Leading the Future of Learning
An “Education in the Balance” Webinar
With Jason Swanson, Robin Kanaan and Virgel Hammonds

The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, from the webinar “Leading the Future of Learning” on March 23, 2021.

Jason Swanson: This is sort of the first episode in a series of three that are going to really explore content from our latest strategic foresight publication called “Education in the Balance.”

For those of you who may not be familiar with KnowledgeWorks, we’re a national nonprofit dedicated to creating the future of learning together. And we do that through quite a few avenues of work, ranging from policy and advocacy to schools’ work, partnering deeply with learning communities for them to think about how they might implement personalized competency-based learning. We do this through research, through our impact and improvement team. And we also do this through looking at and exploring long-range futures for learning. So this is where my team and I really come in, and this is really the origin of the content for which we’ll be exploring today.

I am honored and thrilled to be joined by two colleagues from our teaching and learning team, Virgel Hammonds, our Chief Learning Officer, and Robin Kanaan, Director of Teaching and Learning. I’m always appreciative of their time and insights, but I thought, given the tension of what we would be exploring today, they could offer us some really clear-eyed insight into what’s going on across some of the learning communities in which we work and just some of their deep thinking around this tension. So with that, I’m going to give the floor to Virgel and Robin so they can introduce themselves.

Virgel Hammonds: All right. We’re both looking at each other, so I’ll kickstart. Good to join you all. Good to see so many friends that we know from throughout the field and also to meet new ones. Thanks, Jason and Sean, for the invitation. I’m Virgel Hammonds calling in from the Portland, Maine, area. And it’s great to team always with Robin as we explore and support schools and learning communities across the country. And as a former teacher, principal, and superintendent, it’s always just so incredible to learn and partner with others that are doing the real human-centered work across the country. So glad to join you. Thanks for having me.

Robin Kanaan: Thanks, Virgel. Really, we’re tickled to be here. Anytime Jason calls out and asks, the answer is always yes. So we’re tickled to be with you this afternoon. I am coming to you live from Columbus, Ohio, and my dining room table. And I’ve been on the KnowledgeWorks and schools team forever. Come to the work with a teacher’s heart, a former teacher, and then staff developer and instructional coach back in the day. And now I get to work with states across the country that have learning communities, districts, fabulous leaders, and all of the wonderfulness of the kids and their families and our teachers and everyone that comes together to do what’s best.

At KnowledgeWorks, we really are focusing on personalized, competency-based learning as a lever for equity and have learned lots and lots before the pandemic. And who knew that we’d have a huge
learning curve during? So as Jason and his team continue to provoke our thinking, happy to have a chance to talk a little bit this afternoon. So thanks for hanging out with us, everyone.

**Swanson:** Awesome. And once again, thank you both. So a little bit about the genesis of this project. A little less than a year ago, the strategic foresight team got together to have sort of an unstructured just conversation thinking through, based on our perspectives, what might the effects of COVID-19 be on the future of learning. And at that time, we were just getting into the beginning stages of quarantine of COVID-19. And how did that... We received a ton of feedback.

So we decided to do a followup, and that followup really took quite a few months after that initial engagement. And the world, at that point, was a just completely different place. So in revisiting that webinar and thinking through some of the responses that came back, we really wanted to take a look at overarching issues or key tensions that would hold sway over the future of learning.

At that time and certainly now, there were a lot of learning communities working really diligently and working really in uncharted territory to meet learners' needs. So for us, these tensions really illuminated a lot of possibility and held sway over a vast array of possible futures. And the way we were thinking about tensions wasn't so much a binary this or this statement, but to get at really two key pieces of uncertainty for which there are shades of gray, and those shades of gray would give us different alternative futures to think about how learning could, should, might appear in the future.

So we did a lot of digging, searched around, and presented three what we would consider key tensions, the first of which we would consider tension around contested power. And this is really getting at who holds power and who gets to have a say, and that part of this tension really dealt with this idea that communities of color have been really finding new avenues of power and influence during the COVID disruption. So out of this, the key tension that arises would be this question: Will community activism have a lasting impact, or will established power structures and decision-making structures prevail?

The next tension we looked at was the tension around strained systems, and the education systems' capacity to address the complex problems that it faces is limited, even though the complexity of those problems continues to grow. So the tension that came to the fore from this really was the idea that might we see new approaches and funding to address looming challenges, or will the system really continue to rely on inadequate approaches and structures to funding and resourcing models?

Then our last tension here, and it's the one that we're going to dive into, is this idea of a leadership focus. So having quickly adapted to the pandemic, learning communities are now facing a critical point of choice. Will system leaders bring people together to reimagine education, or will systems leaders conform and go back to what used to be normal? Another way to couch this would be, are we headed back to sort of a systemic snapback? And that is a very human instinct. I totally understand, but I wanted to bring in Virgel and Robin to really discuss this.

**Within the learning communities that we serve, how are you seeing this tension play out?**

**Kanaan:** Thank you, Virgel and Jason and Sean. I was taking notes, and Sean, I did participate in your webinar when you rolled out these tensions and couldn't help but immediately think of not only the districts where we're currently working, but districts where and communities where we may have gone
before, and then ones we’re familiar with, where our own kids may have attended or you’re a local resident of. And that really is the question.

So for me, the first thing we think about is this idea of leadership and how leadership's at the critical point of choice. And I think of leadership at several levels. So I'm thinking of leadership, kind of the formal structures of superintendents, central office, leadership of the school buildings. Then I think of teacher leaders. I think of community leaders. So whatever, I guess, entry point you come into with that idea of leadership, is it going to be continuing to reimagine and work towards those transformational efforts or, as you said and I love that, that snapback, returning to whatever we thought normal was?

And the districts that I think about right now that were poised pre-pandemic, with some innovative structures and system shifts, they were able to ride out through the pandemic the way that learning and the teaching structures had to change on a dime, are now in the place where they are continuing to focus on that re-imagining. I guess if you’d look at it in terms of a case study, they had some of that going on before the world kind of stopped as we knew and then we had to shift gears.

Virgel and I were even talking a little bit offline. I think it comes... A couple of things were in place. If there was ongoing this idea of a collective efficacy, so that shared vision and then a collective efficacy to kind of see that through, to imagine what that would be at some pretty high levels. And then as we kind of peeled that onion back or dug down a little deeper, in what ways were and are the leaders, in whatever formal or informal structure they have, really capitalizing on their talent pool, their resources to build and support and develop this idea of agency to empower the human capital to get the job done or to continue keeping their eye on looking forward and not so much looking back?

But I want to put a parenthetical kind of footnote to that, and we can come back to that around. Not everything that's in the rear-view mirror was bad and we shouldn't bring with us forward into the future, right? So I'll stop there. Virgel, get in on this.

Hammonds: I love it. I love teaming with Robin. That's great. No, I agree. There's a piece that I always have appreciated about educators and especially those within the learning communities we serve, is that there is a really strong why, why they came into the profession, why they have turned over every stone to make learning the constant during any situation and especially during the pandemic. There’s been that strong moral compass, right, that has helped guide educators forever. And that always will continue, I would imagine, would continue to be the case.

But I think one piece where we perhaps miss some opportunities is we're staring at our compass and trying to seek some guidance as to what our journey will be, or our next step might be, or which direction we go, and sometimes we experience a little bit of tunnel vision, right? And we're so focused on the right now that we lose sight of the potential. And much like Robin mentioned, I often mention the answers are in the room, right? The genius is in the room. And a piece where oftentimes we, as learning communities, miss that boat as we're staring at that compass is the genius is within our community, the voices within our community. How do we become much more intentionally inclusive of, not just individuals, but those closest to our families, systems closest to our families, right?

So we, as learning communities, we often or oftentimes think as educators that we’re it. Like, we know. We're the closest. I know my kids. I know what their needs are. I know their family. I've had their siblings or their cousins. But there are other systems, right? So imagine what that could look like if we were to
also include and redesign and rethink what is possible with those other systems that are closest to our families as well.

Swanson: I love it, right? And thinking about this idea of tapping the collective genius of the community as we think about innovation, that tension around system snapback, right? The assumptions that we held and still hold that the system is slow to change, I think the last year we’ve kind of blown that assumption out of the water as the education system had to pivot on a dime. But one of the things, Robin, you had mentioned was about agency, right? As we think about fighting kind of the weight of history and returning to normal is there’s a lot of really interesting innovation in what I would call in-between places, so that when your staff are looked at for the untapped genius that rests there, then they have the agency to flux and flex to meet student needs. There’s a lot of under-the-hood innovations taking place: something as simple as instead of parent-teacher conferences, I have a Zoom link, we get virtual coffee, right? And that level of humanizing connection pays dividends throughout the learning journey.

But I want to get back to the parenthetical question of yours, Robin, because we had talked a little bit before we went live with the webinar. And a question I’m really interested in hearing both of you respond to is this notion, yes, transformation, right? But when we talk to those learning communities that have that strong why and they’re driving towards transformation, what is it that we want to preserve from the past and bring with us to these future spaces that we’re working on creating?

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Kanaan: That ought to be top of mind at every professional gathering in their PLCs, in their staff meetings, in summer PD, in our minds between now and the time that school may resume after summer break, if districts are going to have that break for kids. It really is what worked before and that we maybe had to put on hold or maybe had to do a variation of, but we know that’s really important? And one of the things that I have heard, and Brenda Neil who’s on the... who’s joined us today as well, who I do a lot of our field work with, we have both seen... The biggest shift, I think, or almost deficit has been having the opportunity to build those deep relationships. And it’s been, as we know, even on the Zoom today, I’m sure one of our general consensus would be it’s... Zoom can be really efficient, and it’s a connector for us. Deep relationships might be some things that... We miss the in-person back and forth to some degree.

And I think in one of our schools in South Carolina, in Berkeley County, which is not far from the Charleston area, Goose Creek, South Carolina, there’s a school Westview Elementary School. And Westfield Elementary School, it’s a 3-5 school. And it’s a school where any one of us would want our own kids, our grandkids, our nieces and nephews to go to, because you don’t even get out of your car and start across the parking lot that you think there’s something special going on here.

And we have kept in contact with their principal, Shawn Wimmer, this year, who’s just a... Innovation is all over her, but she also is grounded in the realities of the day. And she would tell you that her struggle has been this year, and she believes it with the teachers as well, not really figuring out how blended learning is going to work or how you can mitigate some learning gaps with our kids or how to build choice boards or playlists for kids and do some pre-assessments, but how to keep that classroom culture
going via a Zoom or a hybrid learning.

And for her, it has been how to continue to build on that rich, deep, robust culture that the power of place kind of brought to the game. And it’s been a struggle this year. So I know for her and others, she would say, "We have got to... Our culture that once was, and it was that culture of growth and collaboration, that has got to come forward with us. We cannot leave that behind."

**Hammonds:** Yeah. One piece that is just... that we value and treasure as parents and community members of our schools is that love that our educators bring to our kids. That's a piece that we just can't ever lose. And to Robin’s point, how do we bring that in a virtual or hybrid way? There is no hybrid love or heart, right? How do we continue to be human centered and deeply connected and continue to deepen those relationships when we're staring through a screen, where we're not able to give that perfectly timed pat on the back or hug when one of our young people needs it? So the question back to you, Jason, and to Robin, is how do we make space for other hearts to help support that love? And how might we inspire that to fruition in our learning communities?

And I'll say, and maybe this is just part of our vernacular at KnowledgeWorks, but just to point it out for others, you've heard us say learning communities a lot. And for us, that means that the learning and the partnerships extend beyond the superheroes that exist within our schools. So same thing here with the relationships and the human-centered connections. How do we do that collectively as a community?

Yesterday, I was talking to a great friend, Tony Monfiletto from Future Focused Education. And he had just this... He really was pushing my own thinking around this idea of shared love throughout a learning community. He said, "We have to..." He shared this yesterday. "We have to really lean in and listen and be gracious learners with our community." So how can we, as educators, collectively do that, and who are those people?

And he spoke a lot about, in his work, learning a ton from community health organizations, community organizers, faith-based organizations. And all have the same intentions, the same purpose, the same human-centered commitments to our families and our young people as we educators do. So how do we recognize that and how do we include them in these new designs, but also how do we take what they have inspired and created in their field and integrate that with the successful pieces that we educators have also implemented throughout the years and throughout the pandemic?

**Swanson:** I want to recognize that we've got seven minutes, and it looks like we have two questions on top of Virgel's excellent question as well.

**During the past 12 months, states have removed traditional barriers, such as seat time, for futures thinking. How do we use our leadership voice now to remove these barriers going forward?**

**Swanson:** That's a phenomenal question. And I think you're probably going to get three different answers. But for me, it's to bring the leaders together with community and representation throughout the literal learning community to engage in a collaborative visioning process. That's the first step. You have to imagine and believe the future can be different, and you have to take into account as many different voices as possible, most critically those in which the system serves. Policy is a blunt tool. So any way that we can humanize it, put a human face on it, and try to have policymakers think, to the extent
that it's possible, the full ramifications of the implications of that policy change at the student level.

**Kanaan:** I appreciate that, Jason. I don't work in the world of policy directly with the work that we do in the districts and the field work in our schools and with our teachers. But I would tell you that what I have heard and what I believe I know is, yes, there have been policies that were barriers, or statutes that were barriers, and so they have been changed or relaxed during the pandemic. I think one of the challenges with that is, even before the pandemic, there were policies in place and waivers that allowed people to be innovative and transformative. But for whatever reason, they either didn't have access to those, didn't know about it, or didn't have the time or space to imagine what it could be to actually implement that policy or that waiver, if you will.

So I would think it's important that if we can recognize what those barriers are that have currently been removed or lessened, let's develop strategies to implement the goodness that those bring to us. And what can that look like? And I think to Jason and I believe what I think Virgel is going to say, that's where that collective impact comes into place, where you have those kind of conversations. It can't be left to one person. It can't be the superintendent or the superintendent's cabinet behind closed doors trying to figure this out. You really have to come up with ways to engage in those conversations in the community about what that shared vision is and what you're going for, and then you can begin to implement structures.

One of the things that Virgel Hammonds taught me a while ago when I first met him and we were doing this work, a lot of the policies and the statutes that are in place right now are comparable to load-bearing walls. If you take down a load-bearing wall, if you think about the building analogy, if you take out a load-bearing wall, you've got to put something else there, or the roof is going to cave in on you. So if the policy is gone or the statute is removed, great. What goes in that place that will support the outcomes that we're all after? Virg?

**Hammonds:** Robin, yes, that's so... Thank you. And a great tee-up, too, to just say you know me well, in that my commentary to that is what policymakers are asking for are new metrics of success. So how do we collectively, as a community, identify those new metrics of success? A lot of those policies that we are... those traditional markers that we are fighting are there because, to Robin's point, there isn't. That's a load-bearing wall, so we have to replace it with something else. So how do we identify those new metrics? Who is a part of the design? And how do we amplify that, and what's the evidence and the research to confirm that? So as Jason and Robin shared, that's for us, as the learning community, to help determine, identify, and advocate for.

**How are districts leveraging the lessons from the pandemic to transition to greater student voice, choice and particularly agency, and adapting a competency-based system of education that dismantles structural inequities?**

**Kanaan:** I was thinking about that earlier. In a lot of our districts, they really are looking at this idea of transparency around and the idea of learning gaps and how to mitigate those through working on identifying priority critical standards and indicators, building out learning progressions, what comes before, what comes after, and then developing a set of, or developing in real time pre-assessments for readiness. So we see where kids are. We meet them where they are in the learning and then are able to
design those pathways forward. And if a classroom teacher does that just as a point of practice, we like that.

What we really like and want to see is when a district comes together and does it systemically K-12. And you'll hear the words learning continuum play out, by and large, that really help teachers understand what kids should know and be able to do. They've identified those important pieces. And places like Lexington 3 in Batesburg-Leesville, South Carolina, have spent quite a bit of time during the pandemic actually working on that. And teachers don't want to go back to the way it was before. A couple of districts that I know, we're partnering with in Colorado and some other places around the country. So we can certainly, Roman, to your point, give you some specific examples.

As we all know, the pandemic has brought to the attention of leaders the issue of mental health of students and staff. How do you propose any new leadership address the mental health of our students?

Hammonds: That certainly has been an issue always, but especially during the pandemic. And I think that's another piece where we can lean on the tremendous resources that exist in our community, that we collectively just have not been able to channel and connect and collaborate with as we are all hustling to support as best we can. So taking that time to create those opportunities, to leverage other systems who, again, are closest to our families, right? So how do we do that? How do we build, how do we design new structures, new supports, to Robin's point, to ensure that collective efficacy that we all strive for in service of our kids and families?

Swanson: All right. That couldn't have been more perfectly timed. So we are at time. I want to thank everybody for joining us. I want to thank my guests. Virgel, Robin, thank you so much. Sean, thank you for your help.

Kanaan: Jason, a webinar that you’re sorry is over means it was a well-spent time together. That's amazing.

To read “Education in the Balance” and download supplementary materials, such as an infographic and sensemaking templates, visit https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/education-balance-tensions-educations-futures/.

Read about KnowledgeWorks internal conversations about the issues and the tensions that arise from them: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/grappling-todays-education-tensions/.

Learn about Nevada’s leadership through COVID-19 has set up a more equitable, innovative future for their education system: https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/nevada-leaders-education-system-equity-blue-ribbon-commission/.