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A Better Way Forward

How Districts Can (Re)create School for Every Child

by Michael B. Horn

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Amid the disaster that has unfolded as a result of Covid's assault on society and schools, there is opportunity to rebuild better by altering the fundamental assumptions undergirding our present-day schooling model.

That reinvention starts with educators. Although there are many obstacles over which educators have little control, administrators and teachers have an opportunity right now to reconceive what they are trying to accomplish and create a more supportive model that allows them to better serve each child.

Too often the debates around improving schooling get stuck in a zero-sum framing where for every winner there must be a loser. But the reality is that there are many more losers in our current education system than winners. By moving to a positive-sum system and a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity, we can transform that system into one that benefits both the haves and have-nots in our society.

In that world, as children grow up, schools will help them discover and build their passions, understand what it takes to pursue what they want, learn how they can contribute value to society, and fulfill their human potential. Although many people are scared of change because of what they might lose, everyone has much to gain.

As schools have struggled over the past three academic years and the media has fretted about learning loss, education experts have recommended everything from summer school for all to redshirting every student. What

these ideas share in common is that all students should just have more of the same type of schooling experience they've always had—an experience that wasn't working.

In the years ahead, students will need personalization to meet them where they are—not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. They will need support and help building strong relationships and networks. They will need to develop strong habits of success. We will need to think comprehensively and expansively, because if the goal is to help all students succeed in today's complex society, going back to the way things were is not an option.

In the pages that follow, I highlight some of the research, ideas, and district examples from my new book, *From Reopen to Reinvent: (Re)Creating School for Every Child*, about how to reinvent learning given all the pressures bearing down on school districts, and what that learning should look like. Although the book contains many more ideas and potential solutions, these highlights are meant to empower administrators to see that they can implement important changes that can help unlock progress for students, teachers, and their school communities.

> ## *If the goal is to help all students succeed in today's complex society, going back to the way things were is not an option.*

From Threat to Opportunity: The Importance of Autonomy

What we know from research on innovation is that when organizations frame a problem as a threat, it helps them galvanize resources to tackle that threat. As Nobel Prize–winners Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed, people are more willing to commit financial resources if they perceive something will result in a loss rather than a gain.[1] Learning loss has certainly been framed as a threat.

But if organizations continue believing the challenge is a threat, then something called "threat rigidity" sets in. This insight stems from the research of Clark Gilbert, who was formerly the president of BYU-Idaho and BYU Pathway Worldwide. Through studying the challenge that newspapers faced in the early years of the internet, Gilbert found that when threat rigidity sets in, an organization doubles down on its existing processes. That results in more top-down control; reduced experimentation precisely when that organization needs to be experimenting more to adapt to new circumstances; and a focus on the organization's existing resources, rather than questioning what else it might use to respond to the threat. When Gilbert studied this in the newspaper industry, he found that organizations that saw the internet as a threat marshaled resources to invest in the internet, but "most sites simply reproduced the newspaper" online.[2] If that sounds familiar, it's because that's what many schools did in the face of the disruptions Covid-19 wrought.

To escape threat rigidity, it's important to shift responsibility to a new independent group that can reframe the threat as an opportunity. If there isn't at least one person in the school system whose full-time job is to focus on the opportunity at hand and innovate, then it's no one's job. That's because the day-to-day priorities of the organization will drain energy away from any efforts to create something new and different. Placing responsibility for this task on a specific group has an added advantage of creating capacity in a school district to innovate when the time of the superintendent, other cabinet members, and teachers is being sucked up by the urgent tasks of responding to inquiries from the community and day-to-day teaching.

Microschools Overcome Threat Rigidity at Kettle Moraine School District (MN)

The Kettle Moraine School District, which sits 30 minutes outside Milwaukee, was a relatively high-achieving district. But beneath its positive results were opportunities to improve. Only 45% of students were completing their post-secondary programs—below the national average. With a threat identified, the district marshaled resources to address the challenge.

But this district didn't maintain the threat framing. Once it had galvanized resources, it moved to create a variety of independent environments in which to personalize learning through microschools—schools within schools, in this case—of no more than 180 students. Each microschool had its own unique spin. Kettle Moraine authorized three charter schools on its high school campus and one at one of its elementary schools to help implement a mastery-based model that personalizes learning, along with seven "houses" in its middle school.

With a high degree of accountability in place, the innovations appeared to be working. Results on the PISA exam, the OECD's Test for Schools, would rank the district among the top countries in the world. According to an article in Education Week *in 2017, the students in the district's traditional high school performed as well as students in Canada, Finland, and other European countries, while the students in its charter school performed in the same ballpark as students in Singapore—the second-higest-ranking country at the time—with very high engagement in the learning.**

* Michele Molnar, "Personalized Learning in Practice: How a Risk-Taker Tailored Learning in Her District," *Education Week*, February 22, 2017, https://www.edweek.org/leaders/2017/personalized-learing-in-practice-how-a-risk-taker-tailored-learning-in-herr-district.

Defining the Scope of School

With an independent team of educators ready to reinvent schooling, the next step is to start with the end in mind by defining the purpose of school. From there, the team can work backward to make sure students develop what they need to be successful.

There are at least six domains to consider:

1. Content knowledge
2. Skills
3. Habits of success
4. Real-world experiences and social capital
5. Health and wellness
6. Basic needs

These six domains can be thought of as the sets of experiences a school must consider providing so that it can ensure that it fulfills its purpose for all of its students. When some people look at this list of domains, they grow uneasy. They aren't sure that schools should be involved in many of these areas. Educators often haven't been trained in many of these realms. Some wish that schools would just stick to their knitting. Focus on the basics—like academic knowledge and skills. Reading, writing, and math.

But even for those individuals who might see schools as having a more limited purpose, if we're going to redesign schools so that all students have the supports they need to fulfill a school's purpose, then schools will need to consider all of these domains. Schooling communities will also have to acknowledge that different students in different situations will have different needs. One-size-fits-all solutions won't work.

Some students will need deeply integrated offerings that combine all six of these domains; other students will need less support and will be OK with offerings that are not the gold standard and are less integrated. They may, in fact, be better off with more customization that comes from less interdependence and integration.

The general rule of thumb, however, is that those students who are underserved by school today will likely need more support through all six of these domains—and the more underserved they are, the less these domains should be offered in an arms-length or wrap-around way. They must be offered purposefully to boost student learning.

Learning with Purpose at Cajon Valley Union School District (CA)

Cajon Valley Union School District outside of San Diego helps students make the connection between what they are learning in school and achievement of career and life objectives. From kindergarten through eighth grade, students explore over 50 different careers through immersive, experiential opportunities. These help each student gain self-awareness about their unique strengths, interests, and values; a window into different academic and career opportunities; and the ability to ground and tell their own story.

Linking to the real world creates more opportunities for students to connect with adults from different walks of life. If school isn't just about teaching academics but also about helping students have access to good life opportunities and careers, then those outside relationships are critical. After building a baseline of academic knowledge and skills, who you know is often more important than what you know. Relationships help individuals gain access to opportunities and jobs; they help entrepreneurs raise capital; they help people learn about new pathways.

As with the teaching of skills and habits of success, however, incorporating real-world experiences and social capital isn't an add-on to what schools are trying to accomplish. Indeed, the leadership team at Cajon Valley Union School District told me that students' reading has improved as students gained knowledge about different fields and careers. As a recent Hoover Institute report said, "Coupling academic learning and exposure to people working on real-world problems can deepen student thinking and open possibilities for further learning. Even when teachers themselves do not have the tools or time to build rich materials on their own, organizations like Nepris offer curated collections of speakers, videos, and lesson plans for classroom use. Others, like Composer, specialize in providing globally connected civics education learning and action experiences."*

* Margaret Macke Raymond, "COVID-19, High School, and the 'Both and' World," Hoover Education Success Initiative, May 1, 2021, https://www.hoover.org/research/covid-19-high-school-and-both-and-world.

Guarantee Mastery: Deliver What Students Want

Guaranteeing that students master core concepts may sound like a pipe dream, but not only is it a more rigorous way to structure learning, it also accords with what motivates students and the daily progress they desire.

At a macro level, children are trying to accomplish two goals each day. First, they want to do things that help them feel successful—to feel that they are making progress and accomplishing something, rather than experiencing repeated failure or running up against walls. Second, most students want to do things that help them have fun with friends. They want positive, rewarding social experiences with others, including peers, teachers, coaches, and advisors. The traditional schooling experience fails to accomplish this.

The opportunities to experience success in the traditional classroom occur infrequently. For example, in many classes, the only real opportunity to feel successful is on end-of-unit tests, which occur only every few weeks. Because students often don't receive timely feedback on these assessments, or even on their day-to-day assignments, the opportunity to feel successful is separated from the work.

Progress is also decoupled from the learning because students advance on the pacing guide's schedule, not based on their own learning. That's because in today's school system, time is held as fixed but each child's learning is variable. Teachers move students through a set of standards each year based on their grade level or the course in which they are enrolled.

At the end of each unit, which occurs at fixed times when students typically take an assessment, some students have inevitably failed to master the material. They therefore don't experience success. The privilege of feeling successful is reserved for only a few. By design, the rest of the students experience something short of that.

Despite the reams of advice telling us to learn from our failures, rare is the individual who wants to feel like a failure in anything and seeks out activities that reinforce that feeling. As Northwestern University professor Lauren Eskreis-Winkler argues, there is evidence that failure "thwarts learning."[3]

By moving to mastery-based learning, however, we can help individuals reframe failure as part of the learning process on the road to success. Doing so follows the advice of bestselling author Jessica Lahey to see failure as a gift, rather than a permanent label.[4]

How should schools build their student experience? An important place to start is reversing the practice of sorting that breeds a sense of failure. It's instead important to refocus schooling on cultivating success for each child every day.

A Learning Cycle Built on Success

Over the last several years, many districts throughout the country have chosen to implement Summit Learning, a technology platform that helps schools personalize learning.* Beyond the technology platform, the Summit Learning platform helps schools implement a learning cycle that creates a pathway to success for each student (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Summit Learning's Self-Directed Learning Cycle

Source: Summit Learning

The cycle starts with goal setting. Educators work with students to articulate what they are trying to accomplish. Students then make a plan to reach those goals. From there, students learn and then show evidence of their learning. That evidence could be a conventional assessment, a project, a written paper, a presentation, and so forth. Finally, students receive feedback and reflect on what they learned in the process, which informs the next goal they set. Implementing this cycle builds in the habits of success through self-awareness, agency, and executive functions as students set their own goals, plan how they will get there, and reflect on how well they executed. Students don't tackle a more advanced concept that builds on the prior one until they have demonstrated mastery— and are successful.

* Summit Learning, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.summitlearning.org/.

T in "Teaching" Is for "Team"

Today we ask an impossible number of things from teachers. And it's showing, as the strain on teachers has perhaps never been greater.

But even before the pandemic, 30% of college graduates who became teachers typically left the profession within six years.[5] That ranks as the fifth-highest turnover by occupation, behind secretaries, childcare workers, paralegals, and correctional officers.

> " **A job in which teachers must serve as superheroes is filled with stress and unsustainability, at best, and it's a path to failure for many.**

Creating a more sustainable and gratifying teaching profession is critical. Part of the challenge is that the traditional one-to-many teacher-to-student model is broken. Among the things we ask a single teacher to do are content delivery, tutoring, mentoring, facilitating conversations and rich projects, serving as a concierge to explore different interest areas in the world, curating resources, evaluating and offering timely feedback on student work, data mining, and counseling.

To do all this, teachers must act as superheroes. Many ably do that. But a job in which teachers must serve as superheroes is filled with stress and unsustainability, at best, and it's a path to failure for many. Asking teachers to do things for which they haven't been trained also creates downside risks for students.[6]

There are many ways to help teachers take things off their plates, such as the following:

- Using technology to deliver content,
- Allowing their students to take on more of the work by self-directing their own learning,
- Allowing other professional educators to grade students.

From Reopen to Reinvent explores many of these ideas in greater depth, but one change that could significantly help teachers is to make teaching a team sport so that these different crucial roles are distributed across several individuals.

Team teaching doesn't mean assigning teachers to teams while still having them remain in their separate classrooms and only meeting during collective planning periods or off-hours. Schools have done that for decades. Instead, co-teaching environments should be created in which groups of teachers actively work together to support large groups of students. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this, but the most obvious is to create larger learning environments or combine classrooms.

Teachers Team Up in Elizabeth Public Schools (NJ)

Elizabeth Public Schools, a district in New Jersey, provides a great exemplar of team-teaching in larger learning environments. There, five schools have pioneered the use of Teach to One for math in open spaces of roughly 3,000 square feet. Teach to One is an education model that the nonprofit New Classrooms developed to personalize math learning for middle schoolers.*

In the model, each student receives an individualized learning playlist every day—the precise set of activities and concepts on which each student would work based on their needs. While students cycle through a variety of modalities to learn, ranging from independent online work to peer-to-peer learning and traditional teacher instruction, the teachers do everything from traditional teaching to tutoring to monitoring how individual students are faring in their assigned modalities.

*New Classrooms, Teach to One, accessed August 29, 2022, https://teachtoone.org/. See the study by Douglas D. Ready et al., "Final Impact: Results from the i3 Implementation of Teach to One: Math," Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Columbia University Teachers College (January 2019), https://newclassrooms.org/wp-content/uploads/-Final-Impact-Results-i3-TtO.pdf.

Once you have a larger learning environment with more teachers and students, you can allow teachers to disaggregate their roles and specialize in a variety of ways that transcend the traditional academic content divisions.

Managing Change and Innovation: The Tools of Cooperation

People in a schooling community often won't agree on any number of these or other items recommended in my new book. How schools allocate resources and which programs are prioritized can lead to hot dispute. Often parents aren't empathetic, either, when they disagree about a hot-button issue or a specific initiative that they don't think is wise or is promoting something for their children with which they disagree. Public education in America ultimately takes place within a representative democracy where many voices compete to be listened to and followed.

Given these dynamics, it's tough to manage change in a school or school system. So, what to do? For the past seven years, I've taught a seminar to roughly 40 school leaders in Nevada. Of all the theories and frameworks on how to successfully manage innovation, the one that has consistently been among the most well received has been a theory about what tools to use when there are varying levels of agreement within an organization or community.[7]

Once a school leader has clarity about what they want to change, they still need to convince other individuals who will play a role in the change—teachers, administrators, students, staff, parents, district officials, and potentially others—to work with them. That can be true even if they have designed and tested their plan with significant parts of the community.
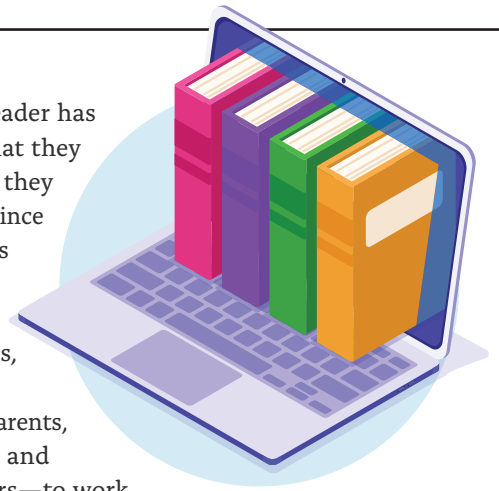
How to convince individuals to cooperate and work together? A leader can use a variety of tools, ranging from motivational, visionary speeches to command-and-control orders to elicit cooperative behavior. We call these the "tools of cooperation." Most of these tools don't work most of the time. As a result, leaders often fail when trying to manage change, as the tools they use waste credibility, energy, and resources.

Therefore, the most important thing to do upfront is to figure out the level of agreement people in a community or organization have on what the organization's goals should be and how it can achieve these goals. In Exhibit 2, the vertical axis measures the extent to which the people

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Exhibit 2 TOOLS OF COOPERATION
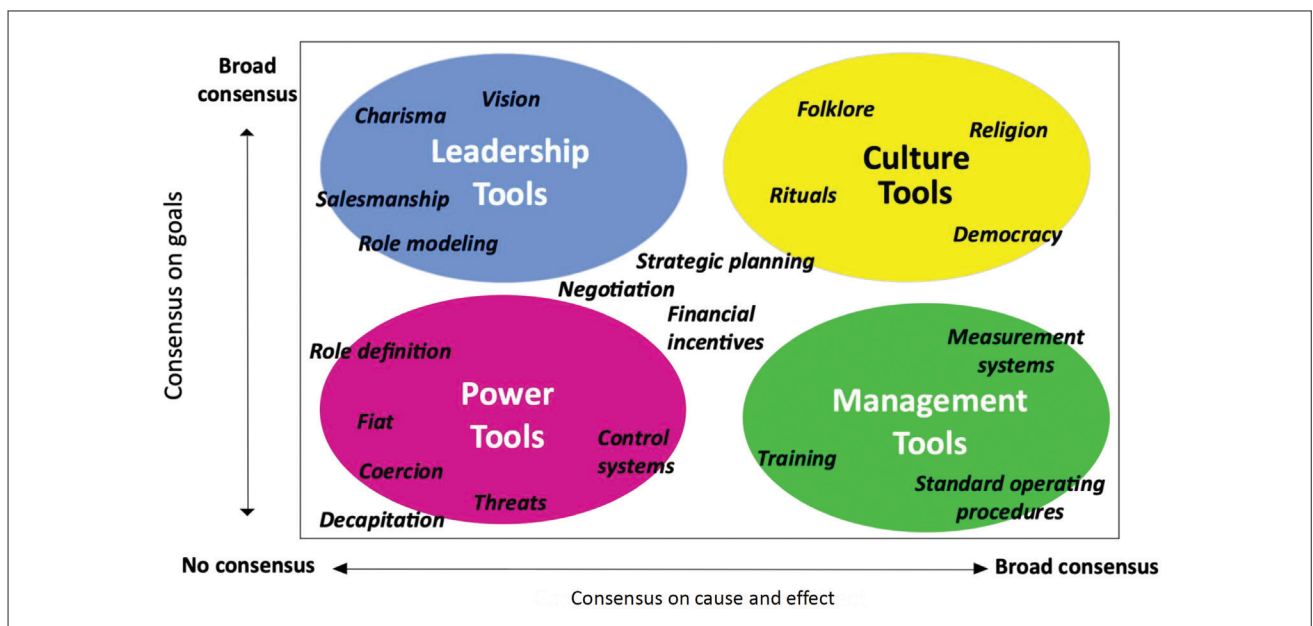
Source: Clayton Christensen Institute

involved agree on goals; the horizontal axis measures the extent to which the people involved agree on cause and effect—which actions or processes will lead to the desired results.

From there, a school leader can figure out which quadrant they fall in and which tools they can use that will work: power tools, management tools, leadership tools, culture tools. In addition, there are three other paths forward to create change which do not reside in the matrix—the tool

of separation, the power of success, and a common language or education. These three additional tools are discussed in greater detail in *From Reopen to Reinvent*, and are important tools to consider in order to drive change and innovation.

Parents and Moving Forward

There is, of course, an elephant in the room. A group of educators in a district may be excited to implement many

Using Leadership Tools to Effect Change at Lindsay Unified School District (CA)

In 2007, Lindsay Unified School District in California fell into a quadrant where leadership tools would work. There was broad consensus among all stakeholders that something had to change. The metrics along every dimension were poor. The district was failing its students.

To illustrate just how bad things were, Lindsay's superintendent Tom Rooney often tells the story of how a new principal at Lindsay Unified High School, Virgel Hammonds, was settling into his role when "in walked a father and his son who had graduated the week before. The father took a newspaper off the desk and gave it to his son, asking him to read it. After a few minutes of silence, the young man looked up with tears in his eyes. 'Dad, you know I don't know how to read.'"

Although there wasn't agreement on what to do, everyone wanted to do something. Rooney swung into action.

As Thomas Arnett of the Clayton Christensen Institute wrote, "Over the course of eight months, he and the school board worked with a consultant to develop the rough outlines of a shared vision for transforming their district. They then invited 150 stakeholders to an intensive, two-day community work session to articulate their shared values and goals in the form of a strategic design document that would be their compass for guiding all subsequent decisions. The district staff then worked with their school leaders to reinforce shared understanding of the strategic design while at the same time giving school leaders both autonomy and support to develop new practices in line with the district's vision."*

As competency-based expert Chris Sturgis notes, although there is some unity in certain principles that undergird how Lindsay Unified now operates—from mastery-based learning to blended learning and a deep sense of accountability—the actual day-to-day practices in the district differ depending on what individual educators and students believe they need in order to make progress. As she wrote, "Outcomes are clearly defined, with empowered students working alongside empowered teachers to figure out how students will learn and demonstrate their learning. ... Teachers often raised the fact that they had permission to take risks and be more creative, as long as there were clear reasons why it would be helping students."**

In other words, the district rallied people around a vision and then allowed individuals to figure out how they would go realize that vision. Superintendent Rooney did not sell the details upfront, but instead stayed focused on the big picture and empowering communities to chase the shared vision.

There is a cautionary note here, however. You need to be honest about where your community is in its level of agreement because the same actions that in one district individuals view as inspiring and visionary are often regarded with indifference or disdain when they take place in another district. As a result, no reinvention is simple and straightforward; instead, it is a series of small steps where success breeds success, excitement, and growth over time.

*Thomas Arnett, "Catching Education's White Whale: School Improvement," *Christensen Institute Blog*, November 15, 2017, https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/catching-educations-white-whale-school-improvement/.

**Chris Sturgis, "Six Trends at Lindsay Unified School District," *CompetencyWorks* blog, Aurora Institute, March 2, 2015, https://aurora-institute.org/cw_post/six-trends-at-lindsay-unified-school-district/.

> **❝** *Framing a change as an answer to a parent's quest for progress and leading with <u>why</u> your proposal will help—as opposed to the how or what—is crucial.*

From Reopen to Reinvent
(Re)creating School for Every Child

Michael B. Horn

In response to Covid's shattering of the routines and lives of students, parents, and educators, veteran education strategist Michael B. Horn urges the sector to reexamine the fundamental assumptions undergirding our present-day schooling model and rebuild our education system better, to more effectively support our nation's students.

In *From Reopen to Reinvent*, Horn draws upon time-tested leadership and innovation frameworks, such as Jobs to Be Done, "Begin with the End," tools of cooperation, threat rigidity, and discovery-driven planning, to offer a prescriptive and holistic approach to address the purpose of schooling, focus on mastery for each student, and explore the ideal use of technology.
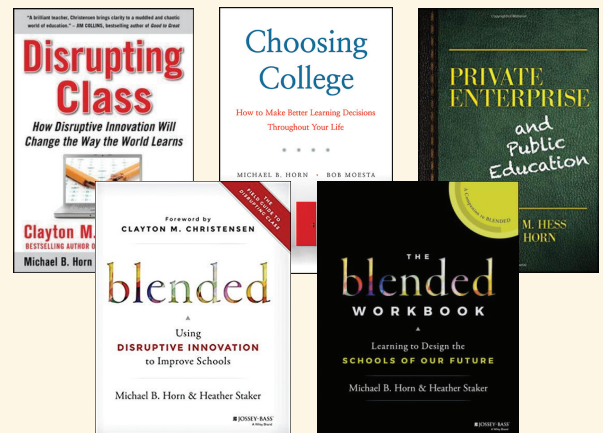
From Reopen to Reinvent provides a practical toolbox for K-12 educators, parents, and school board members to disrupt the educational process and pursue a better path forward.

Read more about Michael Horn's ideas for reinventing education.
Download an excerpt: ⟶

of these forward-looking ideas to create an environment in which all students can build upon their passions and fulfill their potential. But parents are known for being resistant to big changes in education. They are seen as a conservative force for school being the way it was for them.

Because almost everyone went to school, most parents feel qualified as experts on what schools should do and look like. Nostalgia for certain aspects of the school experience—and a desire that the younger generation should even experience some of the challenges they did—runs deep in many parental communities.

Yet parents are clearly disgruntled. Millions have pulled their students out of traditional district schools. Others verbalize their frustrations more regularly than ever before.

At the same time, it's clear that parents have divergent views and priorities. They don't all have the same definition of progress. They don't adhere to what others in their demographics believe or want. Their views are instead shaped based on their circumstances and the struggles they face. What's important to them changes over time as those circumstances shift.

In other words, parents have different goals and priorities for their children and their schooling. Given parents' conservatism, advocating for radical changes or innovations for other children can backfire. It's better to position the changes you want to make in terms of why they will help each individual parent make progress for *their* children, as that parent defines progress. Framing a change as an answer to a parent's quest for progress and leading with *why* your proposal will help—as opposed to the how or what—is crucial. But to do so well requires understanding what causes parents to switch their child's schooling.

Other books by Michael B. Horn:

Having researched this question, I know that there are four macro sets of reasons that are causing them to take action:

- To help their child overcome an obstacle,
- To be part of a values-aligned community,
- To develop a well-rounded child, and
- To realize their plan for their child.

The conclusions from this research are clear: districts will ultimately need to move beyond the one-size-fits-all thinking that has historically pervaded schooling. Schools will need to make hard choices and identify which job they should be serving—and by extension what they will choose to not do well. Or they will need to offer distinct choices and options. Organizations that strive to be all things to all people by being good at all the different priorities individuals have tend to become one-size-fits-none organizations.

In addition, as schools seek to implement different innovations, they need to design and fit those initiatives into the progress that individual parents desire—not the progress that is important to the school, educator, or public education system writ large. That means that innovation will not and should not be filled with dramatic departures, but will consist of small steps forward that ultimately result in a system with options that allow all children to make progress, build their passions, and fulfill their potential. ◆

NOTES

[1] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263–292.

[2] Clark G. Gilbert, "Unbundling the Structure of Inertia: Resource Versus Routine Rigidity," *The Academy of Management Journal* 48, no. 5 (October 2005): https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/a.j.2005.18803920.

[3] Lauren Eskreis-Winkler and Ayelet Fishback, "Not Learning from Failure — the Greatest Failure of All," *Psychological Science*, November 8, 2019.

[4] Jessica Lahey, *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go so Their Children Can Succeed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

[5] Leslie Kan, "How Does Teacher Attrition Compare to Other Professions?," *Education Next*, July 14, 2014, https://www.educationnext.org/teacher-attrition-compare-professions/.

[6] Robert Pondiscio, "How We Make Teaching Too Hard for Mere Mortals," *Education Next*, May 16, 2016, https://www.educationnext.org/how-we-make-teaching-too-hard-for-mere-mortals/.

[7] Much of what follows is adapted from Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), first edition. That book in turn drew from Clayton M. Christensen, Matt Marx, and Howard H. Stevenson, "The Tools of Cooperation and Change," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2006, https://hbr.orrg/2006/10/the-tools-of-cooperation-and-change.
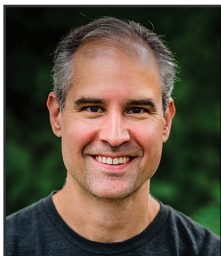
Michael Horn, guest contributor to *DMJ*, is a veteran education strategist and author who has written extensively on education technology, blended learning, and innovation. He co-founded the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, a nonprofit think tank, and is an adjunct lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Michael holds a B.A. in history from Yale University and an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School.