When the pandemic recedes and schools reopen, in an attempt to go back to “normal,” we shouldn’t just scrap all of the adjustments that were made. Some of these changes should have been made long ago, some revealed gaping inequities, and some made crystal clear what really matters in education — and what doesn’t.

Story by Lory Hough
Illustrations by Harry Campbell
THE PANDEMIC TURNED education in the United States upside down, nearly overnight. We were left with closed schools, virtual learning, canceled extracurriculars, kids without access, kids not showing up, desks six feet apart.

In other words, a bit of a mess.

But from that mess, it’s possible that schools could emerge even better if some of the changes made during these impossible months don’t disappear once we say goodbye to masks.

The big question is, what changes should we keep and what’s best left behind? We asked members of the Ed School community to share their thoughts. Here are a few that stood out.

1. Cultivate Trust
We have struggled with trust during the COVID-19 pandemic at every level of the education system. My hope is that active trust-building emerges as a necessity in education — a foundational tenet through which we perform all of our work.

The concept of relational trust in schools is not new, identified by Professors Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider in 2003 as an essential ingredient for school improvement given the mutual dependencies that exist between principals, teachers, and parents. As they explain, trust is built when we discern respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity in one another. According to author Zaretta Hammond, a former teacher, active trust-building is also crucial in classroom communities as students will not engage in the productive struggle of learning without it. It is not just a concept; it is a strategy, a way of being and doing our work.

COVID-19 has required tremendous leaps of faith, and hence enormous trust, as we have realized just how interdependent we are. We must be able to count on one another.

Where trust is low, it seems these acts of reliance have been more challenging. Just look at the conflicts that have arisen between unions and administrators about school reopening and the pressing concerns expressed by many families of color about their children’s safe return. These issues reveal where trust within our educational institutions is lacking, where we find it difficult to believe the other will follow through on their obligations. Where trust is higher, we have done better. This seems most evident in classrooms, virtual or in-person, where teachers have emphasized community, providing their students space to process recent events and share concerns.

The pandemic has reminded me just how important it is to listen, care for one another, seek perspectives, solve problems together, stay true to core values, and follow through. These are acts of ongoing trust-building that I hope we carry to the future.

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2. Rethink Grading
The pandemic has revealed how inapplicable, and even inappropriate, our traditional grading is when students have fewer resources, more instability, and a weaker safety net — characteristics which describe so many of our students over the last year.

One example is the common practice of including a student’s “participation,” which during remote learning has been called “engagement” in the grade. When we’re teaching our students entirely through screens, it’s not only impossible to perceive, and therefore to evaluate, the “how” of learning (Are they looking at us or at another window? When they aren’t contributing to the chat, are they paying attention?), but it’s also a waste of our teaching time and instructional power to award daily points for students’ behaviors when what we actually care about, and what we want our students to care about, is their learning.

We’ve seen the unfairness and stress we create by awarding or subtracting points for behavioral “performances” that fit our arbitrary and subjective model of what learning looks like, such as turning their video on, submitting an assignment by an inflexible deadline, and attending the Zoom meeting on time, when many students are enduring family deaths, food instability, econom-
ic hardship; have feared for their safety; and have younger siblings to care for — all circumstances outside students’ control.

Even more importantly, we must realize that our century-old inherited grading practices have always disproportionately punished students with weaker support nets and fewer resources, students of color, from poor families, with special needs, and English learners. It’s just that the pandemic has rendered so many more students — more middle class, white, and general education students — victims of the harms of traditional grading such that the dramatic rise in D’s and F’s now seems worthy of structural remedies. Students consistently at the lower end of the achievement and opportunity gaps, whose D’s and F’s seemed intractable and even “normal,” have, over generations, been docked points because of our own imperfect perceptions of how they learn, our implicitly biased judgments of their behaviors against “mainstream” norms, and our incorporation into grades circumstances outside their control. Hopefully this pandemic makes us more conscious of how our century-old grading practices perpetuate achievement disparities, and that we are compelled out of moral conscience and professional obligation to use more equitable grading practices.

**JOE FELDMAN, ED.M.’93**, is the author of *Grading for Equity*, and a former teacher, principal, and district administrator

### 3. Stop Walling Off Families

The one educational change I’d like to see us keep after we emerge from this soul-pandemic is the new visibility parents have into what kids are learning, what teachers are teaching, and how schools are using their time. Perhaps the thing I’ve heard most often from parents during the past 12 months is: “I had no idea.” They had no idea this teacher was so organized, that their child was so confused about parts of speech, or how little learning actually occurs during their kid’s school day.

Over time, school systems have evolved routines that have walled parents off from classrooms and corridors. For all the pieties, schools have seemingly gotten into a habit of treating parents as a nuisance. Whenever possible, school leaders prefer to give the gentle brush-off to parents concerned about discipline, special education, or testing. Tellingly, a running tension of the Common Core contretemps was educators dismissing parental complaints that they found the math confusing and couldn’t help their kids.
All of this was turned inside out last spring. When schools needed parents to help kids get online, supervise them, and serve as teacher aides, parents were no longer a nuisance. Meanwhile, parents charged with printing out materials, managing asynchronous platforms, and putting out fires suddenly enjoyed a front-row seat into what students are doing.

The transparency has had all kinds of ramifications. Zoom classes and cameras in hybrid classrooms allow parents to appreciate terrific teachers, see what a child is learning, and intervene when necessary. For teachers, as well as parents, such things have a lot to recommend them. Of course, piping teachers directly into kitchens and dining rooms has also meant that those inclined to deliver soapbox speeches or promote personal agendas can no longer do so in the comfortable solitude of their classroom.

There’s great power in all this. This kind of openness can strengthen school communities, enable valuable oversight for what schools are doing, and provide students more of the support they need. Here’s hoping that we find a way to keep it, long after the kids are out of the kitchen and back in the classroom.

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4. Learn From the Positive Anomalies
A popular narrative, that admittedly holds some semblance of the reality of the abrupt transition to distance learning, says that students who were underachieving academically prior to the COVID-19 pandemic struggle more with the introduction of digital learning from home. However, while in 19 out of 20 cases this may hold true, there are the 5% who actually perform better. Maybe it is the truncated direct instruction time, the streamlined curriculum, or the absence of the social stimuli of being constantly surrounded by other students, a few students who had previously struggled for months, or possibly years, prior to virtual learning are now doing better, if not exceptionally.

Through anecdotal evidence from my time as a school principal, we all too often focus our time and energy on developing solutions to pernicious problems while ignoring the obvious solution that lies in front of us — positive academic anomalies. As an assistant principal, I would often rack my brain trying to develop strategies to motivate groups of disengaged students from marginalized groups (for example, students from low-income homes, students of color, English language learners) to attend school more regularly, stay out of trouble, or turn in homework more often. However, while I was intensely focusing on this group of students, I often overlooked other students from these same marginalized groups who were doing well in every area. If I had taken the time to study the conditions that allowed the positive academic anomalies from these marginalized groups to thrive, I may have come to a solution previously unconsidered.

As we transition back to the schoolhouse and move away from distance learning, I hope school and district leaders are making a concerted effort to identify and learn from positive academic anomalies. What is it about the distance learning environment that has helped them turn the corner and how can we preserve these strategies as we return to traditional, in-person instruction?

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5. Stop Teaching-by-Telling
In the era of the pandemic, educators have found that remote instruction centered on teaching-by-telling has left many students unengaged — even to the point of skipping school. Classroom-based methods of motivating students to listen to talks and to read textbooks have been ineffective in distance teaching. As a result, many teachers have shifted their practice to involve
students with active forms of problem-based or project-based learning.

For example, studying what is happening in their communities because of COVID-19 is engaging for students and offers opportunities for socioemotional support as well as cognitive learning. Experiencing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through making and experimenting with materials available in their homes is motivating for learners. This also builds their confidence that they could play these roles as adults. Finding that their caregivers can serve as mentors for academic subjects helps students to see the relevance of knowledge and skills in the curriculum to what workers do.

The pandemic has toppled the firewalls between classroom activities and out-of-school learning. As the virus recedes, building on the strengths of the new types of pedagogy that have emerged from educators working with the community is important. Let’s not give up the powerful, novel models of learning and motivation that are a silver lining on the dark cloud of this human tragedy.

Professor Chris Dede is cofounder of a pandemic-inspired initiative, Silver Lining for Learning, that celebrates bottom-up innovations in online instruction all across the world.

6. Continue Creatively Assessing

One change in education over the past year I’d love to see kept in a post-pandemic world is with standardized testing. I noticed last March how quickly these tests were thrown to the side, notably as an equity issue during the pandemic. Post pandemic, people must continue to see it as an equity issue.

It has been exciting to see schools be creative in shifting how to assess student growth and hold teachers accountable, and I hope this continues across classrooms. I work at a progressive independent school in Manhattan and we have relied almost entirely on using current events to assess student learning. For example, after the insurrection at the Capitol in January, a seventh-grade class at our school had a mock impeachment trial of former president Donald Trump and went through the entire process as it is outlined by the U.S. Constitution. Another way is providing student choice in how they demonstrate their understanding. This provides flexibility for students and also engages them more meaningfully, rather than something that is imposed upon them.

To be clear, I believe there’s still very much a place for standardized testing, but as one tool rather than the be-all, end-all that it has become over the past couple of decades.

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7. Keep Doors Open to Higher Ed

The pandemic has heightened awareness and spurred action about the vast inequities of college admission. From unconscionable disparities in access to high-quality counseling to the role of high-stakes standardized testing in perpetuating bias and limiting opportunities, it has required that we as educators be called to action. In response, since last spring, colleges have created robust virtual visit programs that allow more exposure to college options for all students. Institutions at every level of selectivity have adopted test-optional policies. High school counselors, admission deans, and application platforms are acknowledging a need, and collaborating, to find better ways for students to communicate context, family responsibilities, and other circumstances that impact their educational opportunities. Admission professionals are engaging in important conversations about who is being left behind. My hope is that once we are able to remove our masks and move closer together, we will not simply slip back into complacency and continue to allow college admissions to unfairly favor the wealthy, well-connected, and others who have historically had more access to higher education. Ideally we
will keep some or all of these practices and hold each other’s feet to the fire as we work to level the playing field for all students.

Brennan Barnard is the author of The Truth About College Admissions and the college admissions program manager at Making Caring Common

8. Rethink Attendance Policies
Chronic absenteeism plagued school districts this past year like never before. Most of the nation’s largest districts are teaching remotely. Thousands of students, often learners on the margins, have gone missing. Schools have faced tough decisions on how to reengage students who struggle to connect to online lessons or dealing with jobs or caregiving responsibilities.

I lead a team of researchers tracking pandemicic responses in more than 100 large school districts. Some districts are taking the opportunity to rethink how they approach truancy from a student wellness lens, and modelling leadership that makes sure no district slips back into a “business as usual” approach to student absenteeism.

The best practice is a system of tiered absenteeism interventions: basic strategies to encourage good attendance, early help for students at risk of chronic absenteeism, and intensive support for students facing the greatest challenges.

But the pandemic is also prompting leaders to ask more fundamental questions. What if districts also eliminated punitive absenteeism policies? What if, instead, schools collaborated with parents and community partners to find missing students and bridge technology gaps? What if districts asked schools to provide advisory and counseling systems that ensure every student can build at least one consistent relationship with a caring adult at their school? What if schools could give options — like evening classes, flexible schedules, or independent study pathways — to students whose circumstances don’t fit a conventional class schedule?

To enable this transformation, states must rethink pre-pandemic rules that link school funding to the time students spend in class, rather than student learning or wellbeing. For example, states could link funding to course completion or content mastery instead of instructional time — and provide additional funding for students who face greater barriers to attending school.

The solution to chronic absenteeism does not revolve around truancy boards or court dates. We need to incentivize schools to use wellness-centered approaches that hold students to...
high expectations but avoid punishments that only set them back. If students are not showing up for class, schools must be allowed to ask why and offer unique solutions tailored to unique student circumstances.

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9. Expand Learning Time
The pandemic places American school systems at a new juncture. The urge to “return to normal” is strong and we all feel it. But in a post-vaccine world, school districts can’t go back because for so many students and families, the status quo wasn’t close to working. One area that will need to be addressed is that many students — those who were already struggling and those who found online learning too remote — have lost months of learning because of the pandemic. By next fall, some estimates suggest that students living in poverty will be an additional grade level behind.

Luckily, some schools, like Brookside Elementary in Indianapolis, and some districts, like Salem, Massachusetts, are showing the way to a “next-level normal” by trying out promising new ways of organizing staff and technology to expand and target individual attention and learning time inside and outside of traditional school hours. We must keep this going next year and beyond.

What would that look like? We can increase learning time through extended school days and years, intersessions, intensive “high-dosage” tutoring, and other afterschool learning opportunities, like Brookside and Salem have done. While schools and districts will need an infusion of resources to do this, much can be accomplished by reorganizing current levels of staff, time, and technology.

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10. Ask What Matters
It was a wild ride. We were teleported into breakout rooms where we found ourselves taking solace in a familiar face or marking time in a silent standoff, waiting for someone to initiate the conversation. In this two-dimensional, waist-up world, we realized that the back of our hair didn’t matter anymore and that we could
Here are a few other ideas worth considering — and keeping:

- School space matters: More than ever, we realized that how students move in a building, and how we use the spaces in schools, matters.
- Bathrooms need soap, every single day!
- Teachers need to focus on their students’ mental health as much as their grades. Prior, it was considered a nice “add-on” or only for certain students. We learned that all students need this. Teachers need this, too. If the adults in classrooms aren’t doing well, socially and emotionally, their teaching won’t be as effective.
- Including student voices in decision-making as we plan for going back — and once we’re fully back — is critical.
- For many students, schools aren’t just places to learn. It’s where they get their main meals every day. During the pandemic, many school districts offered not only free lunch, but to-go dinner bags for entire families.
- Continue bringing more guest speakers from around the world into schools virtually.
- We learned that access to technology is wildly uneven, but shouldn’t be. Millions of students don’t have computers or access to the Internet. Most are reachable, though, by smartphone.

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Jal Mehta is a professor at the Ed School. This is excerpted from “Make Schools More Human,” an opinion piece he wrote for The New York Times in December. For more of Mehta’s ideas on changes we need to keep and make post-COVID, see this issue’s feature story about motivation.