

What's Failing: The System or the Learners?

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The education system has not seen a catastrophic collapse but rather a slow decline into deep dysfunction.

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WHEN LEARNERS MOVE ON TO COLLEGE AND CAREERS, they find themselves in a world for which they're hopelessly unprepared. At this stage, there's no opportunity to start again; no bailout for an investment gone wrong. Technology and other surface solutions keep the machine rolling, but how long do we have until the cogs can no longer support the machine? How long until we realize the system has, in fact, come crashing down (in slow motion over many years)—to leave us wondering not what went wrong but how we possibly let it get so bad in the first place?

What the education system should and must deliver on is meeting individual needs—those of learners with different and complementary strengths—and possess the capability to connect and create with each other. Real learner-centered education means guaranteeing every individual learner in every education system the opportunity to understand who they are, where they are from, and how they can contribute to our world. Our children are not broken; it is the system around them that is.

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To make a real, sustainable difference for students, systems must examine their practice at all levels. In this sense, I refer to the system as each and every one of us who is involved in education. “We” created the system, and it is only “we” who can fix it. Policy is not set in concrete; it can alter and adapt to make life and learning better. Only by refocusing every decision through the eyes of the learners will we understand how to transform.

What if Doctors Evaluated us with the Standardized Testing Mindset?

The collapse of our education system has occurred on many fronts. Among the most blatant—and one of the biggest tragedies of our time—is high-stakes testing. When we measure test scores as the one true indicator of academic achievement, the focus is absolutely on teaching to the test. Teachers are forced to pay attention to test scores in a way that ignores who the learners are as individuals. In other words, it ignores what makes them human.

Traditional, standardized testing channels thinking and, in many ways, encourages teachers to narrow their students' learning in order to more fully prepare them for what's required by tests. What would happen if we started measuring a personalized and more humanity-driven outcome in education, as we do in other social fields? Does the difficulty of measuring the human capacity to drive the world forward provide sufficient grounds to ignore it?

Medical doctors have been expected to use their professional judgement when synthesizing a range of data points for years. Not one of us would expect a medical doctor to make a decision based only on the blood pressure of a patient—who perhaps could not find a parking spot, was late for her appointment, and dropped the contents of her briefcase all over the middle of the road! The doctor does not say that you need to have open-heart surgery tomorrow based on this single indicator. The doctor will usually ask, “How do you feel? Was there any other reason it might be high?” The doctor may also require a range of tests before making a professional decision. So, why has a single data indicator been acceptable in education?

Perpetuating beliefs or acting in ways inconsistent with what's best for learners directly diminishes their capacity for success. Understanding whether a child is successful can be determined in multiple ways. By single narrative thinking, we have created a measurement system that over promises and under delivers. Measurement in itself is a driver of change—what and how you measure gets focused on. This is only one of a number of the systemic failures persistent in public education today, all stemming from the same failure or inability to examine everything we do in light of its impact on learners. The system must change to provide, from every level and angle, a clear line of sight to its center—the learner.

Assessment Built Collectively for Endless Adaptability

I am not talking about incorporating “one-size-fits-all” programs that promise to turn around failing systems. Or academic programs and strategies that have seen success raising test scores in only one community. We don't have time to waste implementing irrelevant programs or focusing on measurements of learning that do not fully reflect what a learner knows and is able to do. These are the very programs that promote and continue the status quo—they cannot let go of a system that is broken for many and only works for a few.

What I am talking about is a paradigm shift to transform learning to reflect the world we live in. As long as everyone turns and draws us back to narrowing measures, we will never complete the transformational shift required in preparing our learners for success in their world.

What really matters' has to be decided locally and be infused with whom a learner is, what they love, who they aspire to be, and what they need to be in order to get there.

We are building a systematic way to create the new knowledge needed to solve our real-world problems. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a US law passed in December 2015, begins this journey. States and districts can use this policy to reach every learner—or not. They could genuinely synthesize formative information that influences learning in real time, or they could continue to place value on several single indicators and be none the wiser.

By pooling the expertise of people who can bring very different strengths to the table, we can collectively generate new knowledge to solve the challenges that some of our learners face. By listening, learning, and sparking off each other, we can collectively create the new knowledge needed for success in today's world. This is collective cognition in action—thinking together to create new knowledge. Developing a culture committed to this way of thinking connects each level of the system to the growth, progress, and success of every single student.

“What really matters” has to be decided locally and be infused with who a learner is, what they love, who they aspire to be, and what they need to be in order to get there. We need to be using real-time assessment that is based on the full range of evidence, qualitative and quantitative, and that supports teachers to use sound professional judgment in a nuanced, but consistent, way.

System Building in Action

The Learner First, a company I co-founded (with Dr. E. Jane Davidson) to catalyze change in the education system, has been using a measurement system we designed called Authentic Mixed Method Assessment (AMMA). This is used as a way to not only change how learners are measured but also how they are tracking toward success. It's a world-leading, rubric-based approach that uses multiple points of evidence to capture what is most important for learners. The authenticity comes from measuring what is important and relevant to each student. We utilize multiple points of quantitative and qualitative evidence—established through a conversation about the needs of the learners in the school and community in which it's used—to show a richer, fuller picture of student performance, rather than a one-dimensional high-stakes test.

AMMA requires educators to synthesize multiple data points using professional judgment and employing a transparent, systemic, and methodical process. It leverages teachers' educated judgments and puts them in the role of a professional diagnosing learning needs. Teachers can only be asked to do this when we transform at all levels of our systems. This means going well below the surface to get to questions like, what do we really believe, and does that still serve us today? If we use an iceberg as a metaphor, we would see that the "what we officially do around here" (systems, policies, programs, and measures) sits above the surface for all to see. What really sits just under the waterline is the "what we actually do around here" (norms, behaviors, and practices).

We are working internationally and in three US states with growing momentum. And, notably, we are working with leaders and on systems that are ready and on their way to positive transformation. Currently, our work in the US is with medium to large urban districts or clusters of districts. The core of our approach is:

- **Creating genuine personal relationships;**
- **Personalized, deep, and culturally responsive teaching and learning; and**
- **To remove barriers.**

We have found that—in all cases—districts, schools, and teachers were able to use our process as a lens to find out who learners really are and then use that to determine what changes need to be made within their realm of influence.

It is time for everyone to engage in a whole-system change process and identify and share the new system-wide approaches that are required for our learners' success. Only by putting the learner first and measuring what really matters will we transform education.



Joanne McEachen is an internationally recognized education thought leader, author, and whole-system practitioner from New Zealand and is now based in Seattle, WA. Joanne has an outstanding career in educational transformation, working at all levels in the education system—as a teacher, a school principal, and as a superintendent. In addition, she has led and managed countrywide education change initiatives as a national (Federal) leader for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand and now in the United States with her international consultancy The Learner First, LLC, co-founded with Dr. E. Jane Davidson. Joanne also serves as Global New Measures Director for New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL), partnering with Dr. Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn in an international movement involving 10 countries working to facilitate deep learning and to measure growth that is relevant, meaningful, and improves the lives of all learners.