

Laying the Foundation for
**Transformational
Change in Education**



Charting Your Course, Brick by Brick

Stories of transformational change in education often focus on grand, sweeping gestures and actions. Sometimes those moves are necessary. More often, change accumulates over time. People transform what exists into something new, brick by brick, through their daily decisions and actions.

The prospect of creating transformational change can feel particularly fraught given the contentious environment and magnitude of changes affecting education. As outlined in KnowledgeWorks' 10-year forecast, [Charting a New Course for Education](#), education leaders and innovators are trying to create positive outcomes in an ever-evolving environment marked by challenges such as disinformation, a diversifying education landscape, evolving technologies and the erosion of the public sphere.

Given the circumstances, you might feel anxious about the future. You might feel powerless in the face of massive social, economic, environmental, technological and political changes. While these feelings are natural and understandable, they can coexist alongside your own sense of agency. Finding your own sphere of influence and taking the first step in the direction that you want to go is exactly the kind of leadership that turbulent times require.

This strategy guide aims to help you get started. Its calls to action and invitations to reflect provide a solid foundation on which to build as you shape education over the next decade. No one person can bring about transformation on their own or all at once, and no one needs to. You simply need to lay the first brick.

About This Strategy Guide

This strategy guide is a companion piece to [Charting a New Course for Education](#). Its content is based on insights from two workshops facilitated by KnowledgeWorks that took place in San Antonio, Texas, and Las Vegas, Nevada, in fall 2025. The workshops used the [LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®](#) methodology to help participants consider changes shaping the future of education and alternative paths forward. Photographs from these experiences appear throughout this guide.

What Is in This Strategy Guide?

This strategy guide is organized into two sections:

- » **Changes on the Horizon:** This section revisits the drivers of change from [Charting a New Course for Education](#) and highlights some of their implications for education over the next decade.
- » **Calls to Action:** This section provides action steps for creating change given possibilities for the future, along with invitations to reflect on next steps.

Who Should Use It?

Too often, leadership is equated with titles or administrative roles, but meaningful systems change requires leadership at every level. Having people throughout a system or organization serve as and see themselves as leaders helps distribute ownership of change and sustain momentum over time.

This strategy guide is intended to be used by anyone seeking to influence change within any part of a learning community or education system, including classroom teachers; building-, district-, and state-level leaders; and learning providers and innovators. Throughout this guide, these audiences are referred to as leaders unless a certain role needs to be specified.



Expert Facilitation

KnowledgeWorks can provide customizable engagements, such as workshops making use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, and commissioned publications. [Learn more](#) about how the organization helps partners explore the future of learning.

Changes on the Horizon

As detailed in [Charting a New Course for Education](#), four drivers of change are reshaping the education landscape and the lived experiences of learners, educators and communities.

What Is Changing



Integrating with AI

Next-generation artificial intelligence will change how humans think and feel, challenging current notions of skill development and human relationships and requiring new approaches to teaching and assessment.



Everyday Disruptions

A wide range of small-to large-scale disruptions will upend daily life in school and other learning environments and render conventional approaches to educational management and changemaking insufficient to meet emerging needs.



Eroding Public Institutions

As public institutions struggle with declining confidence, economic constraints and expanding market-based competition, public education systems will need to redefine the ways they serve learners and communities.



The Relevance Gap

As young people's realities grow further and further removed from the world of school, education systems face an urgent need to integrate students' emerging needs, concerns and aspirations into learning.

What the Changes Mean

Though these drivers of change may seem distant from the day-to-day realities of education today, they will influence teaching and learning, along with education leadership and changemaking. Some of their impacts appear below.

Uncertainty as the Norm

Ever-changing technologies, extreme weather events and other disruptions related to built infrastructure, funding, physical safety and cyber security are creating widespread and frequent instability in communities and education systems.

(Mis)Information Overload

An overwhelming media landscape that is at times only loosely based in fact, along with echo chambers and strained public discourse, are creating distorted realities that make focusing on teaching and learning and finding common ground more challenging for learners, leaders and communities.

New Operating Environment for Education

Diminishing public support, new approaches to funding, the changing role of the federal government in education and the emergence of new learning providers are all shifting how education functions in and is supported by society.

You might already be facing some of these effects, but their impact and complexity are likely to grow over the next decade, and new challenges could emerge. Leaders at all levels must anticipate how the drivers of change might evolve and develop over time and plan for their implications.

The changing landscape will also provide leaders new opportunities to model what they want to see in learners: resilience, creativity, adaptability and an orientation toward the future.

Reflection Questions

- » Where do I see examples of these drivers of change or their implications already happening in my learning community or education system?
- » For which changes and effects of change do I feel most prepared? Least prepared?
- » How might the changes on the horizon create opportunity to move my learning community or education system closer to where I want it to be?



Where To Start

Leading change in a complex educational environment is slow, daily work. Seemingly small shifts in behavior can serve as the building blocks of transformational change. You can shape your own mindsets and skills, affect what happens in your community and change how you engage with the broader education system. All these actions lay a foundation for deeper change.

The calls to action below invite you to consider where you might lay the first brick on the path toward transformational change:

- » **Remake Your Role:** Pursue expansive learning that aligns with your personal purpose and the changing external landscape.
- » **Turn Down the Noise:** Model and encourage transparency, critical thinking and mission focus.
- » **Seed New Systems:** Pilot vision-driven approaches and structures that can lay the groundwork for new systems for a new era.

These calls to action are described in more detail on the following pages. Each call to action includes:

- » A short description
- » Four initial action steps
- » Reflection questions to prompt deeper thinking





Remake Your Role

Pursue expansive learning aligned with your personal purpose and the changing external landscape.

Most teacher and administrator preparation programs did not include professional learning in storm hardening, spotting AI deepfakes, designing community-based learning opportunities or fostering intergenerational dialogue. However, as the world surrounding education changes, you will need skills that have not traditionally fallen within an education leader's scope. Continuing to serve learners and communities well and sustaining intentional change will mean proactively working to **remake your role**.

Action Steps

- » **Clarify your purpose.** Each of us must accept that our roles will need to adapt. Start by clarifying what you hope to accomplish in your work. Solidifying your purpose can help you reshape your own role instead of letting forces beyond your control dictate what it might become. Identify what matters most to you and bring it with you as you address the needs of the future and the needs of learners.
- » **Orient learning toward future needs.** After grounding in your personal purpose, use the drivers of change and their implications to identify areas where you might grow your knowledge and skills, even potentially pursuing non-traditional training or certificates. AI literacy, climate resilience, change management, partnership building or resourcing and development may be useful areas of focus. Pay special attention to topics that feel concerning; learning about them can help calm anxieties about the future and build capacity to address emerging challenges.
- » **Build on your existing strengths.** KnowledgeWorks' [Portrait of a Leader](#) reminds us that creating sustainable, learner-centered systems change depends on continuous educator development. Many of the knowledge, skills and dispositions on which you rely today will remain essential as education evolves. Consider where you already thrive as a leader and how those capacities may be needed in new ways under new circumstances. By intentionally deepening the aptitudes reflected in the Portrait of a Leader, you position yourself to drive innovation, support learners and lead meaningful systems change in an increasingly complex landscape.
- » **Question what's familiar.** Each of us has inherited ideas about what learning should and must be, and those ideas often show up in how we make decisions. Take note of the habits or patterns that do not align with future needs or your personal purpose; then reflect on what old beliefs might lie beneath. Use that reflection to identify what you might let go of or stop doing.

Reflection Questions

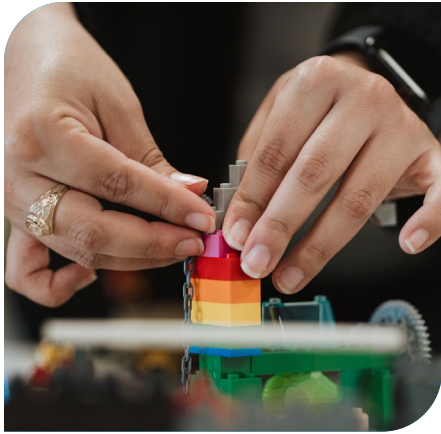
- » What is my personal purpose and how might I ensure it remains present in my work?
- » What changes within education and the broader world seem most likely to impact my role?
- » How might I strengthen my skills and abilities to lead systems change in an ever-changing world?

Resources

Cornell University's "[Teaching Philosophy Statement](#)" invites educators to reflect on personal purpose.

KnowledgeWorks' publication, [Envisioning Educator Roles for Transformation](#), explores promising future educator roles and provides a template for envisioning additional roles, and its [Portrait of a Leader](#) captures the essential knowledge, skills and mindsets educators need to lead sustainable, learner-centered change within educational systems.

The Wallace Foundation compiled an [introduction](#) to what school and district leaders need to know about artificial intelligence, and KnowledgeWorks shared framing and [resources](#) on preparing for climate change in education.



Turn Down the Noise

Model and encourage transparency, critical thinking and mission focus.

Education leaders and innovators are uniquely positioned to champion critical thinking and transparency in a divided environment where facts can be difficult to find. You can be the first to **turn down the noise**, showing learners, colleagues and community members what it looks like to stay student-focused in a chaotic environment, to slow down and navigate complexity with intention and to make discerning decisions.

Action Steps

- » **Model deep, critical thinking and acknowledge what you don't know.** Every conversation with a learner, family member, caregiver or colleague is an opportunity to consider carefully a range of viewpoints, accept the limits of your own perspective and shift your beliefs based on new information. Find opportunities to model this type of critical thinking and to ask questions that prompt others to engage in it.
- » **Increase transparency and accountability.** Unclear and hidden processes foster mistrust and speculation, while appropriate transparency builds trust, clarity and shared ownership. Whenever possible, invite people into decision-making processes. Ground those processes in the shared vision of your learning community or education system and then be open about who was involved and what evidence informed your decisions. Taking these actions can help prevent the spread of false information and can increase the sustainability of change by reinforcing a culture of collaboration.
- » **Prioritize media literacy.** Everyone is learning to navigate new information channels and sources together in real time. You do not need to have all the answers about how to do so effectively. Instead, you can provide opportunities for everyone in your learning community or education system to process information and examine sources together. Create multi-generational, collaborative spaces for people to think through what they are hearing.
- » **Find a common problem to solve.** Focusing attention on rigid political differences often distracts from the nuanced work of creating learner-centered environments. Identify a problem to solve that needs many voices from your learning community or education system. Create collaborative, empathy-driven spaces that center the needs of learners and enable participants to recognize shared values, listen actively, work through hard things together and align toward common goals.

Reflection Questions

- » What is the most distracting “noise” in my learning community?
Am I contributing to it in any way?
- » How might I create and use opportunities to be as open and clear as possible and foster shared ownership?
- » How might I make space for fact-based and learner-focused conversations that foster empathy and trust?

Resources

Media Literacy Now’s [educator resource page](#) includes classroom resources and stories from educators who are prioritizing media literacy in their contexts, and National AI Literacy Day’s [resources section](#) features articles and educator guides.

IDEO’s [toolkits and resources](#) on human-centered design offer starting points for engaging people in collaborative, empathy-driven problem solving.

KnowledgeWorks’ [article](#) on transparency in education changemaking provides examples and additional resources for clear and open communication in learning communities.



Seed New Systems

Pilot vision-driven approaches and structures that can lay the groundwork for new systems for a new era.

Every big change must start somewhere. High levels of uncertainty about what public education might look like in the future and dissatisfaction with current approaches are creating opportunities to rethink education structures. Each of us can work to **seed new systems**. By starting small to put new practices in place, we can experience glimmers of what we hope the future of learning might be and build upon them.

Action Steps

- » **Create unconventional but strategic partnerships.**
The emergence of new learning providers and a widening range of instructional approaches can create a sense of scarcity for people in traditional education settings. However, potential competitors can become collaborators and assets for advancing your vision. Map other learning providers and community and business organizations, even those that may not seem to be natural allies. Consider how partnership agreements, governance roles and shared accountability structures could create mutually beneficial partnerships and support continuity and adaptability over time.
- » **Explore new funding streams.** Public funding for education is in flux. While you should continue to advocate for adequate public funding, you can simultaneously explore alternative funding sources. That might mean joining with other sectors to pursue joint funding or leveraging the strengths of your broader community. Develop diversified funding approaches that balance flexibility and stability and incorporate human expertise, time and collaborative assets alongside financial resources.
- » **Measure what matters.** Assessment and accountability measures are meant to be communication and reflection tools. If your current measures of school quality feel constraining, explore alongside learners, families, caregivers and other community members what data and assessment practices would feel more meaningful. Start small, collecting and sharing those data and creating regular discussion and reflection processes. Treating those conversations as an ongoing learning process can help inform adaptation and ensure alignment to goals.
- » **Get creative about what public education can offer.**
The needs and expectations of education are shifting and will likely continue to change. Even as new players emerge to meet those needs, explore what learning experiences, educator roles and community services your school or district might put in place to remain a relevant and indispensable learning provider in an expanding education marketplace.

Reflection Questions

- » With which organizations or changemakers might I meaningfully collaborate and partner with to advance my goals and strategy?
- » What data can help me understand whether current structures or practices are advancing my goals and strategy? How might I work with others to begin to identify and collect that data?
- » How might my school or district begin to experiment with new types of offerings that promise to be relevant to learners, families and caregivers now and in the future?

Resources

Remake Learning's publication, [*Shift: How cultivating an ecosystem remade Pittsburgh's learning landscape*](#), shares how education has changed through the cultivation of partnerships and relationships.

[The Canopy Project's](#) data portal shares examples of innovative, learner-centered schools, and KnowledgeWorks' article, "[Leading Toward Transformation: Building Systems That Last](#)," outlines key dimensions of sustaining change.

KnowledgeWorks' publication, [*Beyond the Horizon: Blazing a Trail Toward Learner-Centered School Quality Systems*](#), outlines priorities, strategies and examples related to shifting how schools and states measure learning and school quality.

Laying Your Own Foundation

Each of us must decide how we will navigate today's fraught landscape and lead toward the future of learning that we desire. We can succumb to the monumental shifts reshaping education or embrace our agency to influence what happens next. Small actions are the bricks that will build a new foundation for the future. No matter your role, you have the power and the responsibility to spark and sustain change.



Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Katie King for serving as the primary author of this publication and managing the project that led to its creation; to Maria Crabtree, Jeremiah-Anthony Righteous-Rogers and Jason Swanson for their contributions to this publication and the workshops that informed it; to Kyle Anderson, Laura Hilger, Dereck Norville-Bowie, Katherine Prince and Emily Smith for providing feedback on it; to Todd Garvin for creating the design; to Carla Bockman and Patty Casey for proofreading the publication; and to Sean Andres, Shelby Taylor and Kate Westrich for managing its publication and release.

Special thanks to Gloria deLeon and Hiram Oliveros of Ad Hoc Advisory for co-facilitating the workshops and to Jeanine Collins of the Center for the Future of Learning for supporting workshop participant recruitment.



KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 25 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together. [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://www.knowledgeworks.org)

Workshop Participants

This strategy guide could not have been developed without the creativity and insights of the learners and education leaders, innovators and influencers who participated in the workshops that informed it. Much gratitude is due to the individuals listed below for their time, thoughtfulness and courage in engaging with future possibilities.

Alex Bailey
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Natalynn Masters
Camp Founder Girls

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at San Antonio

Kiah Mitchell-Scott
For the Culture Homeschool

Jason Nious
Molodi Creative Works

Zhan Okuda-Lim
Leadership Institute of Nevada

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Nevada State University

Tara Powell
Spring Valley High School

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Lied STEM Academy/Clark
County School District

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at San Antonio

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