

8 Keys to Designing Tomorrow's Schools, Today

By [Eric Sheninger](#) and [Thomas C. Murray](#)

May 31, 2017



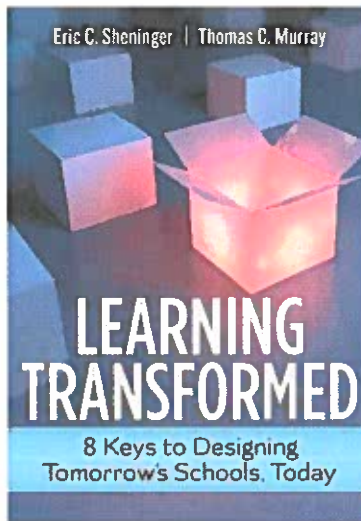
For the past 20 years, we have worked as teachers, administrators and advisors in public schools around the country. And we've traveled meeting with thousands of school leaders, teachers and students, listening to their experiences, both good and poor. Those experiences have sharpened our desire to prepare this generation of students to become successful citizens in a global society by putting to rest the weary industrial model of education and shifting to a more personal approach.

This is hardly some idealistic, utopian dream. Based on all that is known about how students learn, the predictions for the world they will face after graduation and the vast disparities of opportunity and privilege that have existed for centuries, we believe that continuing to use a traditional, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning amounts to educational malpractice.

Our new book, [Learning Transformed](#), published by ASCD, outlines eight keys to intentionally designing tomorrow's schools to prepare today's learners for success far beyond earning a high school diploma. We want to make sure our students are ready to create new industries, to find new cures for disease and to solve tomorrow's world problems. Each of our keys is based on research and is part of unlocking a new design for our K-12 education system of teaching and learning. Here's where we start:

Key #1: Leadership and school culture lay the foundation

School improvement efforts rely heavily on high-quality, collaborative leadership. Educational leaders are tasked with establishing a collective vision for school improvement and initiating change to spur innovation, ensure student learning and increase achievement. In a world where change continues to accelerate exponentially, school cultures need to evolve at a faster rate than in the past if we are to prepare today's learners for future success. The overarching emphasis is and must be about making a difference in the lives of children. Leading and teaching is challenging work that requires a high level of understanding and patience to transform a school's learning culture into one valued by students, educators, and other key stakeholders. Relationship-oriented, innovative leadership practices are core to creating a culture of learning that will prepare students for their future--not our past.



Key #2: The learning experience must be redesigned and made personal

We have all experienced a time when we crammed for a test, earned a passing grade and promptly forgot the information a few weeks later. Neuroscience studies indicate that simply shoving factual information into students' brains ultimately wastes time and resources. Worse, dictating to students what to learn, when to learn it and how it should be learned leaves them disengaged. Very rarely do students have the opportunity to follow their passions, explore their interests and engage in relevant opportunities that break down traditional classroom silos. Going forward, student agency must become the norm, not the exception. We must find ways to focus instructional pedagogy on higher-order skills and problem solving so that anytime, anywhere learning can become a realistic possibility for today's "Netflix generation" of students.

Key #3: Decisions must be grounded in evidence and driven by a Return on Instruction (ROI)

The evolution of the U.S. educational structure has created a generation of students that is hyperfocused on grades, not learning. Students need authentic opportunities to use real-world tools to do real-world work that matters. Technology provides educators with the means to allow students to demonstrate conceptual mastery and develop ownership in ways never before imagined. Changing the way and means by which we assess student learning is a step in the right direction. But we must make a more concerted effort to provide evidence that technology is genuinely affecting learning and achievement. That means school cultures must begin to focus on the "Return on Instruction" or ROI. If we are going to spend billions of dollars each year infusing technology, we must be prepared to share evidence of an ROI that demonstrates improved student learning outcomes.



Key #4: Learning spaces must become learner-centered

A shift in pedagogy mandates a shift in learning space design--and that means much more than snagging an idea from the latest Pinterest board. Instead of an industrial era model where orderly rows of desks require all students focus their attention on the teacher, school and classrooms need spaces that are learner-centered, more personal in nature and correlate with research on how space affects learning. Educators who want to build collaboration and engage students in problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills miss opportunities to unleash student genius by packing them into industrial era classrooms. Learning spaces need to be flexible, provide areas for movement, and promote collaboration and inquiry. These types of modern spaces resemble the local Starbucks more than they do the nearby cemetery.

Key #5: Professional learning must be relevant, engaging, ongoing, and made personal



For decades, we've debated how to make teachers' professional learning experiences more relevant. Compare different school districts' professional learning philosophies and you'll see a continuum of practices around who controls and owns the learning. Various studies indicate that the top-down, one-size-fits-all, hours-based, sit-and-get approach to professional learning shows little-to-no impact on student achievement. Nevertheless, many districts continue down this path. We believe that equating professional learning seat time with accountability is teetering on negligence. The professional learning that occurs in many districts today must undergo radical reform, as the traditional model is outdated and ineffective. A personal approach to professional learning, where growth is valued more than hours obtained, is needed to shift instructional pedagogy. Who owns the learning is key.

Key #6: Technology must be leveraged and used as an accelerant for student learning



Much of the money spent on technology today has little-to-no impact on student learning. In many classrooms, technology is used simply to digitize outdated practices. Many of today's classrooms have amazing 21st century tools being used in 20th century learning environments. Research also indicates that one of the most common forms of integration—the digital drill-and-kill—has no effect on achievement. Even with stagnant budgets, school districts continue to buy more educational technology than ever before, often with little to show for it. However, when effectively used, technology can amplify great instructional pedagogy, adapt to the individual needs of the learner and help make learning a more personal, engaging and rigorous experience. Intentionally designed schools also maintain a focus on access and opportunity for all students.

Key #7: Community collaboration and engagement must be woven into the fabric of a school's culture

We know parents are instrumental in the academic success of children. Yet walk into schools and you'll witness a sweeping range of parent engagement. Some schools work to create a welcoming environment where the community is seen as a tremendous asset. In these schools, you'll see parents working side by side with students, laughing at lunch with groups of students, working in classrooms and collaborating with staff in various capacities. By contrast, other schools create cultures in which parents hardly feel welcome at all. Except for a few planned events each year, parents in these schools typically feel locked out, left standing at the front door. Businesses and universities may be located within school boundary lines, yet the vast majority of these have little to no relationship with schools lining the same streets. From daily collaboration to consistent, relevant communications to supporting home access for students in need, intentionally designed schools are collaborative partners and the hub of the local community.

Key #8: Schools that transform learning are built to last as financial, political, and pedagogical sustainability ensures long-term success

A budget impasse. A political attack. A shift in instructional pedagogy. How will your school district's success stand the test of time? Will one budget cycle or a defeated referendum sink the ship? Will a shift in school board politics undo recent progress? Will instructional growth continue as your teaching staff changes? With the average district superintendent tenure lasting only a handful of years and the pending retirement of a generation of experienced school leaders, we need to build schools to sustain over the long term and override the negative turmoil that could hurt future generations. Is your school built to last?

We can no longer wait. We must prepare our students for their future, not our past. We must create and lead schools that are relevant for the world our students live in—not the world our staff grew up in. We must do this . . . starting today.

Eric Sheninger ([@e_sheninger](https://twitter.com/e_sheninger)) serves as a Senior Fellow at the International Center for Leadership in Education. Connect with him at ericsheninger.com. Thomas C. Murray ([@thomascsmurray](https://twitter.com/thomascsmurray)) serves as the Director of Innovation for Future Ready Schools, a project of the Alliance for Excellent Education, located in Washington, D.C. Connect with him at thomascsmurray.com.