WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT
What COVID-19 Could Mean for the Future of Learning
**Katherine Prince:** Hi, everybody. I’m Katherine Prince. I work as Vice President of Strategic Foresight at KnowledgeWorks, where I’ve had the pleasure of exploring the future of learning for about 14 years now. I’m excited to be looking to draw from this moment and to think ahead as our circumstances have changed.

**Jason Swanson:** And working the Brady Bunch boxes... Maria?

**Maria Romero:** Hi, my name is Maria Romero. I am originally from Venezuela. I’ve been here in the States since 2015 and working as a futurist pretty much since then. I am the senior manager of strategic foresight at KnowledgeWorks and happy to be here.

**Katie King:** Hi, everyone. I am Katie King. I’m the director of strategic foresight engagement at KnowledgeWorks. I’ve been working with the organization since about 2015. I was a classroom teacher before that and, I’m looking forward to diving in.

And one other logistical thing: We’ll have the chat open. Please share your thoughts and insights there. The Q&A box is where we’ll be monitoring things a little more closely to see if there are questions that I can then pose to the group. If you have something you want us to possibly discuss, put it in the Q&A box. Otherwise, thoughts and things you want us to take a look at afterwards, feel free to use the chat.

**Swanson:** And my name’s Jason Swanson. I’m the director of strategic foresight here at KnowledgeWorks. I’m based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I’ve been with KnowledgeWorks going on six years this summer. I’ll also be playing the role of facilitator.

We put our heads together to start to think of some bigger questions that we might want to tackle from each one of our perspectives. Our hope is to go through those and then leave approximately 15 minutes for Q&A at the end.

One of the first questions that I got when the Coronavirus really started to take hold was from my parents—my mother, in particular—she was really curious. She said,

**I don’t always understand what you do, but you’re always looking at the future. Did you see this coming?**

**Prince:** We did and didn’t see it coming. When I look back at some of the work we were doing in 2010, 2011, we were certainly writing personas and scenarios that alluded to these kinds of circumstances and the kind of broadscale disruption that COVID-19 has brought. Yet, at the same time, it’s one thing to know that those kinds of things are possible, and it’s another thing to remember day-to-day that it’s coming. I think we’ve been really aware that system shocks were a distinct possibility, that our systems were brittle and needed to be more resilient. We even wrote a scenario about a young learner whose parents had died in a pandemic, so we kind of knew but when it becomes real, we’re all still taken by surprise when it hits.

**Romero:** Yeah, for me, it’s the same. It’s like, yes and no. We haven’t said explicitly anywhere that this is going to happen because we are not trying to make predictions. That’s not really what we do, so it was always a possibility, it was kind of on the radar, and not only this but more, as Katherine was saying, a system shock. It could be a pandemic, but it could also be, for example, a natural disaster; it would still have a similar effect because it interrupts our normalcy as we understand it. So that’s important to mention. I like this
notion that I read about a desensitized future. It’s like maybe after reading about it so much, people will just think, “Oh, yeah, you’ve told me this so many times and it has not happened, so probably you were wrong. So that’s it.” That’s a possibility. I also wonder if it’s our responsibility as futurists to communicate the urgency of the situation better so that people could take it seriously and not disregard it as something that it’s impossible or less likely.

Swanson: I think that’s really interesting. I heard a famous futurist, Peter Schwartz, say that there are countless forecasts out there about disruptive events—climate change, pandemics, you name it—and, yes, desensitized futures—we get sick of hearing it. We did the forecast retrospective, right, and we were talking about large-scale systems shock. All futures work considers inbound change and really a few big flavors for which future events would be one continuous series of big shocking events. By virtue of the work we talk about these shocks, I do wonder this is a desensitized future, and I also wonder about what vehicles for communication we might consider going forward to better communicate these things. Foresight’s an interesting thing. We lead with: “We can’t predict any of this. Yet it’s our job to make you spend time and resources to prepare for something that might not ever occur.” So, yeah, did we see it? I think “kind of” is good. Katie, is there anything that you’d care to weigh in on around this?

We do foresight to prepare to be surprised. It’s not so much that it eliminates the surprise entirely or it makes us 100 percent ready to handle it when it comes, but that we’ve done enough preparation that we know those disruptions are coming.

King: Yeah, I sort of have the unique experience that my parents both have a background in foresight, so our conversation certainly was different about it. I think one of the things that I have heard my dad say a lot that I think really applies is that we do foresight to prepare to be surprised. It’s not so much that it eliminates the surprise entirely or it makes us 100 percent ready to handle it when it comes, but that we’ve done enough preparation that we know those disruptions are coming. We can be resilient enough to hopefully withstand them as best as we can. I think about offering all of ourselves some grace in that there’s no way to be entirely prepared for a really big disruption, so understanding that and using that as information moving forward.

In keeping with that theme of preparing to be surprised, the current moment in time is riddled with critical uncertainty. What do you view as those big critical uncertainties for learning because of COVID-19?

Prince: One of them for me is where a learner is going to be and that’s a real near-term question. I mean some people are still wondering about whether their summer care is going to be open or not, and it’s a question for the fall and beyond. If they’re not in school five days a week or if they’re rolling closures, then what kinds of infrastructure to do we need to consider putting in place to help learners be safe, to help parents be able to work effectively and make sure that learners have the other kinds of supports that they need?

Romero: Yeah, somewhat related to that, to me, is the assessment. After we have gone through this period where learners are just getting whatever they can, but it’s not really uniform by any means, how are we going to assess those differences and then try to get them to where they need to be in a shorter amount of
time to catch up? But an even bigger question is that the objective? Is that what we aim to do with our education system as a whole or do we need to worry about other priorities before even getting to assessment? Also on that bigger kind of systemic question – yes, there are a lot of questions about the learners, but there’s also even more questions about the other adults involved in the learners’ lives – just to start, the teachers and how they can deal with going back to normal, if we can call it that even, and how to do it? Would they be willing to do it? What about the higher-risk population and their relationships that they have with their families? How would they manage those? We’ve seen that this crisis has put a toll in how first responders relate to their families because they need to keep some distance. Is that going to be what we do with teachers as well if they go back and they need to interact with a larger group of kids and because they spend a lot of time together. They don’t even need to be larger groups of kids to be at risk.

It’s going to be really challenging, and are we willing to have the hard conversations where we say, “We know what we need to do for kids and teachers, but we don’t know how to do it.” It may be unpopular, and it may be entirely different from what we’ve ever done before.

King: Yeah, I think my uncertainty, my biggest one right now is less about the external environment, which there are a lot of uncertainties there, but more about us and how we are going to respond and how willing we’re going to be to really face what we’re experiencing and let it change us? My question is: Are we going to let history be, and what has always been, be informative of our path forward but not necessarily be our goal? I think that we’re seeing people rise to the occasion of this moment in some really amazing ways. Continuing to do that over time – it’s going to be really challenging, and are we willing to have the hard conversations where we say, “We know what we need to do for kids and teachers, but we don’t know how to do it.” It may be unpopular, and it may be entirely different from what we’ve ever done before. Are we willing to have that conversation and make those attempts, or are we, in other cases, willing to say we don’t know what to do? But in either case, not necessarily be willing to go the path of least resistance (which I understand the appeal and have to fight that urge myself every day in this situation), so it’s really how long are we willing to stick with the difficult decisions and conversations we have to have in order to meet the needs of kids and communities and of our society?

Swanson: Yeah, those are the thoughts that are really keeping me up at night, Katie. It’s a very understandable very and human reaction to want to go back to life as we know it, even if that past paradigm is totally flawed. The critical uncertainty for me is can we deepen, spread and sustain the amazing work to a point that it’s almost transformational to the system? What’s our appetite for change while everything else is changing? I saw a comment pop up that it’s time for an education revolution, and, yes, it’s long been that time, right? So is this that moment to kind of push forward? It’s: Can we overcome that very human want to go back to how things were, even if that’s no longer an option?

Based on the conversations you’ve been having, are you seeing more interest in that conversation, and are you seeing it in any way the beginning of an appetite to engage in radical system redesign?
**Swanson:** Most of my conversations have been local. I’ve been hearing a lot of positive language from people that play deeply within the system, colleagues within the Pennsylvania Department of Education have used the T-word a lot, right? This is the time to transform learning. We’ve had to roll out innovative initiatives around distance learning – but can we begin to drive deeper change? Certainly western Pennsylvania with the stewardship of the Remake Learning Network and its amazing network members are acting very, very innovatively and very, very collaboratively to meet the demands that COVID-19 has placed on our learning communities. At the same time, they’re asking how these innovations can sow the seeds for that visionary future. Are they creating pockets of the future now and can they move to it? This has ranged from everything like innovative professional learning networks and even thinking about resource allocation radically differently. So what does it look like to truly share resources across district lines, including teaching? Might we see a regional model for teaching? I’m pleased and encouraged by what I’ve heard, really with the leadership that I’ve seen with people that are doing great things and fearlessly charging ahead right now.

*I think for too many learners, it’s just the bare bones, one-size-fits-all academics right now, and I’m worried that some stripped-down version of that might become an emergency norm.*

**Romero:** Yeah, I mentioned before that I think this crisis has accelerated conversations that we thought would happen in the next 10 years or so – but now they’re all kind of happening almost at the same time. We are forced into having these difficult conversations – kind of to your point, Katie – because it has made those flaws in the system much more obvious. We see the inequities more now than ever before. It just made it clear. On the other hand, because of the situation that we’re in, in one of the blog posts we recently posted on our Futures Thinking Now series, I talked about the futures triangle, which is a tool to understand how the drivers of change can be categorized between the past, present and the future. The past is understood as the way of history. In the situation that we’re in, because there’s this urgency to respond to what’s going on now, that the weight of history is lighter. So we have this opportunity to take this moment and not only respond to the present but also push ourselves toward a future vision that we already have, or that we might need to craft at this moment to then respond to the longer term, not only to the short term.

**Prince:** Yeah, I, too, and hearing people talk about and reading people talk about this as a generational opportunity to rethink, re-envision and restructure how we want learning to take place. I think one of the critical uncertainties that I’m feeling is: What will lead to that transformation? Will we seize that moment, or reverberate back, not even to how it was but accept some kind of basic minimum education or at least for emergency times? I know my daughter’s not having a full version of school. There are lots of comments in the chat box about the importance of addressing trauma – trauma this moment and other trauma in social-emotional learning over academics and having a community. I think for too many learners, it’s just the bare bones, one-size-fits-all academics right now, and I’m worried that some stripped-down version of that might become an emergency norm.

**King:** I think one of the kind of questions about that sort of how we might proceed if we do hope to see some transformation. I saw a comment about this in the chat from Nicholas: How do we expand who gets to be a part of that discussion? I think if we have the same power structures and the same decision-making processes that we have always had that we aren’t going to get there. I think Katherine just outlined some of what her daughter is experiencing, families are experiencing, there’s some commonality, but there’s also so much variation in what’s happening to assume that any one of us can capture that ourselves and then know what we need to do moving forward that will serve every learner and family. I think that it’s just a misguided
notion, so how we change the processes by which we pursue transformation is going to be critical if we actually have any chance of getting there.

Swanson: We can add this to our list of critical uncertainties, too: How do we invite others to come with us in co-creating this future that we want to move into, right? Because there is a certain amount of preaching to the choir with a lot of conversations around innovation and transformation, usually the same folks that show up. How do we invite those, what we could consider, unusual suspects as voices that aren’t often heard and really bring them into this watershed moment? Your voices are not only valuable; they’re critical to this. This is – we like to cast education as the intellectual infrastructure of our societies, so by rights we all own it, and we should have a say in what it looks like. I think that that’s going to be one of the most important considerations and strategies to think through in all of this.

My worry, though, is we might see a different scenario up here, where because it’s more cost effective to engage in more of an EdTech mediated environment, that we actually end up with a digital race to the bottom and that it’s seen as being as transformational, but it’s really innovating within a very narrow framework.

After discussing uncertainties, what are some possible scenarios that we might see – either on the other side of COVID-19 or even through as we emerge out of this?

Swanson: For me, I go back to – and I realize the future is not a binary place – but we have the more transformative scenario where we say, “Okay, to come out of this, we need to build the future upon the shoulders of partnership so that we can create systems that surround the learner that take all the best practices we see now in response to COVID and carry them through into the future. My worry, though, is we might see a different scenario up here, where because it’s more cost effective to engage in more of an EdTech mediated environment, that we actually end up with a digital race to the bottom and that it’s seen as being as transformational, but it’s really innovating within a very narrow framework.

King: Yeah, I think that’s really interesting. I think there were some questions in the Q&A about distance learning and the challenges that schools and students and families have faced with it, and your point makes me think: Is that the problem that we’re going to try to solve in a narrow way? How do we make distance learning better, which is something that we should address? Or are we going to take a more kind of holistic view of it because we could very easily focus narrowly on what didn’t work in our response this time and try and improve upon that, which I think could potentially get us to that scenario you’re talking about, Jason? Or we could expand what fundamentally hasn’t been working? Where did that show up in this place, in this situation? And what does that tell us, bigger picture, about we need to work on?

Romero: To what you were saying, Katie, about how different people are being impacted differently, and this is a crisis that is varying by state, by cities. Rural versus urban areas have different responses and have been impacted differently. So I think it’s just going to be kind of a patchwork of scenarios, you know, because different communities and learning communities are going to respond to either more narrow challenges, or maybe some of them are going to recognize that this is a unique opportunity to change the system as a whole and then they’re going to look for those partnerships. So instead of looking at it from the binary point of view, it’s more that it’s opening a spectrum and then each learning community can fall in that spectrum.
And so how do we connect those different scenarios? How are these different learning communities going to interact with each other? It could be like another scenario by itself.

*I feel like that could be a lever of change that would both help address immediate needs while also setting up the system to have a broader possibilities for learners across a variety of pedagogies.*

**Prince:** I think that there’s a plausible scenario in which we would see competency-based learning take much greater hold than it has today, though there has been a growing movement toward it. I think we’re realizing that we need to have broader and more effective ways of understanding what children have mastered and not just what they’ve sat and seen somewhere, whether it’s in person or online doing. I feel like that could be a lever of change that would both help address immediate needs while also setting up the system to have a broader possibilities for learners across a variety of pedagogies. And I feel like the appetite for that is growing in this moment.

**Swanson:** I would agree, and I think that the economic reality that is emerging in all of this is going to be one of, frankly, severe austerity. In Pittsburgh, we forecast at a $150 million deficit this year. The Pennsylvania’s whole is $2.2 billion in just year one, so I’m thinking that this might be an accelerator in terms of how we structure learning. Because of the dire need for resource sharing, this might begin to really push deep cross-sector partnerships, and it’s going to have to fundamentally put the learner at the center. We talked about this previously in a strategy guide publication, but that need to really, truly create systemic interdependencies – this is the crisis that is pushing that to the forefront. Whether we consider it a network, an ed cluster, an ecosystem, I think that the cross-boundary sharing isn’t going to be something that’s desirable; it’s going to be critical. I think that it’s plausible that we might expect to see different structures, organizing principles for learning as organizing principles as well.

**King:** One other – I kind of put my teacher hat on when I was thinking of this – but I think it could have major implications when we think about student mindset when they come back to school in whatever form it looks like and whenever that may occur. I anticipate that we would just see this wide range of levels of engagement and buy-in. There are some students who are really going to crave what they had before and some of those traditional systems and structures and processes, and others who are going to say, wait a second, we haven’t been doing this for however long, and questioning things in a different way. What does that look like on a larger scale, and how do we hear that and accept that – the truth of what they’re saying? How do we manage that as a system? How do we use that as an opportunity to get them more engaged and involved in what learning should look like? So that’s sort of, I think, a scenario that every educator is going to need to deal with on a small-scale but gives us an opportunity to think about things on a larger scale as well.

Futures work, at its best, challenges us to question assumptions. As we think through the assumptions that we hold about how learning could or should operate, what assumptions might we all benefit from challenging right now?
**Prince:** I think one is that learning takes place in and must be mediated by a place we call school. I mean obviously learning takes place in much broader ways – the way we’ve systematized it makes it hard to link up the learning that’s taking place elsewhere with the learning that’s formally credited and acknowledged by schools and other learning communities. I think there’s enormous opportunity as we’re considering new system designs. But it’s also something that I’ve personally been excited about over the years. It’s also in some ways possibly harder to think about a broader learning landscape or a broader learning ecosystem when a lot of the places we can go to engage in those kinds of experiences are closed. We’re not sure how many people we can be around anytime soon and be safe so, again, there are digital options around all of that but complicating consideration.

**King:** I think, for me, one assumption – that I think a lot of people are probably challenging but that’s really front of mind for me – is the assumption that we can just kind of scale up or do more of our approach to differentiated instruction essentially, knowing that students are going to be coming back to school, in whatever that form that looks like. Everyone knows it’s going to be a wide range of experiences that they’ve had that we don’t know anything about, both learning experiences and emotional experiences, that we need to help them work through. I just think that we really need to examine the assumption that we may even have the structures in place to do that. I don’t think – when reflecting on my time as a teacher and how difficult it is to differentiate for the wide range of student experiences that were already present, and just thinking that we can do a little bit more of that and we’re going to be able to support kids in the way they need to be supported. That, to me, feels like something we really need to examine, and say what do we need to do to make sure we are supporting kids authentically and thoroughly and not necessarily assuming the structures we had in place before are going to serve that.

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*What could be other real but invisible risks out there that we should be talking about and preparing for?*

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**Romero:** To me, the kind of building, on top of what Katherine was saying, it’s not only that education needs to be or learning needs to be mediated by school, but also that there’s no scheduled time for learning. That it can happen pretty much at any time. Now that we are blurring the times on our schedule, and it’s parents that are working and caring for children and maybe other family members at the same time. It’s not like you do an hour of this and an hour of that; it’s more complicated than that. So that is one assumption that I think it’s going to be challenged, and people are experiencing themselves. So it’s going to be easy to talk about from a personal, anecdotal perspective. Another one is: What are the priorities for learning and education? Is it academic preparation? Is it going to be to provide a safe space for kids, or children, to develop and flourish? And what is the role of parents in all that? Because that’s clearly going to change going forward – at least that is my opinion, my perspective – since they now have been so involved in this process, are they going to be ready to just let go once things change, or are they going to be really now empowered and would they want to be more involved going forward? There are differences there that we could talk about.

**Swanson:** I’m probably going to bungle how I think I express this, but I think right now the system is set up under the assumption that it is designed to serve learners and cultivate some measure of success. I think that assumption is being directly challenged right now in that those that were successful pre-COVID-19 were successful despite the way the system was arranged. They had parents that cared, they had access to resources and time; so that you could augment your experiences within the education system and essentially get what you need. I think that one of the big changes from COVID is the world slowed down and got really
transparent and that assumption or that major narrative is being directly challenged now because of COVID-19 because there are households whose parents who aren’t in a position to help you with online learning, that don’t have the flexibility that maybe we have in terms of our schedules to help young people. I think that major assumption has long been needed to be challenged, and this environment of increased transparency is being challenged very, very publicly. And then when we look at the system’s response to prioritized learning continuity over anything else, rather over health and well-being of students and caregivers and teachers, that says a lot, I think.

Is there a question that we all think people, particularly leaders, can or should be asking themselves right now?

Swanson: So I think the most important question is – and it’s one we’re really fond of asking even before this disruption – is: What do you want for the future of learning, beyond sort of the mechanistic vision statement that your kids are going to be ready to work and be leaders in the future. But how might that system feel, how might it operate? I think that because of this disruption, people need to go back and interrogate those visions as they deploy massive amounts of resources, they look at innovation. If it is not of the quality expressed in that vision, then they’re probably not the right answer. You know, the actions that we’re taking in the present are going to shape that long-term future, so they need to be very, very critical, both about their aspirational sense of where they want to go and how the plans they’re making now act to either design things to get there or to adapt in service of that vision.

How might we design our current responses and our future systems for equity? We’ve seen the system laid bare the inequities that we knew were there, and if we’re not asking, “How can we move forward through reducing those inequities?” then I think we’re missing this moment and we’re missing our responsibilities to children.

Romero: I think one that I really think that people should be asking themselves right now and related to the desensitized futures that I mentioned earlier is: What could be other real but invisible risks out there that we should be talking about and preparing for? And then one that I’ve used myself, and it’s a big question to me as a futurist: How can we help others create better futures for themselves so they take a more active role in creating their own futures and not, just you know, waiting and having others telling them what their futures should look like?

Prince: I think a key question, for me, would also be: How might we design our current responses and our future systems for equity? We’ve seen the system laid bare the inequities that we knew were there, and if we’re not asking, “How can we move forward through reducing those inequities?” then I think we’re missing this moment and we’re missing our responsibilities to children.

King: My question is one that I think would serve us to ask and begin for the immediate response and for the longer term of, “Who do I need to be talking to right now? Who do I need to be in touch with?” Which students, parents, community members do I need to be a part of – do I need to check in on, first of all and make sure that they’re okay; and, second of all, who do I need to be a part of the conversation about what
we want. I saw a comment in the chat as it passed by, “Who’s part of that interrogation of the vision?” And I think that that’s just a question that we need to ask ourselves a lot more often. Now is how do we get lots of different perspectives and lots of different experiences of what this moment has meant to people, what they’ve needed, what they continue to need and let that really be a part of our plans moving forward.

Transformation in some ways looks like we engage in change differently, that we engage in change less from a hierarchical standpoint where students and families are something that experience the effects of our choices and instead are part of driving the choices and the change processes.

Swanson: Oh for sure, and I have to plus-one that comment, absolutely, because whose future are we talking about, right? I think that’s a perfect segue.

What do we mean by transformation and what might our preferences for the future be?

King: I think to me, it sort of relates to that last comment that I made that transformation in some ways looks like we engage in change differently, that we engage in change less from a hierarchical standpoint where students and families are something that experience the effects of our choices and instead are part of driving the choices and the change processes. I think if we are able to change the way that we make change, then we will see outcomes that are different than what we’ve had. That to me is a way to transform the system in a way that is resilient because if you’re continuing to engage people in the process of change, then you’re continuing to adapt to changing needs, changing desires and changing preferences.

Romero: To me, transformation really means a systemic change, something that is fundamentally changing the metaphors, the myths that are sustaining the narratives we are living in, enacted today. We are working on a publication that has an aspirational vision that I think reflects what we think would be a great vision for the future of learning and some of the elements there are aligned with what we’re talking about here: equity, belonging, the need for focus on social and emotional learning and also the involvement of the community and, kind of what Katie was saying, a more inclusive decision-making process. To me, that is now kind of that ideal of what I would like to see. I don’t know if all that is going to emerge from the current crisis that we’re living, but it would be – I could see that this could again accelerate the conversations that we need to make that shift. So there is chance.

Swanson: We certainly wrote a lot about our preferred futures and the publication that Maria referenced I think gets to sort of that myth metaphor purpose level. To me, from a structural standpoint – and we’ve long written about the idea of learning ecosystems – I think that still remains to me an aspirational vision is to have those structural and interdependencies to have a seamless flow of resources and experiences across a lot of different learning landscapes that really frankly prioritize a learner’s needs, interests and goals, so we can get away from this notion of scaling up to really directly and very targetedly meet that learner’s need in service of their interests and goals, offering them a wide amount of experience to get there. If you build that on top of those myths and metaphors and those narratives around education being a place rooted in love
and designed to inspire critical consciousness that should liberate you and all those great things and not just boil it down to making you a better employee.

**Prince:** I would agree, putting the whole person at the center of education and finding a variety of ways to meet their needs, really tailored to each individual’s circumstances.

*I think this is also changing the definition for local and what we consider local, just because before this started, I thought that local was to go to downtown and spend my money on locally owned businesses, for example. But a few weeks into being at home, local started to be more like getting eggs from my neighbors or getting red cabbage from my neighbors.*

What are your thoughts of what might community – learning community or broader community – look like? How might it change on the other side of this?

**Romero:** I’ve mentioned before how I think this is also changing the definition for local and what we consider local, just because before this started, I thought that local was to go to downtown and spend my money on locally owned businesses, for example. But a few weeks into being at home, local started to be more like getting eggs from my neighbors or getting red cabbage from my neighbors. So that was something that hit one day when I was reflecting on the changes that we’re experiencing, and I think to some extent that’s it’s going to happen with our definition of community because you’re going to think that is going to kind of close down on who is the closest to you.

But funny enough, we’ve also become closer online to other people, like during this time, I’ve been singing “Happy Birthday” with people I haven’t been singing “Happy Birthday” with for decades or years, just because it’s normal to have a “Happy Birthday” on Zoom or whatever videoconference. It’s like you are kind of focusing down on the physical community, but now it’s blurring even more so the lines of an online community and online support networks. That takes shape in different aspects of lives, so I think that what’s interesting to me about the question on how we define community going forward.

**Swanson:** Yeah, I’m not sure how I could add on top of that, Maria. I’ve had that same shared experience. I mentioned that at the beginning of the session and that my online community has blown up in a way that I am consistently talking to friends and loved ones from hours away that, under normal circumstances, I just didn’t talk to all that often. Even the weird social norms that have bubbled of wearing a mask in public have actually created almost tighter communal bonds because now I’m forced to signal to you that I’m friendly, waving, “Hey, how ya doin'? what are you up to?” So it’s kind of strengthened those connections, at least locally for me. In a way, it’s not a drastic redefinition of community, but it expands it in ways that maybe were somewhat unexpected and surprising, to me personally.

**Prince:** I think that community may seem more precious coming out of this, and we may be more intentional about cultivating it, as the examples you both have been highlighting illustrate. I think we’re both realizing through the pandemic just our biological interconnection and through our isolation. I think it’s underscoring the interdependence that we share – relationships being so critical to education, in particular. I think we’ll find the ways to cultivate those even if they can’t be in person, and we may place greater primacy on them in the system generally that we did previously.
Some of those may solidify by really changing who we consider a part of our communities and how we can relate across divisions of community.

King: I mean not to end on a negative note, but I do think that we do need to also pay attention to the ways that what we’re experiencing can create more division. You know, in California here, we have such a wide variety of different counties and communities and how they’re experiencing the pandemic, and it has the potential to harden some boundaries, to make people think different things about someone who lives in this community versus that community, and how safe a place is or not and whether people feel burdened upon because they’re having to follow rules that really don’t feel like they apply to my community. I think we need to be attentive to how some of those divisions and polarizations that we have a very strong foundation that unfortunately might be built upon. Some of those may solidify by really changing who we consider a part of our communities and how we can relate across divisions of community.

Swanson: Yeah, that’s interesting, Katie. And that was a big tension that surfaced in our Forecast 4.0 is in a world that’s increasingly personalized, what does that mean to have personalization in community? And I think we’re kind of – we’re challenging that right now? We’re seeing how that’s playing out right now. Are there particular things happening outside of education or that we’re seeing that are giving us hope? It could be anything that we can point to that says maybe this shows we are ready to think differently about how we respond to this moment and what we do moving forward.

King: For me, one thing that is giving me hope is that it does feel as if we don’t have to make quite a strong case for why it’s important to think about the future. I think people are more willing to engage in that type of thinking and see it as important. You know, I just don’t say that because that’s what we do, I do think that that’s really important if we’re going to hope to design something different, we need to be thinking further ahead than our structures and our systems and our society often want us to or allow us to. The fact that people are already asking some really big questions gives me hope that we can continue that conversation, continue to ask those big questions, continue to challenge ourselves and our colleagues and our leaders to think differently about what we expect from the future, what we need to plan for and prepare for.

Swanson: I also hope that there’s a growing recognition, too, or a realization, that on the other side of this is that change is a constant. It’s not going to stop. And whether it’s disruptive or whether it’s continuous change, it’s the reality. I think that everybody needs to recognize what they have to deal with.

Prince: Drawing into education a little more specifically, I feel hopeful in seeing the sense of relief that the field has been demonstrating around the using of standardized testing, the using of those assessments that have been such a hindrance for so long, as well as other strictures. There’s so much that has had to be opened up right now that I think people are getting some time to live without them. I think that in combination with our pretty widespread understanding that this is a generational moment we have to go
through and we need to make the most of it and really think about what we would rather do, not just what we have been doing. If we could come out of this with some way of continuing the breathing room and finding new approaches to assessment and quality assurance, I think that would be very supportive of the kinds of systems transformation that I think all of us would like to see.

**Romero:** Yeah, so a little bit closer to education, too, it’s how we value educators and the role that they play in society at large and not only in learning. I think it’s going to be highly appreciated going forward after this crisis. I also think it even expands some from education as a society that are not currently compensated fairly but have been critical in responding and helping society respond to this crisis. They are fundamental in that we need to appreciate more what they’ve done and what they’re going to continue doing for us.

Then at the more abstract and society-level, I think, that just having this as an example of that contrast between an individualized society and how this is a situation which it’s not only about you and your health, but it’s actually that you need to take care of yourself for the sake of others. So that is really kind of pushing and challenging some of our most basic Western assumptions as a society.

I’m hopeful that now that we have this as an example, more people are going to be able to understand and relate to this reality and be able to apply this to other instances, such as education and that just because you want what’s best for your kid doesn’t mean that it’s the best for all the kids around them. Sometimes we need to make those difficult decisions in order to have everyone go up at the same time, and not just that individual.

**Swanson:** For sure. Before we head out, if it’s helpful, we just published a blog series called [Futures Thinking Now](#), so everything we talked about, ranging from uncertainties to assumptions to the futures triangle to vision, there are write-ups, fairly short. They’re intended to be instructive and illustrate how you might bring some of these tools to bear as you all are faced with making really big decisions in the face of massive uncertainty right now. If you’d like, please check that out. You can find that at [KnowledgeWorks.org](#).

Then we’ll be following up this conversation with some blog posts. The chat and the Q&A was so absolutely rich that we have a lot to write about, so thank you all.

Most importantly, thank you for your time and spending it with all of us. If anybody needs anything, if we can be of assistance, please feel free to reach out. You can [contact us](#) through the website KnowledgeWorks.org, and thank you all.
KnowledgeWorks Response to Request for Proposal

REFERENCED LINKS

Forecast Retrospective: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/2020-forecast-retrospective-introduction/

Futures Thinking Now: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/futures-thinking-now-facing-uncertainty/

Forecast 4.0: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/forecast-4/

Navigating the Future of Learning Forecast 5.0: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/forecast-5/


“Solidarity in Age of Social Distancing:” https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/solidarity-age-social-distancing-webinar/

Contact: https://knowledgeworks.org/contact/

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