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**How Youth Are Changing the Conversation**

The education ecosystem witnessed so little change over the decades that when the pandemic hit, its core was was rocked. The “school day” was thrown overboard along with the daily commute. In its place, schools shifted to online – a disaster for many. Nearly six months later, uncertainty reigns. While we await medical therapies and vaccines to ward off COVID-19, students and families alike yearn for structure and stability.

Fortunately, not all is lost. In fact, America has rediscovered the ingenuity and resolve of communities. As the pandemic lags on, the lack of direction from Washington, DC on how best to approach learning is alarming. Yet, many are viewing the present turmoil as an unprecedented opportunity to lean in, partner, and innovate, rather than an excuse for inaction. Where federal leaders have dropped the ball, state and local leaders have picked it up, convening experts and practitioners to customize solutions to meet local needs.

In some communities, students are being asked for input. And, for good reason: their voices are authentic and their observations moored in personal classroom and online experiences. 2020 students have taken ownership of their learning in profound ways and have demonstrated extraordinary care for their communities by, among other things, delivering food to hungry families and tending to the children of first responders alongside their classmates and mentors in out of school time programs.

What “school” and “learning” look like in the future will depend on what we get right, now. In addition to reviewing data and research specific to how students are performing academically, socially, and emotionally, students’ active participation and entrepreneurial drive are critical at this juncture. By nature, young people are builders. They want to engage. They desire accountability for the results. While students bring few titles or positions of authority to the table, their input is no less valuable than those who do.

So what are the services, interventions, and supports 2020 students need? How can expanded learning programs and initiatives best serve these students for the uncertainties of the future? Having worked in the field for many years, and now among my community’s core network of problem solvers, four key provisions immediately come to mind: excellence in technology; adaptive problem solving; nurturing relationships; and ethical decision-making. Let’s unpack each.

*Excellence in Technology*. 2020 students are already beginning to engineer the future. This generation will be light years ahead of even today’s most technologically talented millennials. Yet, too many of our most vulnerable students still lack access to the Internet and devices needed to complete coursework. Add to these technological obstacles the trauma many have experienced adjusting to a “new normal” -- perhaps a parental job loss, or worse, the loss of a family member to COVID-19 – and the challenges loom large. So, the first provision to pack for our 2020 students’ journey in expanded learning is excellence in technology.

*Adaptive Problem Solving*. While adults ponder when things will “return to normal”, our youth are rapidly adapting to their changing world. 2020 students will multiply their energies to make change where they believe it’s most needed. That’s why the next provision to give 2020 students are tools to adapt and solve the complex problems of tomorrow. Expanded learning settings offer students a safe space to succeed by offering a variety of different settings and experiences with new and challenging circumstances.

*Nurturing Relationships*. Deeper relationships lead to deeper learning. Athletes respect coaches who demonstrate understanding, empathy, and concern. They will test the boundaries of physical endurance in order to excel. Similarly, 2020 students taught by trusted mentors who help them discover their identity and purpose can face whatever challenges they confront. They become incentivized to a growth mindset and are motivated towards excellence. So much of what traditional afterschool programs focus on – the skills and knowledge students will need to secure that first internship or excel in their postsecondary pursuits – instill confidence so students can apply themselves in myriad circumstances, whether in school or the workforce.

*Ethical Decision-Making*. 2020 students are demanding ethical leadership. As our nation turns its attention to horrific disparities in treatment exemplified by instances of systemic injustice, a national movement has been ignited. 2020 students are sounding the call for equality and justice. Reinventing learning will lead our successors to succeed. Ethical leadership is a cornerstone provision for the journey.

The truth is, young people are showing up, rising up, and making their voices heard. They are communicating to their communities. They are expressing their thoughts and feelings. They are demonstrating a resolve to do what they believe is important and sharing why it matters to them.

Those of us who embrace their energy and optimism will be better for having done so. As for afterschool mentors, we will continue to ask our 2020 students, “Who is the leader in you?”. We do so knowing that these future leaders will seek and find empowerment through the systems they help to design, create, and initiate.

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