

# A New Education Story

THREE DRIVERS TO TRANSFORM  
EDUCATION SYSTEMS



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# Foreword

Since 2017 Big Change has had the privilege of bringing together global partners who share a commitment to reimagining education with and for young people. Collectively, we have explored and challenged old assumptions about what education is and can be, who and what it is for, and hope to create a new education story for our times.

At this moment, when education leaders, policymakers, and funders in every context are making decisions about how to restore learning and education, we want to offer a provocation. To say that it is simply not enough to “go back”. That to set up every young person to thrive - to prepare them well for their futures - the old ways will not do. More reform that leaves the existing narrow goals and purpose of education untouched will not get us there.

### Our new education story must be one of transformation.

This publication is an invitation to education system leaders and decision makers to step back, to ask big questions, and to think differently about both what we are aiming for, and how to get there.

This is not to say that the job of transforming education is theirs alone. The nature of transformation requires a new mindset and set of approaches that work with those across the system - educators, students, parents, communities and peers. Working with global partners and contributors, we have identified **three interlinked drivers to transform education systems**, along with **nine actions and real world stories** that show how to make progress.

The drivers require us all to think differently about; **purpose** - the goals and outcomes of education; **power** - expanding who has voice and agency in education; and **practice** - unlocking innovation that has transformative potential. They encourage leaders and funders to act in new ways, with a greater focus on the wider ecosystem. While this may seem daunting, there are many exciting examples of people, organisations, alliances and places showing that a new way is possible.

We hope that this publication will act as a provocation for conversation and action. There is no quick fix or neat solution, so we invite you to explore the ideas, actions and questions set out here with colleagues and allies. And if you have ideas for how to share and activate others around this work, please get in touch.

ESSIE NORTH, CEO, BIG CHANGE

View the full digital report at: [www.big-change.org/new-education-story](http://www.big-change.org/new-education-story)

# The Case for Transformation, Not Reform

**Education systems around the world are at a crossroads; a moment of huge challenge and opportunity when, perhaps more than at any other time in living memory,<sup>1</sup> decisions made now about what happens next for learning will have deep and lasting effects for the future.**

In 2021, education systems around the world began to emerge from a global pandemic that created the worst learning crisis in a century.<sup>2 3</sup> While the long-term effects are yet to be felt, the pandemic resulted in impacts for children way beyond education, such as increases in early marriage and child labour, trafficking and displacement. In the short term, though some children, families and educators discovered new ways of learning, many children lost months of learning progress and fewer completed secondary education.<sup>4</sup> Many children's mental health and wellbeing suffered under lockdown and in response to adversity, personal grief and economic hardship brought about by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the challenges the pandemic raised were not new. There have been calls to reimagine learning for many years.<sup>7 8 9</sup> But the pandemic and long-anticipated impacts of major social and economic trends, technological advances, shifting geopolitical landscapes, climate change and increasing inequality, have created a new urgency for change.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of calls for change are shared questions about what the future holds: What purposes do learning and education systems need to serve if humanity and our planet are to flourish? What should learning and education systems look like, if we are to live lives that have meaning for the individual and significance in the world, and to work together to solve our greatest problems?<sup>11</sup>

**To reimagine learning - sustainably and at scale - the education systems within which learning takes place need to be not just reformed, but transformed: not just improved, but redesigned.**

Many education systems are in a process of continuous reform, in which efforts are made to improve efficiency, effectiveness and equity, but which largely keep the existing system and goals in place. Transformation, by contrast, involves both a shift in the dominant logic of a system and for the effects of that shift to be experienced at scale.

Transformation is required if education systems are to adapt to the new challenges and opportunities facing young people and society in an emerging - and uncertain - future.

Critically, there is also agreement that learning and education need to offer every child - not just some children - the chance to reach their unique potential and further, that learning and education should become solutions to tackling inequality, rather than part of the problem. It is perhaps this purpose that will prompt the most urgent and fundamental shifts.

# A System Perspective

Education systems are inherently complex, deeply connected to - and interdependent with - people systems (family and community) and other systems (business and the economy, politics). They loom large in the public consciousness and carry huge historical and cultural significance.<sup>13</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising that even relatively small changes can be hard to implement, and the realisation that education systems can be - must be - transformed for learning to be reimagined, is daunting to say the least. However, viewed another way, complexity and interdependence can be seen as advantages, as assets, in education transformation.

Recent work, inspired by the late Donella Meadows,<sup>14</sup> an American environmental scientist and pioneer in the field of system dynamics, has revealed fresh insight into how complex systems like education resist transformation by accommodating and adjusting to change at a superficial level without making any fundamental shifts.<sup>15 16 17</sup>

This helps to explain how it can feel for people in education systems that everything is changing all the time, but that nothing really important ever does.

Meadows identified 12 leverage points - places to intervene in a system - that can bring about system transformation. Education reform efforts on the whole concern themselves with the practical levers, which can be helpful for improvement but are ultimately weak and leave the system itself largely unchanged.

**If system transformation is the goal then work needs to happen at the points of stronger leverage, which concern culture, beliefs and values, and which require a very different approach.**

*There may be a key distinction between education systems that will master the crisis and move forward, and those that will not. The distinction may be between those education systems that feel threatened by alternative ways of thinking and those that are open to the world and ready to learn from and with the world's education leaders.*

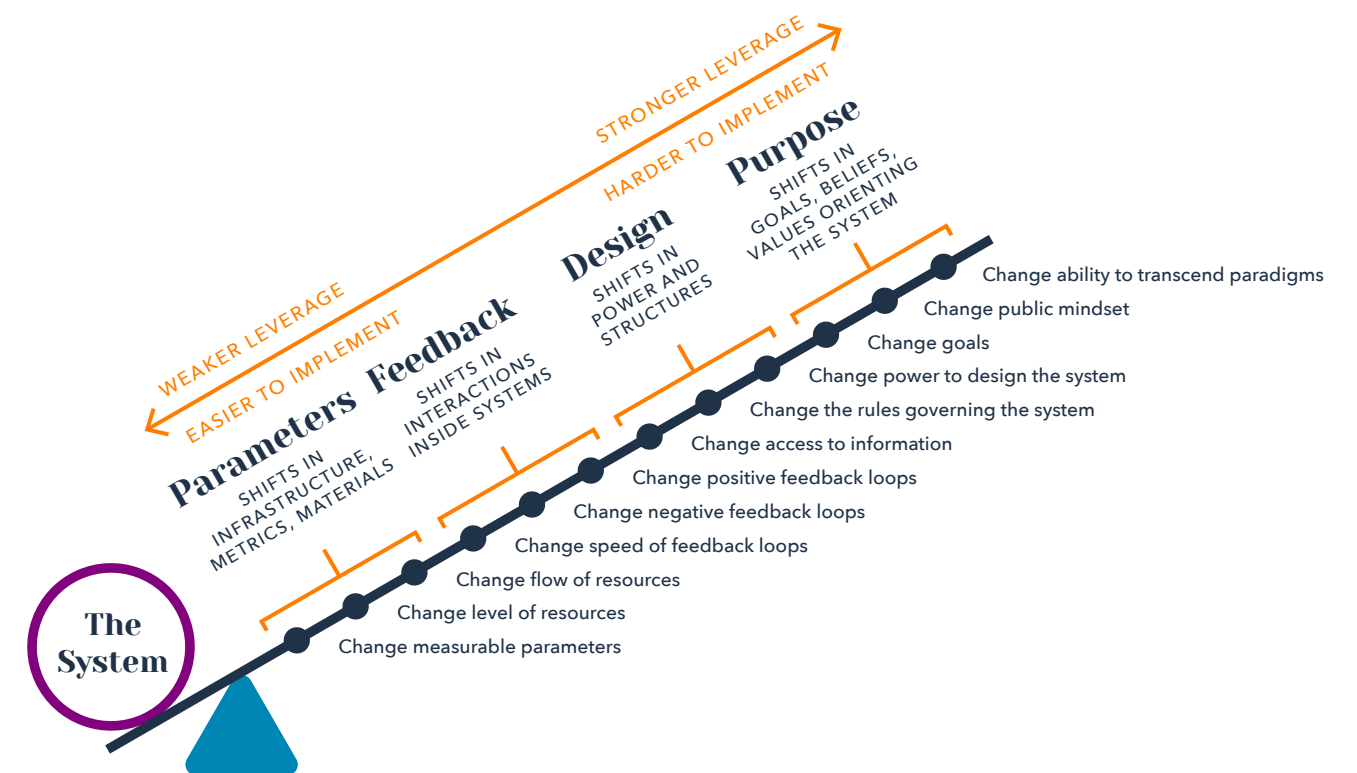
ANDREAS SCHLEICHER,  
OECD, 2020<sup>6</sup>

*How do we ensure that we don't go back to the old world, old us when this crisis is over? If we go down that path, it would be such a waste of this deeply transformative experience that life has thrown our way.*

VISHAL TALREJA,  
DREAM A DREAM, 2020<sup>12</sup>

*Education should help young people to find out what they want from life, what they love.*

RESTLESS  
DEVELOPMENT YOUTH  
RESEARCHER, 2021



**FIGURE 1: MEADOWS' PLACES TO INTERVENE IN A SYSTEM**

ADAPTED BY WINTHROP, ET AL. FROM MEADOWS (1999)  
AND FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH POPULACE

# Three Drivers for Transforming Education Systems

Transformation is a deeply human endeavour.<sup>18 19</sup> It requires understanding of the forces at the heart of education systems. The laws, regulations, structures and institutions on which educational reformers tend to focus are just the tip of the iceberg. The much larger part, lying beneath the surface, concerns the interests, beliefs, motivations and fears of those involved.<sup>20</sup>

**To truly transform education systems, efforts need to be focused on three interlinked drivers: Purpose, Power, and Practice.**

*We need to remember that the system is us. In the words of the late Sir Ken Robinson, you don't need to change the system, you just need to change yourself. If everyone were to act with integrity, as decent human beings, then the challenge of complexity - the need for complex things like transparency - would fall away.*

SAKU TUOMINEN, HUNDRED, 2021<sup>47</sup>

# Beyond Theory to Action

Together these three drivers begin to indicate a theory of action, directing leaders, funders and decision makers to the places to intervene in education systems at sufficient depth to bring about fundamental and lasting changes.

It is axiomatic that action should be at the heart of a theory of action, but this is not always the case. Theoretical models, helpful though they may be, are often just that - theoretical - and the work to make the big ideas and big challenges they advance actionable is left for another day, another report.

Challenged by partners to go further on this occasion - to bring the theory of action to life - each driver comprises a handful of actions that might be taken to bring about transformation, along with stories from the real world;

places and organisations where progress towards transformation is being made.

We have been selective. There are many actions that could and are being taken in service of transformation in education systems around the world. In the spirit of this work, we have focused on points of high leverage and deep impact, indicated by the research and evidence shared by partners and contributors and in the real world stories of transformation.

On the pages that follow, we set out how these three drivers and actions work, together and separately, to bring about education system transformation, and we pose challenging questions for reflection and discussion in your context.





# Purpose

## Redefine Goals and Outcomes

Redefine the goals and outcomes of the education system to reflect the challenges and opportunities of the future and the values and priorities of stakeholders

*We have seen education become everyone's business, whether you are a corporate CEO, a parent, or a minister. How do we motivate and catalyse these connections to accelerate collaborations between likely and unlikely allies? What if there was a way to map new narratives and showcase new connections, so we can ask new questions and unearth new thinking in education?*

REWIRED SYSTEMS MAP, 2021<sup>22</sup>

*Transforming education systems is a deeply human endeavor.*

ALEX BEARD, TEACH FOR ALL, 2021<sup>21</sup>

*Left solely in the hands of those who are invested in and who currently control education systems, any questions surrounding its current purpose will almost certainly be answered in ways that align to the outputs and outcomes that system is geared to delivering.*

TODD ROSE, POPULACE, 2021<sup>23</sup>

### ACTION

#### Engage stakeholders in defining the purpose of education

In many schools across the world, caring and committed educators create welcoming and stimulating learning environments for students. They achieve this despite the pressures and incentives of the education systems in their contexts, which can constrain how, when and where learning happens and damage learning relationships and the culture of the school community.

Education systems are designed to deliver very specific outcomes - basic skills for many, exam success and higher education for some; safe supervision of children and young people while enabling their parents to work; and the transmission of cultural norms and values that govern how children and young people should behave in the world now, and as adults.

Stakeholders in learning and education - in particular educators, parents and learners - are rarely if ever asked if they see the purpose of education this way.<sup>24</sup> If education systems are to truly transform then different outcomes - new purposes - need to be agreed by a wider group of stakeholders, in the context of a frank appraisal of the challenges of the future and transparency about the shortcomings of current systems.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What is the purpose of education in your context? Is it clearly defined?
- Who determines the purpose of education in your context?
- How do parents, educators and learners feel about the current purposes of education?
- What different purposes emerge as desirable when different groups are asked?

### ACTION

#### Reveal and challenge the shared assumptions blocking transformation

To change the purpose of education means challenging the collective assumptions - unquestioned widely held beliefs - that inform and reinforce the current purpose and making explicit new assumptions that do the same for the new purpose. To challenge collective assumptions requires first to reveal them, then to question their legitimacy and challenge their power.

A collective assumption, prevalent in many places, is that only a select few children are capable of high achievement and sees poverty as an insurmountable barrier to learning.<sup>25 26</sup>

However, myths and assumptions like this have to be debunked because they underpin and justify a whole set of arrangements in education systems - standardised testing, 'ability' groupings, timetabling and the subject choices available to children to name a few. These are the very arrangements that reinforce inequalities. They are the forces buried deep in education systems that ensure systems deliver on their purpose: to filter the best performers based on their intake of standardized material.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What myths and assumptions might create barriers to transforming education in your context? How pervasive are they?
- How could these be revealed and challenged in order to make transforming education possible?
- How would you ensure any new assumptions that underpin a new purpose are made explicit and widely shared?

### ACTION

#### Discover, connect, and amplify new alliances

It is striking how often people feel themselves to be in the minority - that they believe they feel or want x and everyone else wants y. It can make people stay silent on even passionately held desires and opinions.

This matters because a parent's or educator's belief that their view about learning and education differs from others' prevents them from finding and connecting with people who might share their beliefs. A misalignment or a lack of communication of beliefs and values around the education purpose is a barrier to successful system transformation.

The same is also true of how and where learning happens. Both educators and parents would, for the most part, prefer to see new approaches to learning through enquiry and projects, but both groups believe the other to prefer more traditional approaches.<sup>27</sup>

In a recent survey of parents and teachers in 10 countries, The Brookings Institution found that the majority of both parents and educators think that children's social and emotional development is the most important purpose of education, but that each group believes the other to be narrowly focused on academics.<sup>28</sup>

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How could you discover the gaps between privately held and publicly declared views about learning and education in your context?
- How could parents' and educators' privately held views about the purpose of learning and education be made public? What strategies or approaches might be used?
- What connections might be made and alliances forged to agree a new purpose for learning and to drive change in education systems?

### REAL WORLD STORIES

**Enseña Perú** continues to engage an entire community to collectively define a purpose of education by creating systems and structures for shared goal setting, strategy setting, and monitoring. Ancash - a region with a history of unfavourable education quality - is the first region in Peru to have a regional unit of educational evaluation, a key policy, and is also leading in the creation of the whole region's collective vision for education.

In a multi-stakeholder process, **Dream a Dream** redefines and acts upon a new purpose for education in India: children develop capacities that lead to a life of meaning, contentment and wellbeing.<sup>31</sup> In collaboration with many other experts and NGOs, they launched a curriculum that develops mindfulness, social-emotional learning, critical thinking, problem-solving and relationship-building skills.

**Teach For All** developed the Teaching As Collective Leadership framework - a model crowd-sourced from transformational classrooms and the frontiers of education research that starts with the purpose of education. The actionable, locally customizable framework does not come up with answers but with questions.



# Power

## Expand Voice and Agency

Expand voice and agency by investing in stakeholders so they can make confident decisions about learning and education

*Educators, parents and learners don't have the same privileged access as researchers and policy makers to the huge range of learning innovations and brilliant uses of technology that are out there. They need opportunities to see what amazing looks like - and then let's talk about what the future of education should be.*

RICHARD CULATTA, INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION, 2021<sup>29</sup>

*For innovations to move beyond the level of the individual and the classroom, people throughout the system - policymakers, system leaders, school leaders, as well as educators and learners - need to be encouraged and supported in developing the mindsets and skill sets to influence system culture that honours the agency and co-agency of learners and educators.*

WENDY KOPP, TEACH FOR ALL, 2021<sup>30</sup>

*Students should also be asked to be involved in decision making since the decision is being made about them.*

RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT YOUTH RESEARCHERS, 2021

### ACTION

#### Liberate agency and co-agency of educators and learners

Agency, defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to affect change, is at the heart of processes to transform learning and education. Agency for learners and educators is the greatest opportunity to influence transformation.

Learners, in the learning they design and choose for themselves, point the way to learning that is relevant and engaging for them. Educators, innovating in their practice, demonstrate the art of the possible in new forms of pedagogy and assessment.

Whereas transforming education systems in all their complexity might feel overwhelming and appear unachievable, nurturing this kind of local innovation does not. Local innovation, at scale, can become system transformation.

### ACTION

#### Enable a wide range of stakeholders to take part in decision making

The pandemic shattered the illusion that schools and colleges are the only places where learning happens, and that politicians, administrators and experts are the only people who can make decisions about learning.

However, involving more stakeholders in learning design and decision making requires new structures and tools, which enable, for instance, learners and parents to share their ideas, views and experiences as part of a broader, more inclusive, equitable debate about education transformation.

Successful engagement strategies consider both context - parents' attitudes to engaging with learning and education vary according to culture and opportunity - and gender, ethnic, socio-economic class, and other divisions of power and privilege, to continually check that everyone who wants to can take part, and to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

### ACTION

#### Make data and information more accessible, useful and interesting to stakeholders

It is impossible to make well-informed decisions without the full range of relevant data and information available, which is what happens when only people and organisations invested in the system's status quo commission and accumulate data and have access to it.<sup>32</sup> Most education data are not usually made public, are not disaggregated, and are not in formats that are user friendly.<sup>33</sup>

To empower stakeholders a range of data and information needs to be available to them. How happy, safe, confident are children at school? How resilient, creative, adaptive, and entrepreneurial will they become? How is school preparing young people for the challenges and opportunities of the future?

We also need to expand the horizons of those making decisions by connecting them with people and places where learning is being reimagined and education systems transformed. It is hard to imagine a radically different future without being able to see and understand what transformed learning and education look like.

### REAL WORLD STORIES

**Escuela Nueva** from Colombia enables students, educators, and communities to exercise power. In more than 19 countries, the program equips students and educators with co-agency for their schools.<sup>34</sup>

**Kids Education Revolution** in India shifts control and decision-making power from adults to students, enabling student involvement in key questions such as purpose (why education matters), practice (how education should be delivered), and school governance (how schools should be run).<sup>35</sup>

Through an ecosystem of legally independent entities with a shared vision for transforming Africa, the **African Leadership Group** empowers 3 million young adults to become ethical leaders who can solve society's challenges with creativity.



#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How well understood are the concepts of agency and co-agency in your context?
- What tangible opportunities exist for educators and learners to influence the education system?
- How do learners shape their own learning and how are educators supported to innovate?
- How does your education system support, learn from and share local innovations?

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What opportunities and support exist for parents and communities to take a role in making decisions about learning and education?
- How inclusive are these opportunities? Who typically takes part and who does not?
- Who might need to share or relinquish power to enable more inclusive decision making in your education system?

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who decides what data and information are collected, shared and used?
- What role do data and information play in accountability and in maintaining the existing system?
- What more could be done in your context to make data and information necessary for decision making available to a wider group of stakeholders?



# Practice

## Unlock Innovation

Enable those working in education to create and share learning innovations with the greatest potential to transform the system

*One of the important domains of scientific research into human learning is that of the interplay between cognitive development, achievement motivation, growth mindset and well-being. Wellbeing is now seen as shaping the social and emotional conditions for learning to be effective and sustainable. When the social and psychological climate is not optimal, learning will suffer.*

ANDREAS SCHLEICHER, OECD, 2020<sup>36</sup>

*We need to learn to 'do,' not just 'know' and test well.*

RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT  
YOUTH RESEARCHER, 2021

*Our education systems were built to serve a relatively small group of privileged children. They have been used to perpetuate divisions of power and privilege, through a history of colonisation and assimilation. They embrace the values and practices of a standardised, factory model of efficient production.*

GLOBAL LEARNING LAB,  
TEACH FOR ALL, 2021<sup>37</sup>

### ACTION

#### Make learning more learner-centred

When the learner is at the centre, it is their strengths and needs, passions and interests that become the focus for transformation, wherever that learner comes from and whatever system they are in.

This vision for learner-centredness goes far beyond traditional practices of differentiation or personalisation. It works at the level of the individual classroom, school and whole education system. It both empowers ambitious and creative educators to make their practice more learner centred in ways that are rewarding for learners and educators, and it challenges decision makers at the system level to transform system structures and processes to serve the needs of all learners.

Learner-centredness is disruptive and has the potential to be transformative because it turns the standardised model of schooling on its head, challenges the assumptions that sit at the heart of education systems and shines a light on the inequality that is baked into them.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who or what is the current system centred upon?
- What would change in your context if learning was truly organised around the needs of learners?
- In your community, what does/could learner centredness look like?
- What are the barriers to and/or opportunities for making learning more learner centred?

### ACTION

#### Integrate new ways to assess and recognise learning

External assessment and accreditation are high leverage points of intervention in transforming education systems because they disproportionately affect the learning opportunities that are available to young people in schools.

Since external assessment and accreditation are powerful drivers in education systems, they are also a force that can be harnessed to ensure that they drive the system in the 'right' direction; serving the purposes of learning and education determined by stakeholders.

New forms of assessment are in widespread use. They privilege learner self-assessment, involve evaluation by external industry experts or community leaders, and result in portfolios that evidence both development of competencies over time and diverse knowledge and skills.<sup>38</sup>

By integrating a wider range of assessments and ways to recognise learning into the learning process, assessment and accreditation can be used to help close equity gaps and to accelerate transformation.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What is the purpose of assessment in your context and who benefits from it?
- How wide is the range of assessments and forms of accreditation used in your context?
- How well is assessment integrated into learning to empower learners and educators?
- What role might technology play in integrating assessment and learning?

### ACTION

#### Strengthen the link between learning science and teaching practice

The science of learning builds on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, brain research and social psychology and offers new opportunities for transforming learning and education systems.<sup>39</sup>

It tells us, for instance, that learning is enhanced when learners are given the opportunity to build on existing knowledge,<sup>40</sup> that learner mindset is associated with academic success,<sup>41</sup> that learners need to feel seen, safe, and valued to learn,<sup>42</sup> and that learners benefit from meaningful, challenging tasks.<sup>43</sup>

Elsewhere, research has shown that social emotional skills such as achievement, motivation, responsibility, stress resistance and resilience, curiosity, and meta-cognition are predictive not only of academic outcomes, but life outcomes.<sup>46</sup>

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What opportunities exist for educators, learners and families to learn about the latest developments in learning science?
- To what extent does evidence from learning science inform education policy and practice?
- What incentives and support could enable educators to work together to use evidence from learning science to develop their practice?

### REAL WORLD STORIES

**Agora Schools** from the Netherlands break with conventional education systems and enable young people to lead learning. Students have freedom and self-ownership about their learning process.<sup>44</sup>

Classrooms feel like co-working spaces, kids aren't badged by age groups but mixed through ages and backgrounds, and there's no hour-to-hour subject change. Unlike fixed curriculums and learning objectives set by teachers, students at Agora set their own learning objectives.

**MUSE Schools** from California diversify assessments around learners' needs. They use evaluation as a tool for goal-setting, self-reflection, and motivation puts the individual learner's capabilities and aspirations at its centre.<sup>45</sup>

MUSE's assessment approach illustrates the upsides of going beyond a narrow, standardized snapshot of a student's abilities.



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## Thanks to the following partners:



**Big Change** is a nonprofit organization re-thinking how charity can be a positive catalyst for change. They are reimagining education so that all young people thrive in life. Big Change shares insights from across sectors and geographies, supports pioneers and projects that show a new way is possible, and activates support for transformation in the UK and globally.

[www.big-change.org](http://www.big-change.org)



**RewirEd** is a global platform with a clear vision: to rewire education for a prosperous and sustainable future. Led by Dubai Cares, in partnership with Expo 2020 Dubai and in close coordination with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC), RewirEd aims to be a catalyst in redefining education to ensure a future that is prosperous, sustainable, innovative and accessible to all.

[www.rewired2021.com](http://www.rewired2021.com)



**Teach For All** is a global network of more than 60 independent, locally-led partner organizations that work to develop collective leadership to ensure all children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Each network partner recruits and develops promising leaders to teach in their nations' under-resourced schools and communities and, with this foundation, to work throughout their lives, from inside and outside of education, for the systemic changes necessary to ensure all children thrive.

[www.teachforall.org](http://www.teachforall.org)



**HundrED** is a Finnish nonprofit organization that discovers, researches, and shares inspiring innovations in K12 education. HundrED's goal is to support improvement in education and inspire a global movement, opening up valuable innovations to spread across the world so that every child has access to the best possible education innovations by 2030.

[www.hundred.org](http://www.hundred.org)

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