



Thinking Forward

New Ideas for a New Era of Public Education

A collection of essays celebrating CRPE's 25th anniversary

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Executive Summary

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Acknowledgments

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

Ushering in the “Age of Agility”¹

As the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) celebrates its 25th anniversary, the education system it has focused on for the past quarter century—and the nation whose students it serves—face unprecedented change and uncertainty.

The most dire predictions are that artificial intelligence and automation will unleash massive disruption—with as many as 400 million to 800 million individuals displaced from their jobs worldwide in the coming decades and new jobs requiring unprecedented combinations of skills.²

A more sober assessment is that new jobs will be created, but will favor skills—like adaptability and creativity—that only the human mind possesses. Change will be the new normal. Employment opportunities will shift quickly, requiring adaptability and constant retooling. Automation will affect everyone, but middle-class jobs will be harder to find, making it harder to overcome the disadvantages of poverty.³ Finally, the need will be greater than ever for talented innovators, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders.

What’s clear is that whether the Fourth Industrial revolution creates chaos or opportunity depends on the response from policymakers, businesses, labor organizations, and—importantly—education. New jobs can be created through innovation and ingenuity. Workers can adjust to shifts in employment opportunities. A new generation of reformers can revitalize America’s governing institutions to manage these shifts and meet other emerging challenges—caring for an aging population, adapting to the effects of global climate change, negotiating the technical and ethical questions posed by new technologies. Students of today are eager to be the problem-solvers of the future. Yet despite reform initiatives and spending increases over the past several decades, our nation’s education system still focuses on preparing students for an older, simpler, more predictable world.

Persistent achievement gaps and high rates of student failure in higher education show how far our education system falls short of meeting even yesterday’s challenges. Our education system is even less prepared for a more demanding and unpredictable tomorrow. It is no longer enough for students to stay in school and expect to enter a well-defined career. Graduates will need to understand the local economy well enough to both judge their own strengths and weaknesses and seek needed skills and experiences. For that to be possible, students will need common skills and understandings—literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge of science, history, and civics. But the future education system will also need to equip all children for an uncertain future by broadening their opportunities for learning and growth, helping individuals gain applied knowledge in areas where they have particular abilities and interests, and allowing them to create customized educational pathways.

To explore what this kind of agile system might look like—and what it would take to make it a reality—CRPE analysts have written a collection of essays, many of which revisit topics we have examined extensively during our 25-year history, to envision what schools and systems capable of ensuring that every student can realize their untapped talent would look like.

- In **To Serve Every Student Well, Design for the Tails, Not the Mean**, Robin Lake and Travis Pillow begin with the academic and career gaps faced by students who are the most complex learners and explore how a system capable of meeting the needs of all nontraditional students—high-achieving, low-income students, English language learners, homeless students, children in foster care, and “twice exceptional learners” who have extraordinary gifts in some areas and require support in others—could improve teaching and learning for *all* students, not just the so-called “square pegs.”

“It’s hard to forecast all the demands the age of agility will place on the next generation, but it’s a safe bet creative problem-solving, bilingual communication skills, and unconventional thinking will all be in high demand; we cannot afford to throw away these talents,” write Lake and Pillow. “Further, solving for the needs of these complex learners may help the public education system get it right for everyone.”

- **Rethinking the Traditional High School-College-Career Continuum** challenges our present-day two-tiered system, which despite efforts to create pathways to college and careers still sorts students along predictable racial and class lines, shutting many out of opportunities for economic and social mobility. Looking to more flexible models pioneered in Switzerland, Cleveland, San Antonio, and elsewhere, authors Robin Lake, Georgia Heyward, and Tom Coyne argue that systemic change, not improvements to existing career and technical education programs, is required.

“If we become enamored with add-on programs that fail to address the underlying weaknesses and inequalities in K-12 education,” write Lake, Heyward, and Coyne, “students will not have better opportunities than they already have.”

- In **Beyond the Bell: Leveraging Community Assets for an Expanded Learning System**, Betheny Gross argues that while the current emphasis on wraparound services has helped meet some of the many needs today’s students face, a more organic, crowdsourced approach to engaging the community could ultimately result in more agile and responsive opportunities for students—but only if key questions about measuring impact, creating coherent learning experiences, and ensuring equal access to educational opportunities are addressed.

“If these out-of-school learning opportunities become more essential than extra, but remain opt-in experiences (as is likely necessary to allow for personalization),” writes Gross, “the field will need to wrestle with these questions: Can there be accountability for equal access in an opt-in system? If so, who should be held accountable and how?”

- **The Uncertain Future of Teaching** emphasizes an increasingly acknowledged assumption: that for students to be successful, educators need to do more than prepare them academically. But Michael DeArmond argues that nurturing the “soft skills” that can prepare youth for lifelong learning places daunting demands on teacher development and will require new models that expand who works with students and differentiate teaching roles to a far greater degree.

“Even if we just focus on learning how to support self-directed learning and personalization,” writes DeArmond, “the new demands on teachers are daunting. Few people would have enough capacity to do it all. And so, to make the job more feasible, the teaching profession must find new ways of working as well.”

- In **Educational Equality in the Future: Risks and Opportunity**, Ashley Jochim examines the implications of a more customized, agile system for the students who have historically lacked full access to learning opportunities. Auditing access to the growing number of out-of-school learning experiences, providing financial support for nonschool educational services, investing in guidance and support to help families navigate a growing number of options, tracking access and success in postsecondary pathways, developing approaches to student success, and addressing preparation gaps all may be necessary to ensure that the most disadvantaged students have equal access to the full range of educational opportunities enjoyed by their more advantaged peers, Jochim argues.

“If people who care about public education do not open themselves up to new ways to address inequality, not only will they give up the chance to break through the political deadlock that has characterized school reform fights, but they also are unlikely to make headway in equalizing opportunity for American students,” writes Jochim.

- In **Local Governance for an Innovating System**, Paul Hill asks what forms of community oversight are feasible for a nimble system that features collaboration among K-12, higher education, and business? What minimum measurements of student progress, program outcomes, and equity are necessary? Is it possible to prevent measurement from becoming de facto regulation? Will information and alert advocacy be enough to protect students, or will “hard” forms of accountability (e.g., closure or delicensing of schools and instruction providers) still be necessary? Hill develops the idea of integrated “light governance” of local schools, colleges, learning pathways, and special courses, based primarily on providing information, but with some power to remedy abuses.

“A nimble system must be open to experimentation and tolerate some failure, but it ultimately can’t leave results, on which the welfare of children and communities depend, to chance,” writes Hill.

- In **Funding a Nimble System**, Travis Pillow and Paul Hill explore what it would take to ensure that personalized and weighted “backpack funding” follows students across multiple learning experiences, and could meet the needs of all students. Information through online portals and navigators who help families select the best options for their children are critical, the authors argue, as are addressing oversight and helping manage the transition from traditional funding models, a particularly daunting obstacle to making new approaches a reality.

“Low-income students or students with special needs who receive larger funding allotments under the weighted student funding system would be more likely to have money left over after covering the cost of school enrollment. . . . Parents would have a more versatile mechanism to respond to needs that arise during the course of their children’s education,” write Pillow and Hill.

The Road Ahead

For much of the past quarter-century, CRPE has focused on the portfolio strategy, which it originated as a solution to many of the challenges facing public education. The key pillars of that strategy—a diverse set of learning opportunities for students, choice and agency for parents, autonomy for educators, a commitment to equity, accountability, and continuous improvement, and attention to systemic functions like information and transportation—remain more important than ever. But the lens must shift from schools to students. Policymakers and educators must now focus on developing and sustaining a portfolio of broader student experiences, to create an agile education system designed to innovate, bend, and stretch to meet the needs of every student, including the most complex learners.

Rather than prescribe a specific outline for the public education system of the future, these essays collectively focus on key strategic elements, including out-of-school learning opportunities, the teacher pipeline, governance, and funding models.

The concluding essay in this collection offers meaningful yet manageable steps that communities can take now to move in this direction, including:

- **Examining data** to identify which students aren’t getting what they need.
- **Inventorying community-based learning opportunities and resources**, as well as the extent to which they are accessible to all students and families.

- **Identifying gaps**, including needed learning opportunities and supports, as well as early identification and intervention strategies.
- **Examining the infrastructure** required for families and students to make informed decisions about learning pathways and access them.
- **Considering funding streams and models** that better support each student’s individual needs, including noneducation funding that could help support their learning objectives.
- **Seeking and investing in innovative proposals**, particularly those that address complex learning needs with new school designs and teacher training.
- **Breaking through boundaries** with cross-sector initiatives such as industry apprenticeships, new pathways, microschoools and credentials, and individualized supports.
- **Identifying meaningful metrics**, including less extensive “gateway” assessments, more helpful parent information systems, and more intensive supports for schools that need them the most.

Many questions—and potential risks—exist in even a gradual transition to more agile, student-centered learning systems. Yet, as CRPE looks ahead to the next 25 years of public education, it is our belief that fundamentally rigid and inequitable structures prevent the current system from doing what is necessary to prepare every child for the future. The work required is daunting, especially given the ideological divides in education today. But the stagnant debates over issues that have long been the focus of education reformers—funding, parental choice, school accountability—demand an injection of fresh thinking that can awaken new political coalitions and bridge long-standing divides.

These essays are intended to provoke discussion and debate, not provide all the answers. These are difficult, debatable challenges and will require all of us to untether ourselves from past orthodoxies and push each other’s thinking. In the end, however, there is real urgency for beginning to try new approaches, test their efficacy, and build coalitions to create widespread change. Our hope is that these essays help launch the work ahead.

We at CRPE are fully optimistic about the future. Our students are up for the challenges ahead. We are committed to ensuring our learning systems are, too.

Endnotes

1. Jason Gaulten and Alan Gottlieb, *The Age of Agility: Education Pathways for the Future of Work* (Denver, CO: America Succeeds, 2017).
2. Jacques Bughin et al., *Skill Shift: Automation and the Future of the Workforce* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018).
3. James Manyika et al., *Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: Workforce Transitions in a Time of Automation* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017).