Article: **What if We… Don't Return to School as Usual**

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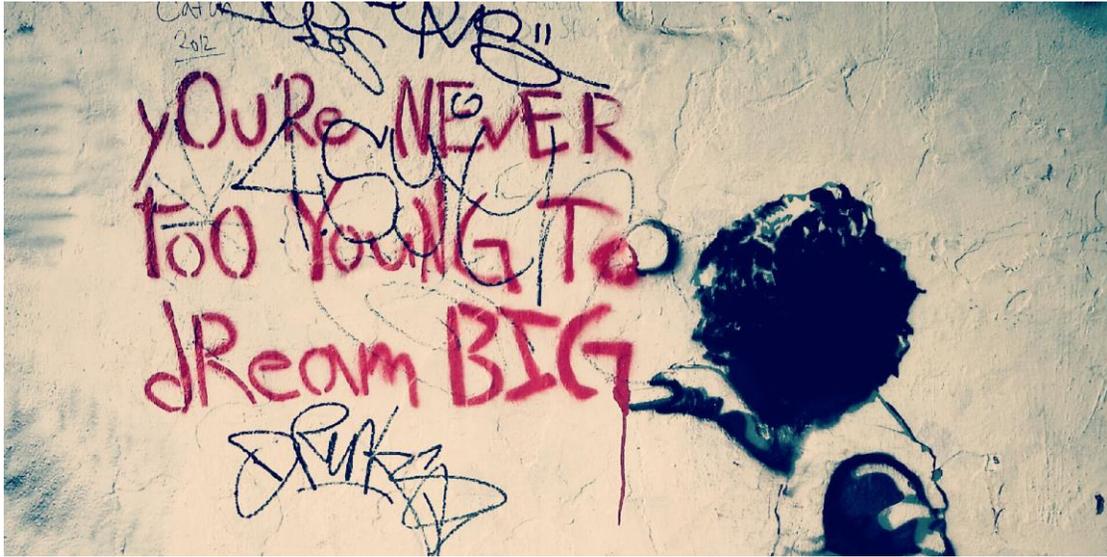
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Photo by Gary Knight

Let's start with the end in mind. Fast forward to a time in the near future, say 12 months from now when we have made it through this world health crisis. Imagine that you have been invited to be on a panel at a conference because you decided to do something unusual amidst the crisis. You decided you were going to refuse to return to schooling in the same way you left it when COVID-19 erupted. You decided you would not return to doing business as usual in how we educate children. On this panel you share why you made this decision and your remarks focus on a desire to change the system because you realized it was designed to produce inequities. You share what it took to stop doing business as usual and how you became a catalyst for others to join in this effort too. You talk about the innovations you and a team of educators, parents, and students created and what you are learning from taking those actions. Then you share the impact those changes had on students, families, and staff. You close by describing how you used the opportunity of the system shutdown to create a better way of educating children and how you are going to make sure the old system doesn't return.

Let's be clear. When the COVID-19 crisis is over, we do not have to go back to business as usual in our educational system, or any other system for that matter. We just don't. The question confronting us at the moment is not *can* we prepare to come back differently but *will* we?

Working in the field of social justice education, we know there are many education leaders from superintendents to policy makers to site leaders to teachers who have come to the realization that our education system is designed to produce what it produces — inequity in who succeeds. We also know that many do not want to continue educating the way education was designed. Many more have realized that what they do day-to-day in schools actually perpetuates the current inequitable system, the very one they would like to interrupt and change. So although we want change, we find ourselves maintaining the status quo. Why?

Nothing changes without disturbance. Since it is people who change things, that means change can't happen until people are disturbed. Margaret Wheatley in her article "Willing to be Disturbed" says,

"As we work together to restore hope for the future, we need to include a new and strange ally — our willingness to be disturbed."

Wheatley is talking about change within individuals where we have to be *willing to be disturbed* by actively engaging with those who challenge our way of doing things. It is in this place of discomfort where we expand our beliefs and innovations are born. When we are disturbed, we change. What is true for the individual is also true for systems. If we want to change systems, we have to be disturbed by what we see and engage with others to disturb, catalyze and influence what we do.

The biggest changes in our society have only come about when there was a strong enough disturbance — an interruption to "business as usual" — and when people were willing to come together even though the path forward was cloudy. This United States was created

out of disturbance. We have Social Security because of disturbance. To the extent that we have civil rights for people of color, women, people with disabilities, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people (to name a few) — it is because of disturbance. People interrupted the status quo way of doing things and created an opening to change something, to build something new.

COVID-19 has produced what may be one of the largest worldwide and systemic disturbances of all time. While schools closed overnight and our daily routines have changed, the inequities produced by our systems are even more stark in terms of which students have access to technology, internet, food, and housing and which families have the privilege of sheltering in place to stay safe.

Since we know that disturbance is required for change and there is no doubt that disturbance is happening as we speak, the question is, *are we willing to use this opportunity to create the kind of educational system we want?* We have learned that if we are going to change a system, we as individuals first have to SEE what the system is producing, then we have to ENGAGE with others to design something different, and finally we have to ACT. Cornel West puts it this way:

> *It takes courage to look in the mirror and see past your reflection to who you really are when you take off the mask, when you're not performing the same old routines and social roles. It takes courage to ask — How did I become so well-adjusted to injustice?*

Seeing the system doesn't guarantee we will engage and act differently. The system is designed to keep us busy perpetuating it so that we don't have time to redesign it. The system is a well-oiled machine that has tremendous momentum to keep things going as they are; just look at Education Codes in any state. The result is that even those who see the system and have a desire to interrupt it do not usually have the mindset, time, resources or

support to do so. The demands of "doing school" prohibit us from engaging and acting differently. But now, that machine has ground to a halt.

What would acting differently (both during and after) this crisis look like for education? Below are a few ideas on what we could do differently. With each idea ask yourself "what if…" as you read it, and notice what thoughts come to mind. If you find yourself saying "oh, we can't do that," read it again and ask *"but what if we did…"*

What if we…

What if we… **gather our teams now (virtually) to get ready to return to another way**. Schedule virtual meetings with educators and school staff in whatever configuration works best for you to engage them in discussions under the theme "we WILL do school differently when we return." Present your "what if we…" approach and talk about WHY you want to return doing school differently. The goal of these meetings is to enroll and recruit people to this approach and set a new direction, to engage their agency and their imagination. Allow people to talk about their excitement and concerns with this idea and engage them in responding to both the idea of coming back differently and to some of your "what if we…" ideas. Ask them to brainstorm other "what if we…" ideas and come to agreement on what you will collectively create, build and test.

What if we…**use this time to re-purpose our leadership structures to build our leadership muscle to be strategic *equity* leaders instead of reactive leaders**. Strategic equity leaders identify education challenges through an equity lens and engage others in collaborative inquiry to figure out what to do to address the challenges. Strategic equity leaders build the competencies of others to interrupt status quo ways of doing things that perpetuate inequities. Strategic equity leaders keep a birds eye view of what's going on in the system, the school site, and the classroom and facilitate others to see what is happening and co-create strategies to adjust to needs. What if we took time now to develop our strategic equity leadership muscles and re-purpose (or create) existing leadership structures such as leadership team meetings, staff meetings, grade level meetings, professional learning communities, etc. to focus on learning from our actions. What if teams committed to meeting every week for a while to assess how things are going, review the actions being taken, discuss what we are learning from what we are doing, and adjust

actions accordingly. What if we implement minimum day/early release Fridays and use the afternoon for collaboration time to be in a strategic equity leadership mode looking at what to do more of because it is producing a climate for learning and what to stop or do less of because it is not.

What if we…**focus each hour on student learning instead of seat time?** Tony Smith, former Illinois State Superintendent says in his article "[The Invisible Blizzard and the Importance of E-Learning](#)" that we have prioritized seat time over student learning and that our schools waste our children's time and creativity every day. Our current way of doing school is organized around a dominant culture view of time: time to sit, time to learn, time to move on, time to test, etc. Smith says that we can, if we wish, create a new system where teachers can use their creativity to connect with students about ideas, projects, activities and learning "in ways not dictated by hands on a clock." We can use the moment we are in to ask teachers how they would work or what they would do differently if their days were designed around student learning as opposed to seat time. What if we do what Smith suggests — engage teachers *now* to design a system that focuses on learning and competency development.

What if we…**gathered data from students about their experience of our classrooms and schools regularly?** We know that how students feel about being in school impacts their learning**.** What if we implement a system to learn in real time how the learning environment is working or not working for students? Ideally these assessments are conducted every week by every teacher in every school so that teachers and other leaders see how well students are engaged in their learning, the extent to which they feel like they are getting enough support to learn, and how relevant the material is to their life. Tools like [PERTS' Co-Pilot/Elevate](#) allow teachers to gather and discuss real time feedback from students and work together to design and lead changes in their classrooms.

What if we…**implement a focal student approach** where we structure the classroom to meet the needs of students farthest from learning? Return to school with teachers prepared to name the students who are struggling the most to learn and teach the teachers how to use a focal student approach that discovers what these students need and how to best reach them. This approach does not assume a teacher knows what is in the way of a student

learning, but instead has the teacher engaging with the student to figure out what the barriers are to learning and finding innovative ways to meet their needs.

What if we...**organize the curriculum with project based learning (PBL) as a key component and create opportunities for every student to participate.** Think about it, a plumber doesn't become a good plumber without being an apprentice and learning by doing. They do not become an expert by sitting at a desk listening to a lecture about how to unclog a pipe. Nor do medical doctors, electricians, teachers, mechanics, writers, chefs, or nurses. All career and professional learning involves learning by doing. Apprenticeships, medical residencies, and being mentored by someone skilled in their craft is project based learning, and project based learning is a good practice that we know works. We can revise the curriculum so that every school and every classroom implements project based learning and every child has the opportunity to engage in learning through projects. We can make our first teaching moves facilitating learning by projects before we lecture on a subject and hand out worksheets. What we can do now is build the conditions to put PBL into play when we return?

What if we...**co-design and plan a "Return to a Different School Back to School" event**. This pandemic *will* end and we will return to our buildings and school communities. Invite students and parents back in a new way. Assemble the school community and engage in new ways together. Talk about the excitement you have as educators to do school in a different way and the challenges you will face to make the new way work. Acknowledge the way we were doing things before the virus was not working for everyone and explain how you want to work in partnership with them to design new ways. Break into classroom size groups for sense making, allowing students to meet with students and parents with parents to build relationship and contribute to a new vision focused on student learning.

The first step in designing a new way is to decide *now* that you won't return to normal — a normal that was never neutral and wasn't working well for most students, teachers or families. Engage with your teammates and community *now* to articulate a bold, audacious, wild vision of what your education system can look like. Focus on a couple small but powerful pieces to change. Gather your people to engage in equity *by design* and engage in collaborative inquiry to continuously design, test, and adjust your practices based on what

you learn. And, commit to sticking with the process— for at least a year, to stay the course. This is how we can collectively take the opportunity to design for change in how we do school.

For my fellow rebel leaders — those who have learned about equity, who are "woke" to how inequities are produced and perpetuated, who have built leadership skills to engage others in working toward equity, who have been trying to take action to change things...we have been preparing for this moment of interruption, the moment when a great disturbance would bring the system to a halt. We are strong in what we know, strong in what we see, strong in what we want. We have to act courageously NOW so we can come back together differently. **What if we...**

When the world becomes a fantasy / And you're more than you could ever be / 'Cause you're dreaming with your eyes wide open / And you know you can't go back again / To the world that you were living in / 'Cause you're dreaming with your eyes wide open / So, come alive!

- The Greatest Showman