influence, and what vision of education they want to pursue. To help readers consider what path of education changemaking they are currently taking and what path or paths they might want to help create in the future, the strategic considerations below look across the scenarios to explore high-level implications for the future of education changemaking in the U.S.

Motivation and Vision of Changemakers

The characters in the scenarios were motivated by a range of factors and had different visions of their ideal education systems. Similarly, the visions and motivations that drive today's changemaking efforts are often implicit or are not discussed regularly. As more and more players get involved in education reform, stakeholders can examine those players' values and motivations and evaluate alignment with their own. They can also consider whose visions are privileged and why.

In Your Context:

- What changemaking efforts are you or others in your community currently pursuing?

- Whose vision(s) of public education do they represent?

- What perspectives would you like to see have greater influence?

Scope of Change

Three of the scenarios illustrated small, localized changemaking efforts; the other presented a large-scale initiative. Educators, funders, and advocates are currently grappling with which scope of change is more likely to yield positive results. In the future, as more changemakers get involved in education reform, the question of when and how to coordinate will become increasingly pressing and complex. To help discern a way forward, education stakeholders can explore their perspectives on whether widespread and equitable change is better achieved by seeding a variety of approaches simultaneously or by starting with a common approach.

In Your Context:
Which avenue to change seems to be more fruitful in your context: testing a variety of approaches simultaneously or pursuing a common approach?

Role of Funding

Some of the scenarios presented well-resourced changemaking efforts, while others represented scarce funding environments. The funding landscape for education is growing more complex, with increased participation by private funders and consideration of new funding formulas and mechanisms. In the future, if funding streams diversify further or if certain funding sources become less reliable, stakeholders will need to find ways to carry out public education's mandate and, ideally, its promise, in a different funding environment. Assessing opportunities to access private resources based on whether those opportunities have the potential to promote or hinder equity and the collective good will be a crucial step. It will also be important to consider how changemaking efforts might be sustained if any given funding source dried up.

In Your Context:

- Where have you had to navigate such considerations to date?

- Moving forward, where or how might you be able to pursue sustainable and ethical funding sources for your changemaking efforts?

Nature of Decision-Making Authority

The scenarios reflected the leadership of different kinds of changemakers. In the current education reform landscape, authority lies largely with public institutions, large philanthropic and advocacy organizations, and well-resourced individuals. Nonetheless, such stakeholders are demonstrating increased interest in involving those most affected by the changes, and grassroots changemaking is on the rise. In the future, decision-making authority over what reforms are on the table could look considerably different than it does today. Education stakeholders may need to review their governance

and decision-making structures to ensure that those structures support a public education system that works well for all learners as well as for society.

In Your Context:

In what ways might your organization's decision-making structures need to shift to produce the outcomes you hope to see from public education or to accelerate impact?

Structures Enabling Collaboration and Coordination

Apart from who was involved in leadership and decision-making, some of the scenarios alluded to structures and processes that supported increased collaboration, coordination, and input from a variety of stakeholders. Network-based structures have been gaining sway to support education collaboration and innovation, and their adoption is increasingly being enabled by technological tools. Having more of them in the future would reflect the current appetite for fostering more and deeper points of connection among changemakers. Even if the future brings a more fragmented education reform environment, creating structures that help stakeholders communicate and collaborate across silos could ameliorate the more challenging aspects of a highly diversified education landscape. In navigating such possibilities, education stakeholders can consider how they might adjust their current structures or foster new ones that aid the spread of good ideas and bring together partners.

In Your Context:

What structures and systems could you change or put in place to enable more partnerships and collaboration, even with stakeholders who are in other sectors or who are pursuing different approaches?

Purpose of Public Education

In each scenario, the public education system supported, and was supported by, learners and communities in distinct ways. Indeed, education systems reflect and influence society in ways that cannot be overstated. In the future, as society becomes more complex and the challenges that it faces intensify, the public education system will need to help learners and communities navigate that environment effectively. To help the public education system lead, and not just respond to, such changes, stakeholders can consider how the role and purpose of public education in society might be defined so that the system can reach its promise to, and responsibility for, learners and the nation.

In Your Context:

- What roles does public education play in your community today?

- Is it serving the existing needs of learners and society?

- Do stakeholders agree on its purpose?

- If not, how might you help clarify how your community views the purpose of public education in the future and its vision for its graduates?

Summary: Responding to the Moment

As this paper has explored, education changemakers are facing a unique moment in which social, economic, and political factors are converging to alter both the context and nature of education reform and to bring new leaders and benefactors to the fore. In this relatively open landscape, there is opportunity for new players to become involved in education reform, for established actors to become more involved or to shift their approaches, and for all education changemakers to consider how best to engage with one another and with the learners and communities whom they aim to serve. The strategic considerations above highlight far-reaching questions whose answers will influence what visions and outcomes education changemakers choose to pursue, how they carry out their work, and which efforts gain the most traction over the coming decade. The strategic considerations also highlight uncertainty as to how best to effect large-scale, sustainable change across this essential form of public infrastructure.

Even stakeholders who are not currently seeking to champion change in education have the opportunity to explore how today's decisions might affect young people, communities, and the education system in the future. It is time to consider whether our collective efforts to improve education are indeed pushing closer to an equitable and effective education system that serves all learners and society well. If today's education changemaking efforts are not moving in that direction, or are not gaining enough traction, what might you do – and with whom – to get closer to that goal?
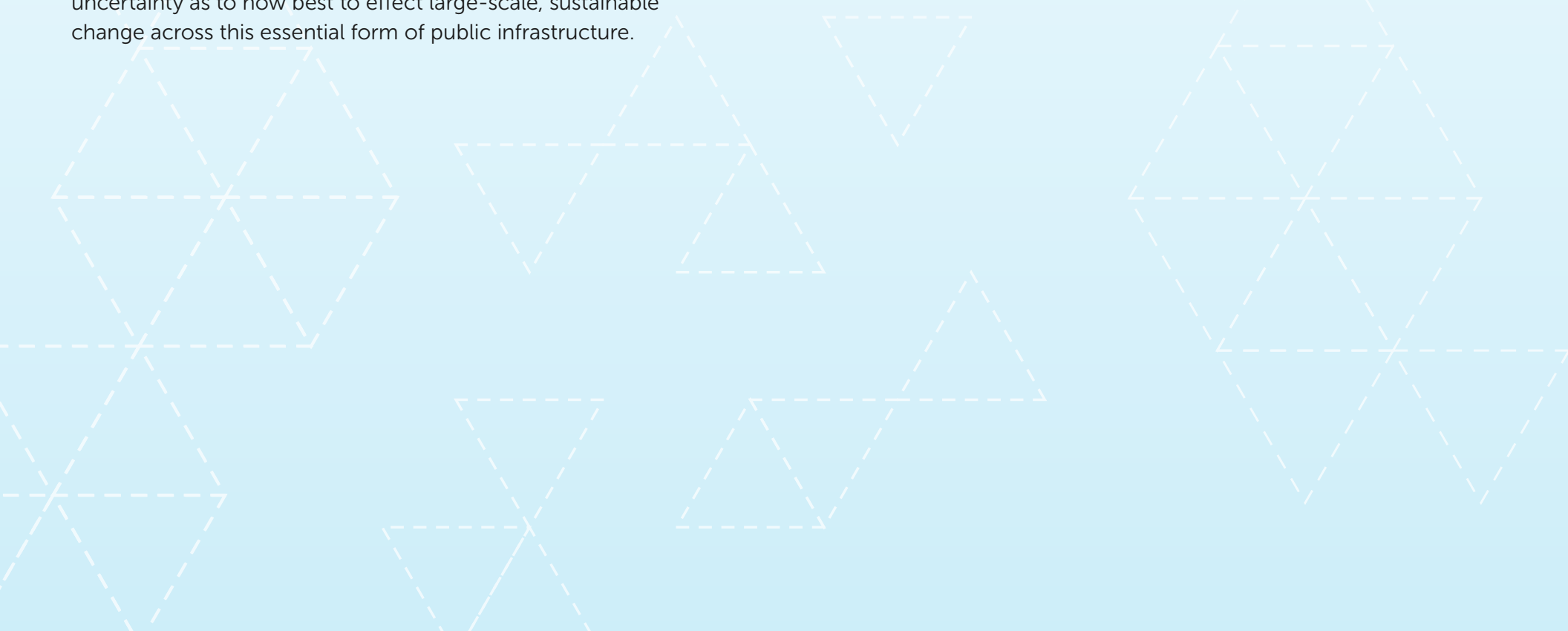
Appendix

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KnowledgeWorks

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