Maria Romero: Hi, everyone. Welcome to another video of part of the series “Futures Thinking Now.” I am Maria Romero, and I am a senior manager of strategic foresight at KnowledgeWorks. And here with me is:

Rita Pello: Hello, everybody. I'm Rita Pello, and I'm the program manager – I'm a program manager at KnowledgeWorks for the impact and improvement team.

Romero: Thank you for being here. So KnowledgeWorks is a national non-profit that works in education, specifically k-12, but also sometimes we dig deep into other areas of learning in general. And we work to build the future of learning together with communities and education stakeholders. We are doing this series because we, the strategic foresight team, believe that it's important to provide timely tools that people can use now to deal with uncertainty and everything that's going on.

So back in May, I believe, we published a series of blog posts that introduce and explain a little bit of what these tools could be. I was in charge of writing the blog post on drivers of change and the Futures Triangle, which are those tools that are widely used in the foresight field. And now I wanted to bring in Rita's perspective into this conversation so we can get more grounded into how to use the tool in practice and have a little bit of more conversations around it in general.

So let's get started. I'll share this example that Katie King, director of foresight engagement of KnowledgeWorks, and I developed for another presentation. I thought that it could be a useful example to just review together and have this exercise here that you can model in your own teams and your organizations and see if that could be of use to you and have this as a starting point. You can then do with it what you want. You can run free with it.
So here is the pull of the future. You can see it at the top, then the weight of history on the bottom right corner, and then the push of the present is on the bottom left corner. This is the Futures Triangle.

And then the way that these three dimensions interact, they are going to create possible futures, so combining how we understand these three things create possible futures for us to explore and strategize with. The Futures Triangle was created by a futurist called Sohail Inayatullah. He currently works with UNESCO, and he has created other frameworks for foresight. This, again, is one of the tools that are really simple and accessible for people to start having like some conversations.

So here we were kind of thinking: Some of the drivers that you can see to the sides in these colorful boxes are the things that Katie and I thought that could be valuable to understand in the context that we're in – now that we're facing this crisis, how can we prepare for other crises, like understanding that this is not the last time that we might face something at this level. How can learning, in general or education systems, prepare for other situations similar to this? This is not meant to be like all-inclusive. We just wanted to provide some content that we can start discussing and then we can start this conversation with.
We would love to hear what other things you would add. You know, try to keep it simple. Don't go too crazy with it, just to make it manageable. But it could also just like adapt to your own context: You know, what would be some drivers that might not be that relevant to other communities but are crucial to yours?

We have here, for example, in the push of the present, the hurricane and wildfire season. Those are geographically different, so if you are in certain areas you might only have wildfires, and if you are in the other areas you might only have hurricane seasons. And the way that you respond to that is different, so that is something to just consider.

So, I'll just start reading things from the top on the pull of the future, we have:

- relationships are the core of learning
- no suspensions or expulsions
- public education never recovers from recession
- new options after COVID-19
- intense digital surveillance culture in schools
- resilient systems prepare for crisis
- parents, educators, health and mental health professionals are coordinated in student supports.

One thing that I want to add here, and we can just stop for questions and comments as we see fit, is that not all pull of the future drivers are aspirational. Some of them are quite scary, and you actually don't want them to come to fruition, but you know that there's that threat. And some can also just be ambiguous, like it could have positive things; it could have negative things. And depending on your
perspective, the perspective of the organization, it could be seen as aspirational, something that you want to actually get to, or a threat, something that you would like to avoid or diminish. And that's going to determine your strategy towards that driver. Rita, do you want to add some comment or question? Bullet points that you would add or anything at this moment?

**Pello:** The only thing was that I thought about how, "Oh, they're hopefully not all aspirational," exactly to your point, but then, you know, even doing this exercise, if you were not to write anything down and you were to have a group that works in a school together write down, you would have such different answers because my push of the present, I came up with a couple other additional ones, and I know you'll read through that, and I thought, "Oh, that does say a lot about you as a person, about what, you know, even what you're able to, if you're given a few minutes to brainstorm, you know, your triangle around plausible futures, it's going to look so different because it's just -- there's just so much, and even having conversations around those differences are probably illuminating.

**Romero:** Yeah, so on the weight of history, we have:

- inequitable funding structures
- school and neighborhood segregation
- policies to protect student data
- lack of trust among school leaders
- historically marginalized families
- special education legislation

And then again here you can just see that some of them are what we call sources of a stability that would just set kind of like a standard for something to happen, like the policies to protect student data. But then some of them could also be seen as obstacles for change in other areas.

**Pello:** Maria, I have a question then: Are you – for people thinking about using this framework or kind of playing around with it, is it helpful to make sure that there is a thought or a bullet point that matches in each three? Because I see you have something about, I think, data and student data in all three, whereas other ones you might have in only one or two different categories that you thought about in that. So I wanted to know for the audience at home: Is there an advantage when you use this tool to try to have a thread that connects one idea to all three or not necessarily?

**Romero:** I think the short answer is: Not necessarily.

I can see how in this example it's useful to see how the same thing could have different – could be placed in the different dimensions according to what you are looking at of that thing (in this case, data.) But in my experience working with this tool, there are sometimes where I am in this conflicting situation of: “Okay, is this happening now? Is this the push of a present, or is this something that we're aspiring to?” It has happened to me before with the circular economy. There are things happening right now, like startups and small companies, that are starting to get together and introducing some things that would align with the concept of circular economy. It, to me, that is the best way to put it. It's like two different things, like the momentum that these startups are having is push of the present. However, that whole
idea of having a circular economy as a country, and even in the state, it is still very conceptual. It's just an idea that we are striving to, but it's not here yet. That said, going back to your question: If it feels helpful, do it, but it's not something that you should look to do intentionally. It could also serve as an example of, "Yeah, am I forgetting something?" And then you review the other two, and it's like, "Oh, there is something in the push of the present that also aligns with what's going on in that same space." But it's not necessary.

**Pello:** And have you had, with your own working around it, have you had those moments, especially in the weight of history category, where you look and say, "This is so big. This is a boulder that's been amassing snow and an avalanche for decades or century or American history or world history etc, etc." And have you ever thought through – like, I look at this, and I'm like, “Those are some of the things I want to change,” and we all feel that way as sort of education folks. Like, we see there's some past there that we're trying to unwind from, we're trying to get away from. And how do you work with these thoughts of: That's really big. And it was before me. And it might be after me or might not. But at the same time I do feel like school neighborhood segregation is tough, you know, for somebody that's working in a neighborhood school. I know that that other side my school is segregated. It might even be segregated inside the building with different ways of tracking and such. How should people be working with the weight of history, specifically?

**Romero:** Yeah, so the way, like when I'm working in groups, the way that it's, to me, at least easier to recognize what those weight of histories are. It's whenever you introduce some idea, it's like, "Oh, what if we would have free college?" And someone in the room is just like, "That's never going to happen. That's impossible." And it's like, "Oh, that's the weight of history talking."

**Pello:** And then they blame people. And you're like, "Well, that's just – they become a character, you know, like an archetype. That's funny.

**Romero:** And when you start doing some research, there's, what we call in the foresight field, weak signals, which are these nuggets of change that are happening. They might not be like widespread or you know impacting a huge amount of people, but there are some things. If someone is talking about it, someone is thinking about it in the same way. And, I mean, after we've had a presidential candidate talking about free college, why is it still so crazy to think about free college, for example? That speaks to again the organization, the person, what's their background.

So when we think about school and neighborhood segregation, for example, I was working in this other project currently, and when we were trying to think about what could be the future of that conversation, what could be the future of that discussion, what are the weak signals around this phase? So first, I saw that New York and Chicago are the two cities that are kind of focusing on this head-on. They are the ones that are most affected by it so, they're the ones that are trying to remediate it the most and that they have they have like focused on this for a few years now.

In New York there's this group of teenagers that created a non-profit, and they're working together. It's like a coalition of teenagers that develop a plan that they have now tried to introduce to the mayor because it's like really a well-thought plan. It has inputs from the teenagers, but they have also worked with other adults to make it into a cohesive, totally viable plan of policy changes that would need to happen for them to explore other possibilities for school segregation, like what would need to happen?
And in there, there are some things that they talk about, like what happens if after we say that schools should get to this like quotas of students, if they don't meet them, what would then happen? And then so one option was that they would – the school will be responsible to help students participate in other schools' extracurricular activities so then they would have the opportunity to integrate in some other ways with other schools. And if they're not able to do that, then they would need to provide vouchers so the students could take the voucher and then have some sort of activity that would then provide the same kind of experience that the school would not. Even the fact that they are thinking about those options, talks about flexibility and also understanding, but truly what they are fighting for is to be able to, especially in New York where there's such a huge problem with the elite schools and like how only, like, three percent of the students come from minority groups or the disadvantaged schools that are underfunded, so that's really what they're trying to get at. They just want opportunities for themselves and their peers that deserve them. So when you read stories like that, that's when it's like, "Yes, it has been going on for decades, but yeah there are things happening, and what else can we do? How else can we amplify those efforts?"

**Pello:** I appreciate those smaller examples, too, and I think that sometimes it's hard to see again the little victories even though we should, in terms of people addressing really heavy weighted historical contexts and fighting them for the present and for the future.

**Romero:** Yeah, and even to that point specifically: also, there was a mandate on school segregation. We have that history to learn from, and to use it, why is it so crazy to think that it could change?

So I'll continue to the push of the present. In there, as you can see, we have:

- pandemic pods, which are happening right now as school starts
- hurricane and wildfire season, which we mentioned before
- proliferation of grassroots, equity-oriented solutions
- increase in ed tech reach
- politicization of opening schools

**Pello:** And that pandemic! But I understand that they're sort of interesting to see them in there, in some of the ones that are pulled out, to our point about how you can kind of infinite thoughts or points to make about push of the present. But I'm noticing they're very much happening very quickly, too. I know that's the push of the president, so I see that urgency in that one, and then I kind of look further out of the two, the pull of the future and weight of history, and I think, "Oh, it's happening urgently now, but some of this has definitely been happening for a long time now." So it just kind of makes you pause and think, "What is urgent, you know? What has been ongoing?" And it, I think, it gives you that moment of: Oh, the pandemic pods are very new. They're as new as a pandemic. But hurricane / wildfire season, no. Have schools necessarily had plans all the time, and now do they feel like they will want to have a plan because of COVID? When it comes to natural disasters, too. And so I can see everybody differing on that point, but at the same time I know everyone would look at that and be like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yes." That's where you come to your collective truth.

**Romero:** And I think there are also different perspectives on it, like you say, pandemic pods are obviously completely new, and it's like, well, but are they? I think someone could make the argument
that homeschooling pods have been happening, like when you like get together in these networks and you connect with other parents that are doing the same and then pull resources or learning experiences for a group of kids. So it has happened differently because of the motivations behind it are different, but there is, again, this weak signal that it’s coming from somewhere, that it’s building towards a way, that it’s recommended to think about the push of the present. It’s usually in things that are quantitative. There are trends you have some data on it because you don’t have data on the future. But there is data on what’s going on in the present. There’s this trend. You can see, like, “Oh, yeah, you know, this is going on. I would also say that maybe even some of the headlines that are in the media right now would give you some clue to what could be in that push of the present.

**Pello:** I like your point, though, about pandemic pods just kind of being called something now in the present moment as a reaction but at the same time kind of being like, yes, homeschooling and also people who have more means or more money able to kind of go and kind of do their own thing or pay for their own type of school or whatnot, and I think that that’s really interesting you bring up because, in a way, that would also be kind of the weight of history of how we have that inequitable funding structures for schools and how we have a lot of economic inequality in a sense that some people would be able to pay for it. So I do think you can almost, yes, put the headlines, like you said, put the headlines in there, but then when you start to uncover or explore what those headlines mean, it could look like a different beast but with the same name. I think that’s worth understanding or worth exploring.

**Romero:** But – and that’s why it’s so important to look at it as a whole and not just focus on one versus the other one. It’s like, “Okay, how do the three dimensions integrate?” And there’s where you can connect, to your point earlier about data, it’s like, “Oh, yeah data has been a part of this conversation for a long time now. We have this part in weight of history, something that is going on now and then this idea of what we would want it to be or what we don’t want it to be.” And you can make those connections with other things, too, as you were mentioning about the pandemic pods, for example, and how they relate to inequial funding structures, and, okay, well, what would that look like for the from the pull of the future?

**Pello:** I mean, I don’t want to get too dire here, but it, to me, it mildly connects with this idea that public education might not recover or could not, you know, if we haven’t been funding our schools, if we haven’t figured out a way to actually provide equitable funding, and then we have a lot of people with the ability to kind of go off. I know we’ve always had private schools, but what if the school reopening is different now? And what if this becomes, you know, if you have money you’re going to have the best teachers again because you can pay for them versus you can’t? And I think that privatization and conversation – I know it’s a passion of mine to explore – that, to me, is very interesting is seeing pandemic pods as, I want to see them as more sinister than they might be right now. My opinion is that’s coming from this sort of quick reaction to make sure that your kid now has schooling because you’re worried that they won’t, which is a valid concern. But then what is that choosing for your own family or your own kid mean for those systems or institutions in the long run if you don’t invest in them anymore? If you’re not participating in them anymore? So I think that’s really interesting to me.

**Romero:** Yeah, and it also reveals the tensions between the responses that are coming from the top-bottom and the bottom to the top because there’s a lack of uniform strong response to what’s going on and there’s no confidence that our authorities pretty much at any level know what to do and how to best proceed forward. There’s this need for families to scramble around whatever resources they have
some have more some fortunately do not have enough to create something, and that's why you can see yes there are the fancy pandemic pods happening in this bay area. I'm in Texas, so you can see that there are families coming together that because they actually live close by, because they're not going away, they want to stay together. Then all the cousins are learning together in cross-level school things that are coming together and that are also pandemic pods but in a very different way, having the tension between not getting the response that you need from the top and having to put things together in a way that would work for you. It's something that is human nature, so it shouldn't be a surprise for anyone that that is happening.

Pello: But a helpful framework for sure nonetheless because then we can have that conversation about why are people reacting that way? And what's missing? And if we are to then vision what that would look like, given in a pandemic or any other kind of crisis, what would a school look like so that it can mitigate people falling off or students losing their place in where they were in school or parents dropping off. You know, everyone's so busy, so to the point of a pandemic pod, you can look at how they've formed in lots of different ways, why they formed. And what does that mean for pull of the future? Does it mean better coordinated supports? Does it mean relationships at the center? And if that's the case, then what would it look like to build that so that when another crisis happens like that, the scramble is less and people – students are truly on a level playing field.

Romero: Yeah, and I think, to your point, this tool can help organizations, groups, teams, educators, just ask that question of what do we want to stay and what we don't want to stay, when it's an option for us to say, what we want to stay and what we don't? What is going to be our answer? Are we just going to be like, "Oh no, all that we did, it's like scratch that. We are going back to normal." Or is it gonna be like, "No, actually from that we learn that this is really important. And that, for example, involving parents more deeply into the learning experiences brought us now newfound value of educators and their role in society at large and to their families more specifically." And it's like, "Okay, how can we keep that because we want parents to keep value in educators going forward? It shouldn't just be something that happened during this crisis, and it's gone."

Pello: Right, right.

Romero: So those are the kind of questions that I think we should be getting at with these bigger conversations that a framework like a Futures Triangle and talking about drivers of change by facilitate.

Pello: I love that knowing the weight of history and what's pressing on us now at this moment, what do we want that future to look like, given that we also can sort of foresee some of the trends that might continue from the other two?

Romero: And with that, I think we're going to wrap up our conversation. I'm super grateful for Rita for being my partner in crime in this video. I really loved our conversation, and I really hope that more people find it useful and that it's just like a resource that they're able to pull and practice with it and have these conversations with their organizations, groups, teams. And just feel free to reach out to KnowledgeWorks. We have our contact form on our website and our emails are also probably somewhere on the web. So you can feel free to reach out, and we'd be happy to facilitate these kind of conversations with you, as well.

Pello: Thank you, Maria. I appreciate you, too, and know that this tool will help us get more comfortable
in a messy room. I'm all for that. My mom would not be pleased, but I'm all for that.

Romero: Thanks, Rita.

Pello: Thank you, bye!

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