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FEATURE

From Chaos to Transformation: New Challenges Demanding New Approaches

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From Chaos to Transformation

New Challenges Demanding New Approaches

John J-H Kim and Kathleen Choi

Now in our third year of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have some sense of a return to normal—at least in the United States. With vaccines and boosters now available, students, teachers, and staff are back in school and masks have come off in most districts—at least for now. But for public education, can there be a return to a pre-pandemic “normal”?

The pandemic heightened existing challenges—“learning loss” dramatically increased the challenge of raising achievement; opportunity gaps have grown wider; the need for social and emotional supports has now skyrocketed; chronic absenteeism has soared; teacher shortages have increased, etc. Simply attempting to do more or do a better version of what was being done before will likely fall far short.

In addition, the pandemic and the events of the past two years have given rise to a host of new challenges rocking many fundamentals of public education. Here we highlight just a few, and we briefly touch upon some ideas for moving forward.

1. Greater competition for students

Many parents or caretakers of younger students have had a front-row seat to their student’s virtual classrooms and have become more engaged consumers. They are showing increased interest in alternative learning environments such as homeschools, microschools, and private and parochial schools. Placing further pressure on enrollment is the projected drop in the school-age population over the next decade (*Exhibit 1*).¹ The combination of these factors means that public schools will face greater competition for students—a relatively new challenge for the sector.

In anticipation of greater competition, district and school leaders will need to strengthen the distinctiveness of the programs and schools that make up a district— what we sometimes call a “value proposition.” District leaders need to ask themselves, “Is our district a commodity (that can be easily substituted) or a brand (that has a distinctive set of features and benefits that cannot easily be



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replaced)?” Is the “service” delivered by the schools in the district different from what students and families might expect from any other public school? In the hierarchy of needs, are your schools providing functional attributes, or are they inspiring aspirational goals (*Exhibit 2*)?

2. Technology-enabled education is on the rise

The periodic lockdowns of the past two years sparked greater interest in educational technology, ranging from products that enable remote learning to new tools that provide greater personalization. With the growing interest in ed tech, the sector is growing rapidly with global expenditures estimated at \$295 billion in 2022, and an increasing number of products created for students and families as opposed to for schools.²

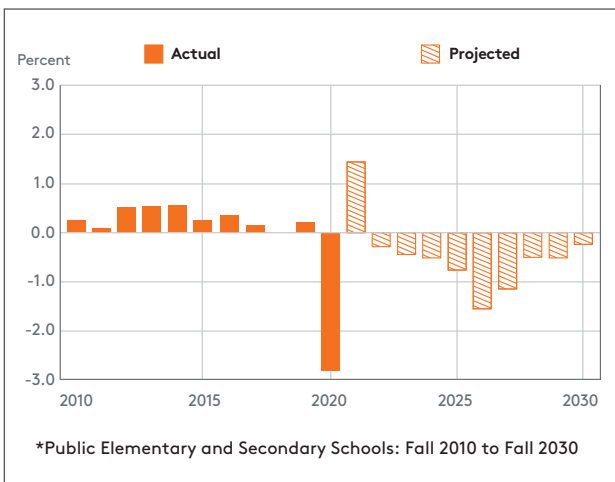
Public schools are entering a precarious period. Many parents and guardians are now demanding more innovation from their public schools or viewing online school as a viable alternative. Indeed, technology offers the possibility of greater personalization, improved access, and increased efficiency.

But the public education sector needs to adopt ed tech with care to make sure it is improving delivery of the instructional core and not becoming an isolating tool for students and educators alike. For districts, the challenge is to find the right tools; ensure that teachers, staff, and students know how to use the new tools; ensure data compatibility so that progress on student outcomes can be monitored; and break down the silos that so often exist between curriculum and technology teams.

3. Teacher shortages require finding different solutions

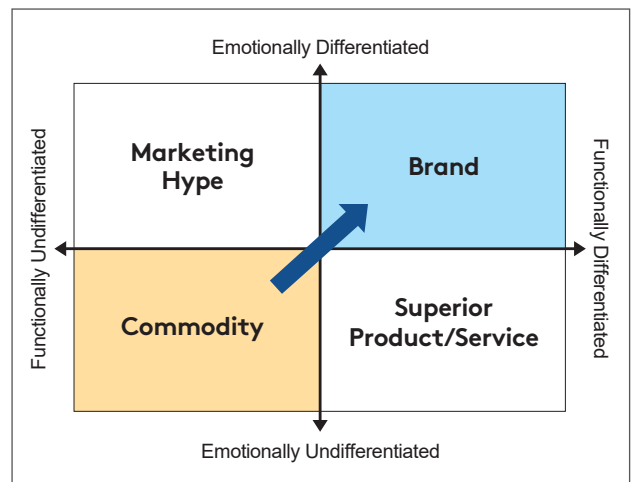
Before the pandemic, around 8% of teachers left the profession each year.³ Over the past two years, indications are that things have gotten worse—a lot worse. A staggering 55% of educators are thinking of leaving the profession earlier than planned, according to a National Education Association survey of its members, published in January 2022⁴—a figure that is nearly twice the number who said the same in July 2020. Even more concerning, a disproportionate percentage of Black (62%) and Hispanic/Latinx (59%) educators, already

Exhibit 1 ANNUAL PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT*



Source: NCES.

Exhibit 2 IS YOUR DISTRICT A COMMODITY OR A “BRAND”?



Source: DMGroup.

underrepresented in the teaching profession, are looking to exit the profession, which will only exacerbate the shortage of teachers of color.

This means districts won't be able to hire their way out of this situation; this challenge demands reexamining how we define the role of the teacher. What the teacher currently needs to do well is a very long list, ranging from content expertise to providing individual mentoring and social-emotional support to each student. While the sector has always celebrated the "superhuman" teacher, in this period of acute teacher shortages, teacher burnout, and ever-increasing needs among students, is this expectation sustainable? A reexamination (or reappraisal) of the role of the teacher begins with asking two questions:

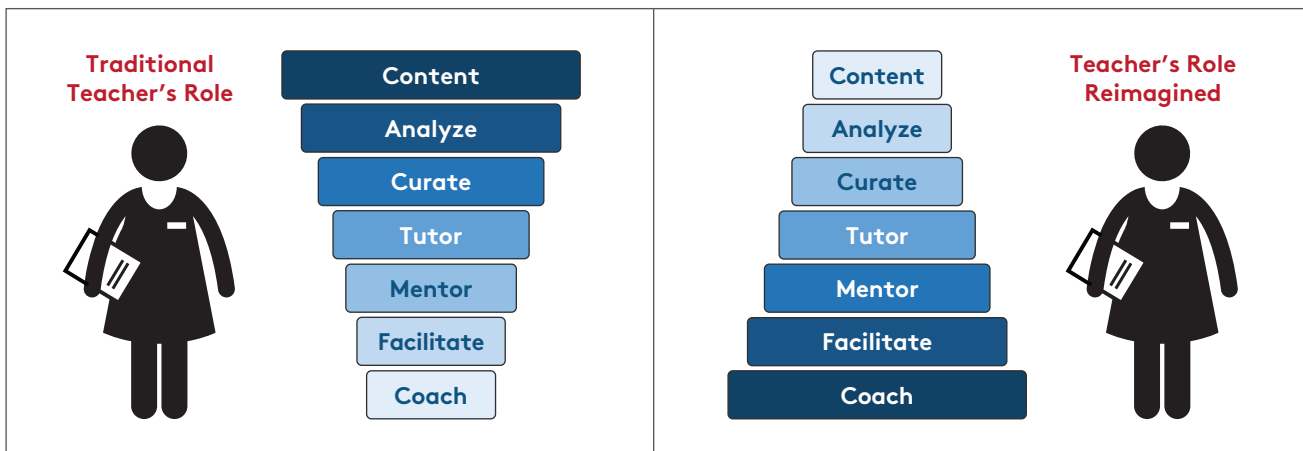
- Which pieces of the teacher's role are critical for teachers to retain?

We know that high-quality teaching is essential to strong student outcomes. Therefore, we need to identify what teachers must do and see how we can best leverage the instructional reach of good teachers. Some ideas include leveraging the skills of master teachers by having master teachers deliver lessons to a larger group of students; other teachers can then focus on working with students in smaller groups to support instruction. Another way to leverage the skills of master teachers is to have master teachers focus their energies on providing coaching to other teachers.

- What aspects of the teacher's job can be handled by others? Here are some ideas to consider:

- Technology can be incorporated in a variety of ways, ranging from delivering lessons (as part of a flipped classroom or blended learning model) to providing assessment or grading support.
- Increase the number of staff with expertise in supporting the social-emotional needs of students. Typically, elementary classroom teachers and homeroom teachers are relied on to provide a watchful eye over students and provide connection and social-emotional support. Investing in counselors and therapists can help to relieve the teacher's span of focus.
- Strengthen relationships with community organizations that provide therapy, counseling, and other health care supports. This recommendation is frequently voiced, but schools and districts often find it difficult to implement and sustain successfully. Investing funds in hiring staff as coordinators can help make these relationships sustainable.
- Utilize paraprofessionals and other staff such as AmeriCorps to assume a variety of tasks outside of the instructional core. Examples include lunch duty, morning drop-off, and afternoon dismissal. Paraprofessionals, however, should not be called upon to provide instructional support.

Exhibit 3 EVOLVING AND UNBUNDLING THE TEACHER'S ROLE



Source: DMGroup.

We at DMGroup and many others in the sector have long been talking about unbundling the role of the teacher. Copious articles exist on transforming the role of the teacher from a “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side”—a transformation that can be aided by integrating technology and incorporating other staff to handle some of the work currently being handled by teachers (*Exhibit 3*). Of course, effecting these changes is not simple in public education and must be managed within the myriad constraints such as collective bargaining agreements and regulations about seat time, scheduling constraints, etc.

4. Changes in how success is defined and measured

There are new standards for the new millennium—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, technology literacy, and social-emotional wellbeing are but some of the 21st-century skills that are now dominating discussions about education. And different communities have different opinions on what should be prioritized. District and school leaders need to reflect on how success is defined in their communities. With new definitions of success, there will likely have to be a shift in how we measure success. At the college/university level, we are seeing a dramatic shift as institutions of higher education waive the need for standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT and are shifting how they assess applicants.

5. Changes in the way we work/rapid-cycle results

In response to emerging science about Covid-19 and fluctuating infection rates, schools had to pivot multiple times over the past two years—shifting from fully remote learning to hybrid learning to in-person learning and back again. To meet future challenges, districts are going to have to maintain the flexibility and spirit of innovation that so many districts demonstrated over the past two years.

To innovate in the public education sector, which is charged with the enormous responsibility of educating and nurturing our nation’s youth, the sector needs to accept some experimentation but should couple this with rapid-cycle work, measurement, and iteration to ensure that students are making progress. Lengthy planning cycles and annual assessments, typical of the sector, will not allow districts and schools to respond adequately to the enormous

challenges before them. Much as the software industry has shifted from releasing new software versions every few years (remember Windows 95 and Windows 98?) to having apps that update very frequently, public education must embrace innovation, frequently measure progress, and be willing to iterate, pivot, or abandon an effort to achieve success.

The chaos of the past two years has dramatically heightened existing challenges and created a host of additional challenges, only some of which we have highlighted here. Simply put, public education cannot respond with more of the same or with better versions of the same. Public education is at a juncture that demands new approaches. Fortunately, there is an unprecedented amount of funding available to the sector, at least in the short term. Over the next few years, it will be critical for public education leaders to embrace innovation and leverage their resources strategically in order to meet the needs of today’s students.

In the coming year, District Management Group will provide more detail on the ideas highlighted here, and we will continue to develop more resources to share. The articles that follow highlight research on best practices for using funding, ideas for innovation based on leading innovation research, research on leading educators past burnout, and recommendations for leveraging scheduling to make the most of existing staff and their talents.

We look forward to working in partnership with districts and schools to encourage innovation and support transformation that will benefit our nation’s students for years to come. ♦

NOTES

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, “New Projected Data Through 2030 to Be Included in Digest of Education Statistics,” *NCES Blog*, February 23, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/new-projected-data-through-2030-to-be-included-in-digest-of-education-statistics>.

² HolonIQ, “Sizing the Global EdTech Market: Mode vs Model,” February 23, 2021, <https://www.holoniq.com/notes/sizing-the-global-edtech-market>.

³ Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It,” Learning Policy Institute, August 16, 2017, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover-brief>.

⁴ GBAO, “Poll Results: Stress and Burnout Pose Threat of Educator Shortages,” memo, January 31, 2022, <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/NEA%20Member%20COVID-19%20Survey%20Summary.pdf>.