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# RETHINKING EDUCATION

Reimagining when, where, and how learning happens

  
RENNIE CENTER  
EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

Condition  
OF Education  
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

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# Introduction

## Meeting the Moment: Rethinking People, Place, and Time in Education

Imagine almost any aspect of society 100 years ago compared with today's world, and the picture will look vastly different. Workplaces have been transformed, with computers and advanced machinery shifting the activities and locations of "typical" work environments. While this change has been most dramatic in the rise of remote or hybrid workplaces, mechanized factory floors patrolled by robotic assistants are also a far cry from the manufacturing plants of the early 1900s. Meanwhile, the electric vehicles that increasingly fill today's roads have little in common with the automobiles of the last century, and smartphones, WiFi-connected devices, and modern appliances have transformed everything from family dynamics to household responsibilities.

In contrast to these fields—where changes have come by leaps and bounds—educational settings often bear a striking resemblance to their counterparts from the previous century. In many schools, learning still takes place within a single classroom, with students grouped together in age-alike cohorts and overseen by a teacher whose role is to deliver content and facilitate knowledge-building. Undoubtedly, many of the tools and techniques of the trade have changed—for instance, Chromebooks may have supplemented (or replaced) textbooks, and differentiated learning within small groups may be widespread in addition to whole-class instruction. But the core approach to teaching and learning is often functionally the same now as it was in the 1920s.

Given the limited progress that has been made to transform learning environments at scale, it is important to consider whether the current model of education is adequate to meet the needs of the 21st century—and data makes it abundantly clear that the answer is "no." In the aftermath of the pandemic, students (particularly students of color) continue to be chronically absent from school in high numbers, and educators are suffering from unprecedented rates of burnout. The non-academic needs of learners (including the impact of individual- and community-level trauma) are more acute than ever before, as schools take an increasingly large role in addressing social-emotional development and mental and behavioral health. Meanwhile, employers continue to seek workers who are prepared to function in technologically advanced workplaces that require high-level communication and collaboration skills, even as students who graduate from traditional educational settings may find themselves underprepared to meet these demands.

In light of these and other ongoing challenges, education leaders seeking to improve student outcomes must dig deeply into the design and functioning of the education system. More specifically, they must consider whether and how to rethink three critical elements of learning: people, place, and time. Historically, these have been among the most static components of educational settings—even as new developments have shifted the approaches and content within schools, questions of who facilitates learning, where they do so, and when this takes place can often be answered in the same way now as they could decades ago.

Over the past year, the Rennie Center has sought to learn more about these three essential elements, their current state, and how they can be reconceptualized to better meet the needs of today's students and educators. This work, carried out through our Condition of Education in the Commonwealth (COE) project, has taken a number of forms. We conducted research in the field to hear directly from educators and other stakeholders about their perspectives on the current state of education in Massachusetts. We convened practitioners and policymakers for a series of in-depth conversations about rethinking people, time, and place, including our annual Condition of Education in Western Massachusetts event

last fall. And we combed through data on the current status of teaching and learning, compiling the results in a brand-new data dashboard that features a range of compelling state- and district-level insights (see the sidebar for more on these and other components of the COE project).

Throughout the year, we've uncovered a number of bright spots within and beyond Massachusetts. In these innovative schools and programs, child development is recognized as an individualized process that takes place continuously and across multiple settings, rather than within the constraints of a classroom or school day. Educators receive ongoing support that helps them balance the demands of their profession with their own personal needs. And young people earn credentials that prepare them to enter their chosen career pathway while gaining hands-on experience that ensures their future success. However, we also found that it can be extremely difficult for anyone—even the most visionary leaders—to think beyond the limits of how education has been perceived and delivered for more than a century.

In this year's Condition of Education action guide, the Rennie Center aims to advance conversations on rethinking education within Massachusetts. We do so through a holistic approach that—just like Rennie's work more broadly—examines the intersection of research, practice, and policy. In the sections that follow, we delve into the three core components of people, place, and time, first by examining what research tells us about the need to rethink each subject, then by highlighting existing examples from the field that can serve as models of promising practice, and finally by pointing toward policies that can help expand innovative approaches across the state. In this way, we hope to inspire education leaders to think differently about where and how learning happens—and, ultimately, to help build a new vision for education that aligns with the realities of life in 2024.

## THE PROJECT

The Condition of Education in the Commonwealth project is one way the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy advances its mission of improving public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. It takes a yearly snapshot of the education system in Massachusetts, examining broader patterns in our public schools and recommending areas for action that are well-supported by research and evidence.

## PROJECT COMPONENTS

**Action Guide:** This guide examines evidence-based practices, identifies local exemplars, and offers research-informed recommendations for statewide actions that have the potential to address gaps and contribute to broad improvement in student outcomes. The report looks at the progress made and the challenges that remain, focusing on areas where new approaches could help foster the immediate success of all the Commonwealth's learners. The report offers strategies that can be applied within schools, programs, and communities across Massachusetts, thereby grounding the research in real-world examples of success.

**Community Conversations:** Starting with the release of the Condition of Education Action Guide during January's "COE Week," the Rennie Center aims to host a series of conversations throughout the year that provide open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to student learning and achievement. These events take place in a variety of venues and seek to include individuals who bring a multitude of perspectives on the education system, helping to further advance recommendations found in our Action Guide while also informing and strengthening our next round of research.

**Data Dashboard:** In 2024, the Rennie Center is releasing a brand-new, interactive Data Dashboard that tracks a wide-ranging set of indicators on the Massachusetts education system, from early education through college and career. The tool brings together state- and district-level data on everything from student enrollment trends and teacher retention rates to school discipline data and test scores. Many of the indicators can be disaggregated based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. To accompany the Data Dashboard, we will also release a series of in-depth Data Stories, which dig deeper into key indicators to provide additional context and analysis.

# Rethinking People

Imagine an education system that...

**Rethinks the teaching profession and moves away from a one-teacher/one-classroom model.**



## Background

Data shows that teacher quality matters more to student achievement than any other aspect of education.<sup>1</sup> Reimagining the teaching job in ways that empower educators to do their best work is a critical lever to advancing student success. More specifically, shifts in the teaching profession aimed at moving away from the one-teacher/one-classroom model have the opportunity to expand student access to quality teaching by addressing long-standing challenges that limit teachers' impact.

Research also reveals that teachers may be outliers when it comes to burnout-fueled attrition.<sup>2</sup> In a 2022 National Education Association poll, 55% of teacher respondents stated that they planned to quit their roles earlier than they originally intended, up from 37% a year earlier.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a 2020 Gallup poll reported that 36% of K-12 teachers "very often" or "always" feel burned out at work compared to 28% of workers in other industries.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pandemic had an impact on attrition within the teaching workforce: in Massachusetts, research from the Wheelock Education Policy Center found that "relative to pre pandemic levels, average turnover rates were similar going into the fall of 2020 but increased by 17% going into the fall of 2021," with particularly high turnover among newly hired teachers and White teachers.<sup>5</sup>

While the pandemic has certainly exacerbated challenges, the teaching profession faced hurdles to recruitment and retention long before 2020. Data show that over the past decade, "the annual teacher turnover rate has hovered around eight percent nationally, and is more than double that for schools designated for Title 1 funding."<sup>6</sup> This same source shows the national turnover rate is more than twice as high as the rate in other top-performing jurisdictions, such as Finland, Ontario, and Singapore. While reasons for teacher attrition are nuanced and dependent on a variety of factors, data show that teachers most often cite limited opportunities to collaborate with peers to improve their craft,<sup>7</sup> insufficient compensation and benefits,<sup>8</sup> an excessive workload that directly impacts wellbeing,<sup>9</sup> and inadequate support for new teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Challenges are also staggering at the beginning of the teacher pipeline. Data show that perceptions of the teaching profession are at, or near, the lowest levels recorded over the last half century.<sup>11</sup> For example, according to PDK International's 2022 Public Attitudes Toward Public Schools poll nearly two-thirds of parents (62%) would not want their children to become teachers, while "interest in the teaching profession among high school seniors and college freshmen has fallen a staggering 50% since the 1990s, and 38% since 2010," to its lowest level in 50 years.<sup>12,13</sup>

These persistent challenges have a direct and significant impact on student learning outcomes. To better empower educators, we need to move away from a one-teacher/one-classroom model which too often isolates teachers, especially novice teachers, and treats experience and expertise as scarce commodities that cannot be shared across schools and districts. Instead, imagine more dynamic learning settings where teachers move freely in and out of classrooms, stepping

in when student strengths and needs best align with their training, talents, and ambitions. More flexible staffing and scheduling is now the default in most other professions and can better facilitate ongoing collaboration, provide support for new teachers, and create meaningful growth opportunities for experienced teachers that fundamentally transform the range of learning experiences accessible to students.

While it is important to look at factors driving attrition, it is also critical to take a look at what is working. When asked about their top reason for staying in the profession, teachers overwhelmingly replied, “meaningful work.”<sup>14</sup> Connecting with the mission, values, and purpose of teaching is an integral part of the profession. Among those citing “meaningful work” as a reason for staying, 93% say they believe their work helps others and 89% say the mission and purpose of their organization aligns with what matters to them.<sup>15</sup> As we attempt to address the urgent and complex needs facing the profession, it is important to keep in mind that most educators deeply value what they do and genuinely care about their work.

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

### Teacher Diversity in Massachusetts

A core component of rethinking the teaching job is paying attention to who enters the profession. Efforts to build a diverse teacher workforce are critical to student outcomes. State and national studies overwhelmingly show increased teacher diversity is associated with improvements in test scores, dropout rates, gifted program representation, and student-teacher communication for students of color.

This graph presents a scatter plot comparing the proportion of BIPOC students in a given district (x-axis) to the proportion of BIPOC staff (y-axis) for all Massachusetts communities. Each dot on the graph represents a school district in Massachusetts, and the diagonal line identifies where students and staff would be equally represented. One critical observation is that all data points fall below the diagonal line, indicating that BIPOC teachers

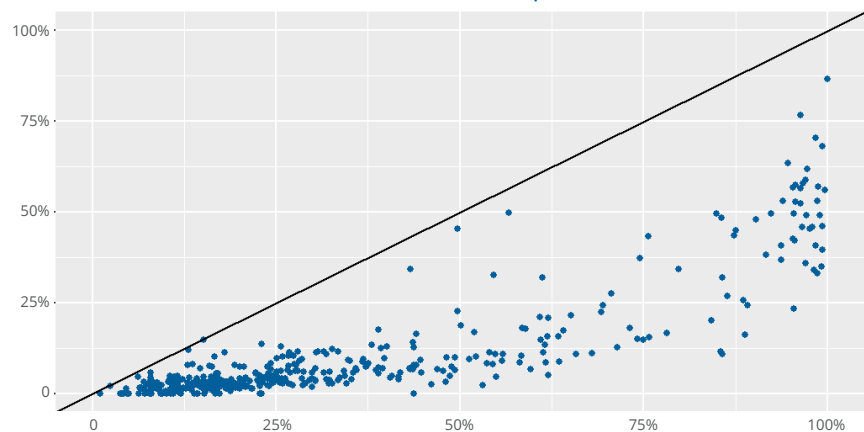
are underrepresented in all Massachusetts districts compared to the students who are served. Amherst-Pelham is the traditional public school district (i.e., non-charter and non-vocational technical) that comes closest to the line. The school population in Amherst-Pelham includes 43% BIPOC students, compared to 34% BIPOC staff.<sup>16</sup>

Over the last ten years, the proportion of BIPOC students in Massachusetts has risen from roughly 35% to 47%.<sup>17</sup> As demonstrated by the data, the need to address teacher diversity is urgent. Building an education workforce that matches students’ backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences is an essential step in ensuring Massachusetts’ public education system supports the aspirations and nurtures the potential of all learners.



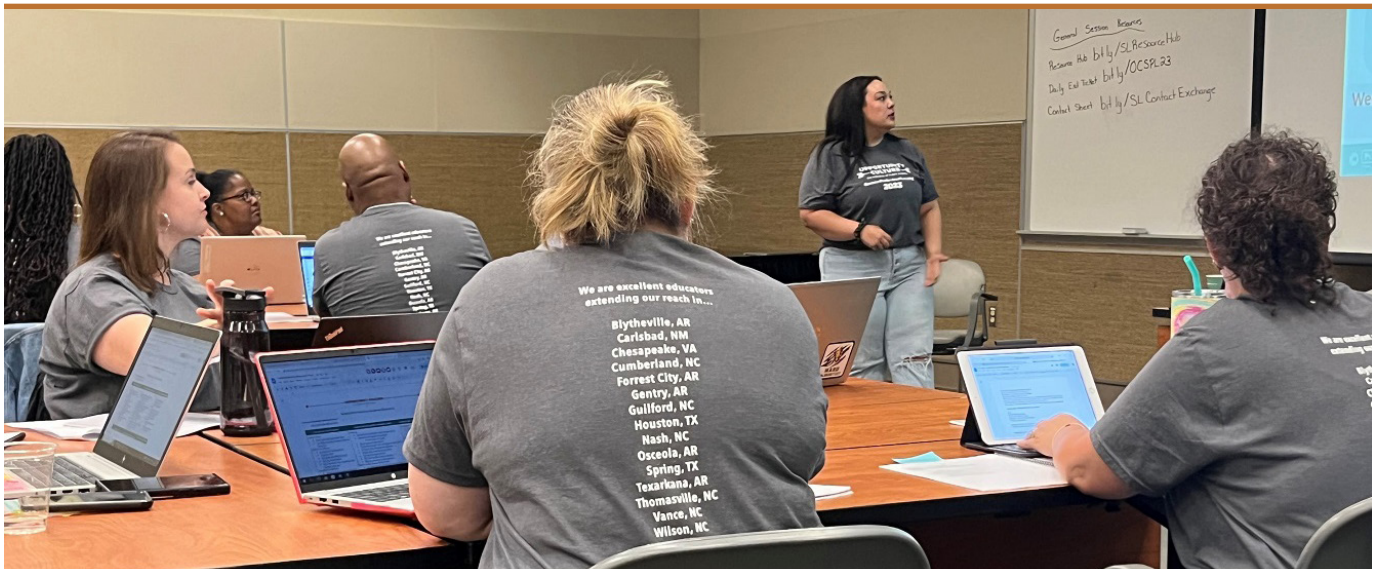
To dig deeper into the data on educator diversity—and research and analysis on its connection to student learning and outcomes—read the [Rennie Center’s full Data Story](#).

**SNAPSHOT: STUDENTS VS. TEACHERS IDENTIFYING AS BIPOC BY DISTRICT, 2022–23**



## Bright Spots

Recent years have seen an increased focus on rethinking the teaching profession. For example, the Coalition to Reimagine the Teaching Role brings together numerous organizations that see value in reenvisioning the teaching job to document exemplars, advance policy, and share research.<sup>18</sup> Many models to rethink the teaching profession have emerged. Some focus on making teaching more sustainable and providing teachers with additional collaboration and planning time. This includes experimenting with having teachers spend only four days per week in the classroom, while using partnerships to preserve a five-day school week for students. In such a model, educators could spend the fifth day of the week engaged in non-teaching responsibilities, such as peer collaboration, planning, and other school-based roles. Other models leverage technology to provide instructional support, freeing up teachers' time to perform high-level tasks that require specialized expertise, such as differentiating instruction based on students' individual needs and working with small groups of students to personalize learning. Each model has various strengths and drawbacks, and some models work better than others in particular contexts depending on grade level, class size, content area, and more. This section provides two examples of innovative models for reimagining the teaching job, Opportunity Culture and Map Academy.



### Opportunity Culture: Creating Innovative Staffing Models to Address Persistent Educational Challenges

Opportunity Culture school staffing models create small teaching teams to address persistent challenges in education, from lagging student learning to teacher shortages. The impact of this work is seen in high student academic growth, high rates of teacher satisfaction, and strong teacher recruitment and retention.<sup>19</sup> Currently, 65 sites—mostly traditional public school districts, from small, rural districts to some of the country's largest urban districts—across 12 U.S. states use Opportunity Culture models, with large numbers of sites in North Carolina, Arkansas, and Texas.

Opportunity Culture schools feature a new core role: Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs). MCLs are highly effective, experienced teachers who lead a small teaching team. MCLs provide teachers with ongoing guidance and job-embedded coaching, while continuing their own part-time teaching responsibilities. Often, MCLs focus on the highest-impact teaching tasks, such as providing differentiated, small-group instruction. MCLs and other team roles that extend educators' reach to more students receive higher pay through reallocations of regular school budgets, making the model sustainable.

In order to maximize the impact of MCLs and other teacher leader roles in Opportunity Culture schools, each school's design team of educators and school leaders redesigns school schedules to provide significant time during the school day for planning, coaching, and collaboration. High levels of teacher support in Opportunity Culture schools have proven beneficial for supporting all educators, especially those who are new to the profession, and ensuring that every student gets access to excellent teaching.<sup>20</sup>

## Map Academy: Creating an Empowering, Flexible, and Collaborative Teaching Role

Map Academy is an alternative charter public high school in Plymouth, Massachusetts that serves students up to age 24.<sup>21</sup> Founded on a belief that every student has the ability to succeed when given the opportunity, the school primarily serves students who have struggled in traditional school settings or have faced significant barriers to education. Map provides students with an individualized, competency-based learning experience where they can progress at their own pace on their journey to a high school degree. Thinking creatively about teachers' roles is a core component of the school's success.

Teachers' work days begin and end with Anchor, which is a dedicated block for a small group of students to meet with an adult in the school who supports them both emotionally and academically.<sup>22</sup> During Anchor, teachers and students meet individually to build relationships, develop daily academic goals, and track progress towards individualized student success plans. In addition to their work providing individualized student support, teachers work collaboratively on



interdisciplinary teams called Learning Studios. Map Academy has three Learning Studios as well as an Evening Studio, accommodating a total of 275 students. While each Learning Studio serves about 70 students, students are never all in the Studio at the same time. Older students, who may have work, parenting, or other responsibilities, have the option to create customized or drop-in schedules to ensure they can complete their schoolwork while also fulfilling personal obligations.

Within each Learning Studio, students work independently or in small groups towards their individualized goals. While students are primarily responsible for setting their goals each day, teachers provide support to ensure students work on an appropriate balance of subjects in order to attain their high school diploma. Teachers have the autonomy to structure their day and play a facilitating role, working with students individually or in small groups based on students' unique needs.

The model works well for mission-driven teachers who seek to empower students to have agency over their learning. The impact of this work has been seen in strong feedback from teachers and students alike, which is also exemplified by the school's strong teacher retention. While many of the ways that Map is rethinking teaching are most relevant in alternative and competency-based school settings, others could be applied more broadly. These include the thoughtful design of

beginning and end-of-day advisory periods, the use of individualized student plans to drive teacher-student interactions, and the role of teachers as facilitators of individual and small-group learning.



## Recommendations

To ensure the future success of both educators and students, a comprehensive re-evaluation of current policies that define and support the teaching role is imperative. While kernels of innovative change can be found across the profession (see above), more aggressive system shifts are needed to fully establish and scale new staffing models. Teachers are among the best educated and trained workers in our economy.<sup>23</sup> Attracting and retaining top-tier professionals requires creating more flexible and dynamic work environments, with opportunities for growth, similar to the work environments found in other high-demand sectors.

Rethinking the teaching profession often begins with moving away from the one-teacher/one-classroom model, which isolates teachers, discourages collaboration, and prevents students from benefiting from all the talent and experiences their school has to offer. Schools can initiate this process by **reevaluating the rigidity of school schedules**. By adding more flexibility to the school day, schools can better distribute classroom responsibilities and increase planning time to optimize learning. For example, one idea is to arrange classes to support a rotating staffing model where schools continue to operate on a five-day schedule, but individual teachers are only in a classroom four days a week. Teachers can use the fifth day for individual and shared planning, professional development, or other school responsibilities, while freeing up class time allows other adults, including non-school personnel like community partners and subject matter or workforce experts, to work with students through structured learning opportunities. Perhaps the most promising aspect of this approach is that when the teacher exits the classroom it does not disrupt or end student learning, but instead opens the door to other meaningful experiences.

Schools can also explore **establishing team teaching models** where multiple teachers with diverse skills, experiences, and backgrounds assume responsibility for a large cohort of students, even an entire grade. While many classrooms have multiple adults working with students, these coordinated efforts rarely achieve the level of collaboration found in other professions. Instead, primary responsibility for student learning still falls on the lead classroom teacher. In contrast, effective teams organize members around a shared purpose (e.g., student success), are intentionally created, have defined roles and responsibilities, and create space and time to meet, learn, and improve.<sup>24</sup> For example, the Next Education Workforce model developed at Arizona State University enables groups of teachers to work with dozens of students.<sup>25</sup> Without defined classrooms, teachers can step forward and back as needed, playing roles best suited to their levels of experience and areas of expertise. Learning strategies can seamlessly shift between large-group instruction, small-group work, and one-on-one support. And learning environments can better accommodate a diversity of student strengths and needs, potentially leading to stronger teacher-student relationships and improved learning outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

Flexible scheduling, teacher teams, and more collaborative practice are also important tools for promoting teacher leadership without forcing practitioners to leave the classroom. Teacher teams can be composed of experienced veterans, classroom novices, student teachers, and paraprofessionals, all working together to leverage their expertise and capacity toward a common goal. Veteran teachers may benefit from opportunities to share their craft and step forward as team leaders, while those just starting their careers gain consistent, ongoing support in implementing instructional strategies. The Opportunity Culture school staffing model described above provides an example of how multi-classroom leaders might provide leadership to educator teams across multiple classrooms. Teams may even expand to include community members and local employers, encouraging partnerships and professional opportunities for educators beyond schoolhouse doors.



Similarly, scheduling flexibility provides **opportunities for teachers to take on leadership responsibilities as part of their core job functions**. Providing time and space for collaborative planning also opens the door to mentoring, peer coaching, and curriculum development. Pushed further, schools may offer teachers sabbaticals to step away from the classroom for a limited period of time to engage in a range of activities aimed at school improvement. This may include designing a new curriculum, serving as an in-house content expert, or developing new programs with community partners to promote real-world learning. Revere Public Schools' Colleague to Colleague (C2C) program, featured in the Rennie Center's 2022 Condition of Education Action Guide, provides an example of this approach.<sup>27</sup>

While these proposed changes hold promise in making the teaching profession more appealing and sustainable, their implementation hinges on the availability of a diverse educator pipeline. Massachusetts must simultaneously and proactively **invest in robust teacher development programs to address the prevailing shortage of qualified educators**.<sup>28</sup> Streamlining and modernizing the processes that are in place to develop and sustain the Massachusetts teacher workforce is essential. Policymakers should continue to explore alternative pathways to certification, recognizing the value of diverse experiences and skills. Additionally, regular reviews and updates to licensure requirements are crucial to ensure that new educators entering the field are prepared to apply contemporary pedagogical research, emerging technologies, and evolving methodologies.

Overall, rethinking the teaching profession requires a structural overhaul of how we recruit and train new teachers, schedule and support classroom learning, and conceive of teacher leadership opportunities. Without dramatic changes to the teaching profession, we will struggle to attract and retain top talent prepared to educate our next generation of learners.

# Rethinking Place

Imagine an education system that...

**Rethinks the role that technology can play in how we define the traditional spaces where learning happens.**



## Background

In the 21st century, technology has become an integral part of our daily lives, transforming the way we work, communicate, and learn compared with prior generations. This is particularly true among students, although they likely don't know anything different—today's K-12 students were born after the start of the century and have grown up in a world where high-speed internet, smartphones, and social media are default expectations, rather than exciting new innovations to be harnessed.

Rapid advancements in technology have reshaped the skills and competencies required for success in the modern workforce, while continuing developments in fields like artificial intelligence (AI) promise even more change in the years to come. Given the pace of innovation, we can either take active steps to harness technology's potential or be constantly beset by inevitable changes of which we have very little understanding and even less control. So, how do we learn to swim with the tide of technology and not against it? To adequately prepare Massachusetts for the ever-evolving digital age, we must reevaluate traditional learning spaces and embrace technology as a tool for developing critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, while promoting digital literacy skills and nurturing the next generation of innovators.

One barrier to a deeper integration of technology in education comes from our own recent experiences and, in particular, the perception that challenges with remote learning during the COVID pandemic exposed technology's shortcomings. While remote learning did allow for a continued connection to learning when schools were closed and contributed to the rapid expansion of access to learning devices, applications, and platforms, it also had an overall negative effect on student engagement, academic achievement, and well-being, with both students and parents reporting high levels of dissatisfaction.<sup>29, 30</sup> However, it is critical not to equate the use of technology in education with remote learning as it was carried out during the pandemic. Not only did the pandemic-driven shift to remote learning occur with little prior warning and under unprecedented circumstances, it also generally aimed to replicate the traditional school experience in a new, largely unproven format.

Moving forward, rather than using technology to replicate schools as they are, we should instead think about how to use technology to deepen and expand the types of learning experiences that could be. With this reframing, the possibilities for the use of technology become much more appealing, given the ability to support students across multiple domains and connect communities, schools, and students with one another in new ways. Suddenly, artificial barriers like student attendance zones, which can limit access to essential educational resources, become far more permeable. When thoughtfully designed and implemented, technology can help learners “think about an idea in more than one way and in more than one context, reflect on what is learned, and adjust understanding accordingly...it can help us align how we learn with what we learn.”<sup>31</sup> It can also break down barriers to access for resources that promote students' holistic development and wellbeing, such as counseling and mental health interventions.<sup>32</sup> Building students' facility with the use of technology—including not only computers but also software packages and emerging AI applications—can support a

more personalized learning experience, organize learning around real-world challenges, help learners pursue passions and personal interests, and create opportunities for students to move to and through college and career with expanded and sustainable networks.<sup>33</sup>

In rethinking where learning can happen through the use of technology, it will be critical to take into account multiple perspectives. For instance, what training do educators need to better implement technology tools into their pedagogy, while ensuring these do not become a crutch that hinders the development of other essential skills for students? How can employers weigh in on the most valuable technical skills that they're looking for in the future workforce, so that schools can proactively plan how to address those needs? Finally, in listening to students—true “digital natives”—what can we learn about how technology can support, improve, and expand learning opportunities?

## Bright Spots Campus Without Walls Closing Educational Equity Gaps through Technology

Campus Without Walls (CWW) is an initiative co-founded by the Rennie Center and Build.org<sup>A</sup> and designed to close long-standing gaps in educational equity by leveraging the power of communities and the unbounded potential of technology to break down barriers that segregate students and limit resources. There is arguably no public system where the lasting effects of racism and disinvestment in Black and Latinx communities is better documented than in education. While we view education as an essential good, necessary to ensure both individual and shared prosperity, district boundaries and student assignment zones permit vast differences in wealth and social capital to limit students' opportunities and outcomes. In our rapidly growing and interconnected modern world, it is necessary to ask: why does a student's ZIP code determine the quality of their education?

The CWW model opens up classrooms and high-quality learning experiences to all students, regardless of their neighborhood of residence or assigned school, in three key steps. First, CWW recruits Lead Teachers who excel in their field and are committed to rigorous and culturally responsive instruction. Second, CWW supports these Lead Teachers in adapting or creating exciting, credit-bearing units that may be shared virtually. Third, Lead Teachers are matched to partnering teachers and classrooms through a learning management system, enabling students to participate in more diverse and advanced coursework for credit than may be offered in their home school. CWW also invites practitioners at community-based organizations to serve as Lead Teachers,



A As stated on its website, “BUILD ignites the power of youth in under-resourced communities to build career success, entrepreneurial mindsets, and opportunity.” BUILD partners with schools, providing teacher training, high-quality curriculum, and community connections and volunteer support, to support career-focused, real world learning experiences for students. For more information, see [build.org](http://build.org).

providing more real-world learning opportunities during the school day. The power of the CWW model is that it builds on the strengths of communities and the talent of the existing teaching force while expanding learning opportunities for students by connecting these communities and teachers to one another.<sup>34</sup>

CWW was launched in 2021, at the height of the pandemic, through a pilot project with Boston Public Schools that served approximately 600 students in grades 6–12 and included 16 schools, 13 community-based organizations, and two universities. Over the past three years, CWW has expanded to work with more than 50 schools and 3,500 students, while bringing together educators from across Massachusetts. CWW currently offers courses ranging from core academic subjects like English language arts, math, and science to fields such as computer science, the arts, world languages, and college and career planning.

Preliminary research by American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the CERES Institute at Wheelock College, Boston University, has shown that building virtual bridges between classrooms benefits both educators and students. For educators, CWW invites participants into a larger learning community, directly confronting the burden and isolation many teachers feel in the classroom. This can be particularly true for BIPOC educators who may have few colleagues with similar backgrounds or cultural experiences in their home school. It is perhaps not surprising that around 75% of CWW educators for the 2023–24 school year identify as BIPOC.

For students, CWW provides access to more diverse and advanced coursework beyond what is typically available at their school. By participating in learning experiences that are curated by a master teacher but facilitated by a familiar and trusted adult, students gain the resources and opportunities necessary to achieve at higher levels, pursue their passions and interests, and raise their critical consciousness. Indeed, AIR found that students participating in CWW demonstrated heightened levels of engagement and an increased understanding of social issues, while reporting increased opportunities to take part in courses that matched their strengths, interests, and learning styles.

By building on its core model and continuing to grow, CWW may offer a novel solution for addressing rising segregation between school districts, breaking the connection between where a student lives and the quality of resources and opportunities their education provides. Scaling CWW to reach even more educators and students will require building a stronger support network through virtual coaching and communities of practice to ensure CWW courses provide high-quality, collaborative instruction. In addition, CWW aspires to empower students in their own course selection and ownership of their learning journeys. Expanding this component of the program would require a user-friendly platform for course selection and enrollment (along with greater coordination or flexibility of school schedules). These aspirations have the potential to reimagine how we define school enrollment in the years ahead.



## Virtual Experiential Projects at Northeastern University: Leveraging Technology to Bridge Classrooms and Workplaces

Northeastern University is a national leader in experiential learning at the postsecondary level, best known for its cooperative education model that alternates academic semesters with periods of full-time work.<sup>35</sup> In the century since it adopted cooperative education, Northeastern has redesigned the college-going experience around the goal of bridging higher education and industry, reconfiguring its academic calendar so that students can spend up to one-third of their degree program building meaningful skills in the workforce and connecting theory to practice. As a result, Northeastern students are highly prepared for post-graduate success and boast high employment rates and starting salaries relative to the average college graduate.<sup>36, 37, 38</sup>

In recent years, seeking to further expand experiential learning opportunities, Northeastern has reimagined where work-based learning can happen and piloted new ways to connect students and employers remotely. As a result, the university has embedded into its courses thousands of “virtual experiential projects”—weeks-long, employer-sponsored projects that students complete remotely as an assignment for a course.<sup>39</sup> The virtual nature of these projects allows Northeastern to partner with employers anywhere, granting students access to companies far beyond the vicinity of the university’s campus.

During these virtual experiences, students spend between 6 and 12 weeks working independently or as part of a team on a project that fills an employer need and is aligned with course curriculum. For example, students may map out a manufacturing process and suggest efficiency improvements or conduct a competitor analysis for a given technology product. Employers provide students with regular feedback during the project, while educators monitor progress toward completion and build connections between project work and course learning objectives. This active collaboration among students, educators, and employers is facilitated by technology—employers communicate with students online and occasionally join video conference calls during students’ class time to provide project feedback. Students also typically

present a final deliverable to the employer in the form of a live video presentation. This kind of exposure to a real-world assignment in an academic setting provides students with not only valuable work-based experience but also an opportunity to refine their career interests and build career skills like teamwork and communication, equipping students with the tools to pursue post-graduate success.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, virtual experiential projects bring together students, educators, and employers to carry out experiential learning in a way that is mutually beneficial.<sup>41</sup> Students benefit from scaffolded exposure to professional work, connections with employers, and practice working remotely, an increasingly in-demand skill. Educators benefit from project-based course components that align with learning objectives. Employers benefit from a new talent pipeline that requires fewer resources than would be needed for full-time, on-site internships. Virtual projects within courses are also more accessible than full-time work-based opportunities for international students and students juggling other professional and/or familial responsibilities, thereby serving as a means to equitably expand engagement in experiential learning.

Notably, Northeastern's virtual experiential projects represent a technology-enabled learning opportunity that stands apart from the kinds of virtual learning offered by online universities and massive open online courses. Virtual projects utilize technology to provide real-world experiences that can meaningfully expand career opportunities for students.

Northeastern's model for virtual experiential projects holds great promise for secondary education as well. Leveraging technology to connect high school students with employer-sponsored project-based learning opportunities has the potential to improve student engagement, build students' career skills, and bolster education-to-career pathways. Northeastern has partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Massachusetts STEM Advisory Council to design sector-specific project templates that facilitate the implementation of virtual experiential projects in secondary career and technical education programs across the state.<sup>42</sup> In the future, students in traditional high schools could likewise benefit from this model. Virtual experiences can serve as capstone projects for academic courses or stand alone as co-curricular activities. They can include job shadow opportunities and final presentations delivered to employer partners. Overall, they represent a powerful use of technology to provide real-world learning that opens doors in the workforce. If widespread, virtual experiential projects could play a significant role in reshaping where learning happens, bridging the gap between classrooms and workplaces to promote students' long-term success.



## Recommendations

One of the significant advantages of technology in education is its ability to transcend geographical constraints. Policy shifts should aim to leverage online platforms and virtual classrooms—defined in a variety of ways—to connect students, educators, and communities to each other while opening up access to a broader range of learning experiences and educational resources.

For students in rural or underserved areas, it is particularly crucial to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities that may not be available locally. State and local leaders must recognize the potential to **leverage technology to break down school and district boundaries that segregate students and limit access to essential resources**. Just as adults across the Commonwealth have become increasingly reliant on technology to connect, communicate, and work remotely in their daily lives, so should students across the state have similar opportunities. We must begin to see technology not as an additional tool or widget for learning, but rather as fundamental to the basic functioning of every facet of a modern education system.

To be clear, this is not to minimize the importance of place-based learning or the role that strong interpersonal relationships play in students' growth and development. To suggest our education system must choose between

the school house and virtual learning presents a false dichotomy. Rather, technology has tremendous potential to expand and enhance student learning by connecting students, educators, and schools to each other. To facilitate these connections, policymakers should **invest in a state learning management system or other digital platform to share resources and materials among districts and schools**. Over time, this system could also support a more transparent and flexible scheduling framework, allowing for shared virtual learning experiences, similar to the examples described above, that transcend the traditional classroom. Much like Northeastern’s virtual experiential projects, or the courses offered through Campus Without Walls, or for that matter the approach of many higher education consortiums, technology can help students, educators, community members, and employers engage with each other in shared learning experiences, regardless of geographic location.

Another area ripe for technology-driven innovation is work-based learning, which should encompass not just internships but also **fully integrated experiential learning opportunities throughout high school**. Rethinking career pathway programs demands a paradigm shift in our perception of high school education. This shift recognizes that preparing students for future careers goes beyond sporadic experiences; we must align work-based learning with academic content to help students see and apply the real-world applications of their education. By embracing a system-wide co-op-like model at the high school level, whether virtually or in person, students can engage in practical, hands-on experiences that mirror professional environments.

Of course, expanding access to educational opportunities through technology requires addressing the “digital divide.” According to the U.S. Census, roughly 40,000 Massachusetts families with school-aged children lack internet service subscriptions and 14,000 lack a computing device.<sup>43</sup> In some rural and low-income urban communities, around one-third of families or more do not have internet access in their homes.<sup>44</sup> The Commonwealth’s Executive Office of Economic Development and MassTech recently administered \$14 million in new grants to address the “digital divide” through the state’s Digital Equity Partnership Program as part of a larger \$50 million program created at the height of the COVID pandemic. In post-pandemic years, it remains imperative that policymakers continue to **invest in closing the digital divide with a specific focus on expanding access to educational opportunities**. Key steps may include establishing portable hotspots in high-traffic areas, subsidizing internet costs for low-income families, and ensuring 1-to-1 student-to-device ratios in all Massachusetts schools. These strategies may be complemented through training and support for educators and families in navigating digital spaces as they continue to emerge.

At the core of each of these recommendations is the call for a fundamental shift in mindset requiring us to **embrace the transformative potential of technology**, including Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is becoming increasingly clear that the use of AI, and how it shapes what students learn and produce, is not slowing down. Fearing and resisting this new frontier only results in less input and direction on what comes next. Leaders at the local, state, and federal levels have recognized an urgent need to examine how AI models can achieve educational priorities more effectively by lowering costs, sharing resources, informing practice, and personalizing learning, while establishing regulations and guidelines to ensure the ethical use of these tools.<sup>45, 46, 47</sup>

Technology has the potential to narrow educational gaps and promote equity, but this requires intentional policies. Too often technology is treated as an afterthought—a tool for implementing other reform strategies. Education leaders must instead develop a clear and comprehensive agenda—no different than how the state has prioritized academic standards and curriculum frameworks—to support the development and use of technology, while attending to essential issues like teachers’ professional learning and students’ access to devices and high-speed internet.

DATA SPOTLIGHT

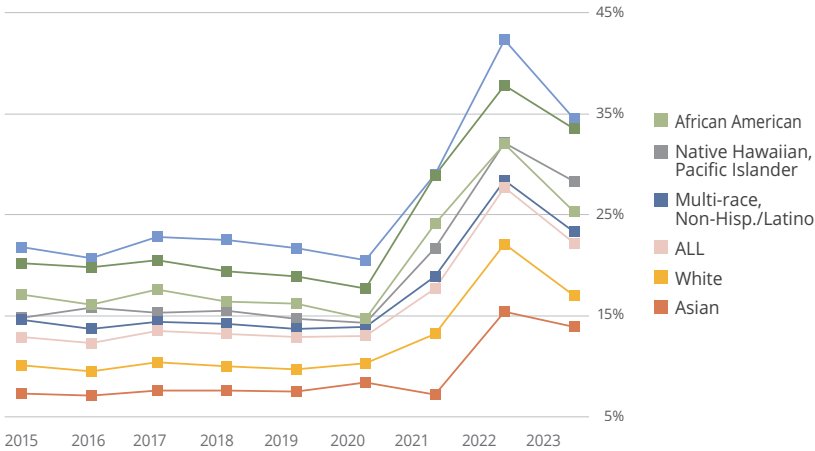
A Case for Re-engagement

Despite school and district efforts to bring students back to physical school buildings during the pandemic, the chronic absenteeism rate—defined as the percentage of students who are absent from school for 10% or more of the days enrolled—rose from 17% to 27% for all Massachusetts students between 2021 and 2022.<sup>48</sup>

More concerning, when disaggregated by race, the 2022 data show that fully 42% of students identifying as Hispanic/Latino were chronically absent, along with 38% of students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, 32% identifying as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 32% identifying as African American/Black.

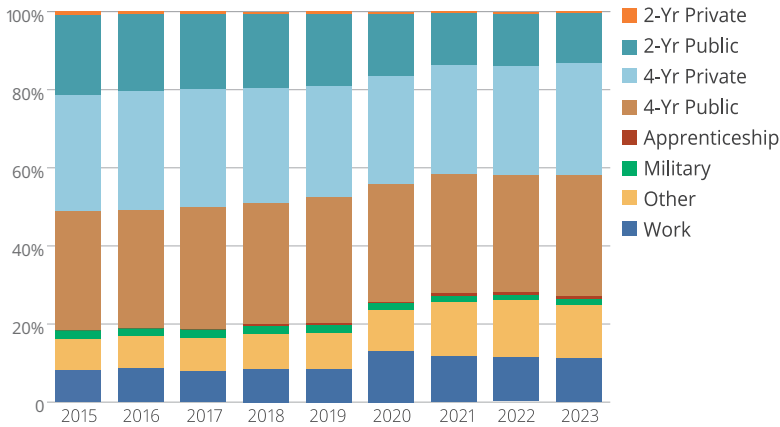
All groups saw an increase in chronic absenteeism between 2019–20 and 2020–21, and again between 2020–21 and 2021–22, with only a single exception: the chronic absenteeism rate declined slightly for Asian students between 2019–20 and 2020–21. However, the following year, this group’s chronic absenteeism rates more than doubled, from 7.2% to 15.4%. While Hispanic/Latino students have the highest absolute percentage of chronic absenteeism, African American/Black students experienced the largest relative percentage increase before and after the start of the pandemic (between 2019–20 and 2020–21).


CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: TREND OVER TIME BY RACE



To address chronic absenteeism and re-engage students, particularly at the high school level, it is important to consider whether and how schools are setting them up for future success. The graph to the right, which highlights the plans of high school graduates, indicates that students are increasingly planning to go directly to work and pursue other options beyond attending a 2- or 4-year college.<sup>49</sup> To address these changing desires, and promote ongoing school attendance and engagement, educators must ensure that they are connecting what they offer students during high school with what students will need to be successful in the months and years that follow.

PLANS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES



 To dig deeper into the data on student enrollment, school climate, and college and career pathways, explore the [Rennie Center’s Data Dashboard](#).



# Rethinking Time

Imagine an education system that...

**Rethinks the assumption that learning happens in the same way at the same time for all students.**



## Background

Think of your current age. What life outcomes should you have achieved by this age? What knowledge, skills, and competencies did you develop over the past year to meet these expectations? What are you supposed to learn and achieve in the next twelve months?

For most adults, these questions will be difficult—if not impossible—to answer: numerical age does not correspond directly with recent or future skill attainment, nor do all adults reach life milestones at the same time. And yet, while this is taken as a given once we reach adulthood, the situation is very different among children and youth. Despite the widespread understanding among educators and parents that children are individuals developing at their own pace across a range of academic, social, and emotional domains, school structures and schedules assume all students will reach developmental milestones at the same time and roughly the same age. As we rethink the use of time in education, it is important to challenge this assumption—and to inquire whether there is a better alternative for organizing students' learning time.

In traditional classroom settings, teachers bear the burden of reconciling established school structures with students' individual needs. Teachers must differentiate instruction and scaffold tasks so the content is accessible to the students in their charge across a wide range of interests and learning levels. In contrast, competency-based education (CBE) offers a different way of organizing instruction, one more closely aligned with students' individual needs and abilities. In a competency-based system, students move through work at their own pace, have multiple chances to demonstrate understanding of a subject, and, as needed, receive support to build specific skills. Progress in competency-based courses reflect the degree of mastery that students have shown.<sup>50</sup> Research shows the benefits of CBE, including offering students more time for practice, reflection, and reassessment, and helping students learn skills that prepare them for success both inside and out of the classroom.<sup>51, 52</sup> A research summary by the National Association of State Boards of Education points to numerous findings of improved student engagement, deepened learning, and improved achievement when competency-based models were implemented as intended.<sup>53</sup> CBE can also better meet the needs of non-traditional students—a term that refers broadly to young people who are older than students coming directly from high school—and improve workforce readiness.<sup>54</sup>

However, a full-scale shift to CBE is often difficult, due to the need for strong buy-in from stakeholders and the challenge of reorienting a school's culture, norms, and established structures toward a skills-based approach.<sup>55</sup> Several strategies, drawn from research, can help schools rethink their use of time in ways that recognize and respond to students' individual learning needs while laying the groundwork for more expansive CBE models. One strategy is to rethink traditional school schedules. Class schedules are "closely connected with students' academic achievement," and traditional scheduling of multiple short classes or subject blocks each day can lead to a high cognitive and homework load for students.<sup>56, 57</sup> It can also result in larger class sizes and require teachers to prepare for numerous daily lessons,

limiting the individualized attention they can provide to students. In contrast, when lessons are extended and maintained with greater continuity, students can focus on fewer courses, receive more individual attention from teachers, achieve improved course grades, and experience a wider variety of elective courses.<sup>58</sup> Alternative approaches to scheduling—especially when combined with opportunities for older students to exercise choice and access out-of-school or work-based learning experiences—can also promote students' autonomy and better prepare them for life after high school.<sup>59</sup>

Individualized learning plans (ILPs) are another strategy for ensuring students' learning experiences are principally determined by their skills and interests rather than their age.<sup>60</sup> An ILP is a long-term and comprehensive approach to education and career planning that spans multiple grade levels and courses and is personalized to each student.<sup>61</sup> When implemented well, it can serve as an “ongoing digital repository” that “captures each student’s interests, strengths, and needs, both in and out of school.”<sup>62</sup> Research shows that these plans help students “learn the relevance and usefulness of their academic learning opportunities” and lead students to select more rigorous courses and set higher future aspirations.<sup>63</sup> These effects are even stronger when ILPs are used prior to high school, demonstrating that this is not simply a tool for postsecondary planning but also a powerful motivator of engagement and achievement.<sup>64</sup> ILPs can also provide important insights for educators and schools about student needs, helping lead to a broader examination of the use of learning time to address common challenges or opportunities. In this way, just as with competency-based education and the use of modified schedules, ILPs can support approaches to rethinking time that move away from the traditional, one-size-fits-all paradigm of age-based groupings.

In general, reassessing the traditional structures and schedules of schools can better accommodate the unique pace of each student’s development and potentially uncover more effective methods for organizing learning time.

## **Bright Spots** **Springfield International Charter School: A Pioneering Move to Mirror College Schedules**

In an education landscape where many schools and educators are struggling to keep up with a rapidly changing modern world, Springfield International Charter School (SICS) stands out. A K–12 college preparatory school, SICS has taken the bold step to abandon many traditional school practices and embrace a school schedule at the high school level that mirrors the college experience.<sup>65</sup> In practice, this means operating according to two rotating schedules that provide students with greater choice and equity in their education. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students take six courses, each 50 minutes in length, primarily focused on core academic subjects. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students take four courses, each 120 minutes in length, allowing time for labs and 30 new electives. This scheduling approach provides for greater flexibility in student cohort composition and abandons the assumption that in a small school, a majority of similarly aged students will be progressing through the same course material at the same time. SICS reports that many electives are mixed-age, offering leadership opportunities for older students and strong role models and peer support for younger students.

This schedule shift also appears to have benefited students in several ways, as observed by SICS. It sets and maintains higher learning expectations by providing students more time in their day to complete homework and work through challenging concepts, and by offering teachers an opportunity to provide more robust feedback on student work. This approach also helps reinforce transferable, real-world skills like time management, self-efficacy, and growth mindset. Finally, SICS students are better able to personalize their course of study with increased flexibility in pursuing advanced coursework or increased accommodations for students navigating personal responsibilities at the beginning or end of the school day.<sup>66</sup>



In addition, SICS' new schedule has been a key factor in the school's ongoing experiment with its pedagogical approach. Previously, SICS followed a traditional college preparatory model, which (as described by John Cusick, the school's Rethinking Grading Coordinator and English Department Chair) was focused on testing and compliance.<sup>67</sup> In June 2023, SICS received a federal grant to examine its grading and assessment practices that is administered by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and managed by the Rennie Center and reDesign. The grant pushed SICS to consider how its schedule, courses, and classroom practices could better support students' deeper learning.

More specifically, this grant has helped advance SICS' Skill Set Based Growth and Development Approach pilot. Begun in one SICS language class, students in the pilot are provided with course materials, tools, and online resources at the start of the semester and given assignments to work through in small groups. At the completion of each assignment students receive two grades and narrative feedback from their teacher. The first grade marks their mastery of course content. The second grade marks their demonstration of transferable skills such as collaboration, communication, leadership, and peer support, supplemented by written feedback on how to improve. If students apply the feedback on their next assignment, their overall grade is raised to reflect their continued progress and improvement.

In the 2023–24 school year, the pilot has been expanded to include and test out this approach in all academic subjects. The school has developed supports for faculty to implement the pilot, including common language and rubrics, while establishing treatment and control groups to assess the impact on student learning. To avoid a top-down approach and ensure buy-in, participation in the pilot remains optional for faculty. Initial feedback is positive. Most SICS students participating in pilot have seen their grades improve. In Mr. Cusick's view, this success is rooted in the pilot's student-centered approach where students have greater control over, and responsibility for, their learning, and teachers have more insight into how students are doing and where they can offer support.<sup>68</sup> Next year, the school intends to make participation in the pilot available to all SICS classes.

Moving forward, SICS envisions its new schedule and pedagogical approach as a strategic and necessary step toward holistic college preparatory learning. The new schedule lays the groundwork for SICS to develop a stronger identity as a college-preparatory school by preparing students to have a smooth transition into postsecondary, offering exploratory courses that investigate potential college majors and career pathways, supporting innovative efforts on current projects, and planting the seed for deeper, more complex learning.

## The Modern Classrooms Project at Myers Elementary School: Fostering Self-Directed Learning Across Grade Levels

Catalyzed by the pandemic, the Modern Classrooms Project (MCP) was developed to address concerns around learning gaps that require differentiation and personalized learning pathways. MCP works with K-12 schools to leverage a hybrid learning approach across all subject areas and is made up of three components: blended instruction, self-paced structure, and mastery-based grading. Its approach to blended instruction includes limiting whole-class teacher-led lectures as much as possible, creating original instructional videos and resources, and ensuring students can access instruction and materials at any time in the way that best supports them. The self-paced structure built into the model allows students to self-direct within each unit of study, and each lesson falls under one of three classifications: must do, should do, and aspire to do. Teachers track students' progress daily, as shown in the examples below, allowing for differentiation throughout a unit of study. Once students show their ability to master the current skills required in a given lesson, they are able to progress to the next lesson. The model organically differentiates content for the teacher and helps identify students who need additional support.

**[Class Name]: [Period/Unit]**

Lesson 2: Practice	Lesson 3: [Description or Objective]	Lesson 3: Practice	Lesson 7: Practice	Lesson 8: [Description or Objective]	Lesson 8: Practice
Lesson 2: [Description or Objective]		Lesson 3: Practice	Lesson 7: [Description or Objective]		Lesson 9: [Description or Objective]
Lesson 1: Practice	Conference with [Teacher Name]		Lesson 6: Practice		Lesson 9: Practice
Lesson 1: [Description or Objective]	Lesson 4: [Description or Objective]		Lesson 6: [Description or Objective]		Unit Assessment
Start	Lesson 4: Practice	Lesson 5: [Description or Objective]	Lesson 5: Practice		

**World History Period 2**

STUDENT	Lesson you're on	STUDENT	Lesson you're on
Jayne	Lesson 4	Sam	Lesson 3
Thomas	Lesson 3	Leyla	Lesson 4
Marcus	Lesson 3	Monroe	Lesson 6
Deja	Lesson 5	Lewis	Lesson 4
Stephanie	Lesson 6	Jermaine	Lesson 3
James	Lesson 4	Marquise	Lesson 6
Crystal	Lesson 4	Nabil	Lesson 3
Joseph	Lesson 5	Romeo	Lesson 5
Tim	Lesson 3	Eloise	Lesson 4
Jessica	Lesson 4	Ramey	Lesson 3

**Target Lesson: #4 Tuesday, October 10**

**Ahead of pace!**  
On pace  
Revising  
Behind pace

**SHOUT OUTS!**

- Marquise for supporting three students on lesson 4 yesterday!
- Jayne for facilitating a whole group discussion on lesson 3!

**REMINDERS**  
Your next test is on October 20th and will cover lessons #1-8.

Source: <https://www.modernclassrooms.org/share>

While competency-based models are often thought of as most appropriate for high school students seeking independent, self-paced study to pursue diverse interests, the Modern Classrooms Project model is equally adaptable to elementary schools. As profiled by Edutopia, Myers Elementary School in Bellwood, Pennsylvania initially embraced MCP as a way to effectively differentiate instruction and address learning gaps following the COVID pandemic.<sup>69</sup> The theory was that cultivating a more individualized approach to learning would lead to higher achievement for all students. Following the MCP model, students use tools such as a color-coded roadmap that provides clear and specific guidance on their learning objectives; teacher-made videos that break down instruction and allow students the flexibility to rewatch as many times as they need to retain the concept; mastery checks that allow students to try out problems on their own and ask for support when needed; and a pace tracker to help students monitor their overall progress in learning course material. In other words, this approach provides students with learning tasks that they complete at their own pace, offering flexibility for students to take longer on difficult topics, move quickly through familiar concepts, and repeat as needed.<sup>70</sup>

Over time, the school's experience pointed toward a host of potential benefits for increasing self-directed learning opportunities among younger students. Students gain increased opportunities to engage with and develop essential skills necessary for continued success as students and adults, including collaboration, self-reliance, and self-efficacy. The approach of working independently to achieve mastery of key skills and concepts, even when multiple attempts are required, helps build a growth mindset. And having students complete more self-directed work enables teachers to focus on where they are most needed in the classroom through small-group instruction and one-on-one support.<sup>71</sup>

The experience of Myers Elementary is consistent with three years of evaluation of MCP by the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research and Reform in Education.<sup>72</sup> Evaluation findings show that MCP teachers report an increased capacity to differentiate instruction and belief that they were growing and improving as professionals. In addition, MCP teachers reported greater confidence that they could support chronically absent students compared to non-MCP teachers. Students, meanwhile, reported higher perceptions of self-efficacy and engagement with learning and stronger relationships with their teachers than non-MCP students. At a time when chronic absenteeism among students and burnout among teachers are persistent challenges, building classroom environments where adults and students find real value in the learning process is no small feat.

## LESSONS FROM THE EARLY EDUCATION & CARE COMMUNITY ON RETHINKING TIME

At the K–12 level, academic requirements can make it challenging to maintain a holistic approach to education that focuses on the needs and development of the whole child. In contrast, the early education and care sector has long had a strong and sustained focus on nurturing children’s growth across all domains—social-emotional, language, cognitive, and perceptual and motor development.<sup>73</sup> In early education settings, children tend to be grouped by developmental domains, fostering holistic, individualized learning. They receive tailored instruction based on their learning stage rather than their age, ensuring that each student benefits from support aligned with their unique abilities and challenges.<sup>74</sup>

As such, the experience of individuals working in early education and care can offer important lessons for educators at all levels, particularly by emphasizing the need to move away from rigid, fixed timelines for completing educational milestones and to focus on individual pacing and flexibility. In order to learn more, the Rennie Center hosted a virtual discussion in August 2023 with a diverse panel of experts in the early education and care sector and discussed opportunities for rethinking time in education. A critical theme across



all discussions was that innovations and common practices in early education and care programs aimed at centering learning on children’s developmental needs should be applied across the entire education system, from birth through adulthood. Additional key takeaways from this conversation are summarized below, while a [full list of lessons learned](#) is available on our website.

### Rethinking Time with the Individual Student

- Relationships are the foundation of early childhood education and care
- All developmental domains and subjects are addressed in unison
- Play is critical to the learning process at all ages
- Early educators are viewed as facilitators of learning

### Rethinking Time During the Day

- Programs offer a variety of flexible start and end times
- The structure of the day varies greatly among and between programs
- Education and communication during the day extend beyond pick up and drop off
- Staffing capacity is critical to success of any program

### Rethinking Time During the Year

- Terminology matters and may be hindering innovations in how time is used for learning
- Innovation in educator preparation and certification could allow for more flexibility across grade levels
- Community partnerships are integral to the success of year-round programs



## Recommendations

The current education system in Massachusetts, like most other states, is built upon an archaic framework, more than a century old, that assumes all students will reach developmental milestones at the same time, in the same way, at the same (or very similar) ages. However, this assumption does not align with the reality that individuals grow, learn, and develop at their own pace and in very different ways. Building an education system that can effectively and equitably serve all students requires a paradigm shift in how we think about, structure, and value learning time, especially how students progress in their learning journey over the course of the school day and calendar year.

As technological advances push the boundaries of what schools are able to offer students through adaptive and personalized learning, we must fundamentally **rethink how we physically group and accelerate students through their learning**. By reevaluating the rigid and outdated structure of grade levels and considering alternative grouping strategies, we can better accommodate the diverse strengths and challenges students bring to the classroom. This shift ensures that emphasis is placed on mastery and understanding rather than seat time. It also allows for more tailored support for students who may benefit from advanced coursework or need additional time to understand core concepts. While structurally this may appear to be a drastic shift, this strategy has proven to be possible, and successful, in many educational settings. By utilizing tools such as competency-based assessments and progress monitoring, adopting individualized learning plans for all students, and leveraging technology such as AI, educators can support more adaptive and flexible learning experiences that meet the needs of each and every student. In doing this, we can begin to promote an education system that places value on individualized progress, deeper comprehension, and a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities for all learners

However, formally shifting to a competency-based model is just a starting point. Ask any education expert, parent, or student, and you'll find a unanimous agreement: **learning doesn't halt when the academic calendar concludes**. Students encounter new experiences throughout all twelve months of the year, and their out-of-school experiences can open novel pathways for learning and deepen the understanding (of themselves and the world) that students gain in the classroom. It is time to move away from an antiquated agrarian-based learning calendar and embrace a more dynamic, year-round approach to learning that caters to the diverse needs and desires of students. To be clear, this does not mean simply offering more summer programs. Rather, it means developing a year-round learning plan for each student through collaborative efforts and strategic partnerships with community organizations. These plans would integrate diverse and enriching experiences with academic study and offer credit to students for out-of-school activities. Access to engaging learning opportunities—from the arts to sports to music to travel and beyond—should not be yet another matter left to chance; instead, intentional planning will be needed to guarantee that every student has access to meaningful and continuous learning opportunities throughout the entire year.

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# Conclusion & Next Steps

The work of rethinking education is never complete. At all times, there will be more to learn, innovative approaches to study and replicate, and exciting developments to harness and cultivate. And just as educators start each new school year with a new classroom of students who bring their own unique experiences, changes inside and outside the education system are constantly contributing to new challenges—and sources of inspiration—for reformers.

The evidence base, models of effective practice, and policy recommendations outlined above represent starting points for a broader conversation about rethinking people, place, and time in education. We do not expect that all readers will immediately seek to shift their school model so that it matches that of Map Academy or Springfield International Charter School, or that all institutions of higher education will aim to replicate Northeastern University's model for virtual experiential projects; nor do we anticipate that the promising practices modeled by Opportunity Culture, Campus Without Walls, and the Modern Classrooms Project will immediately take root in new settings. Rather, these examples aim to confront assumptions about the nature and form of learning that too often go unchallenged and demonstrate that forward progress toward a redesigned education system is possible.

When students returned to school following pandemic-related closures, a common refrain was, “We can't go back to the way things were before.” Yet in so many settings, a return to “normalcy” has become the priority. Our hope is that this guide makes clear why Massachusetts schools, programs, and institutions must instead work toward a new normal that leads to better outcomes for all students—and that it provides some critical insights into how we can get there by rethinking people, place, and time. Over the coming year, the Rennie Center will continue to advance these conversations through a series of public events, discussions, and deep dives into state and district data. Ultimately, we hope that the Condition of Education project will lead to meaningful changes in how students in the Commonwealth access learning experiences that set them up for success in school and in life.



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## About the Rennie Center

The mission of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

The cover art for the 2024 Condition of Education Action Guide was generated by asking Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create an image of a learning environment based on the criteria explored in this report.



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