

FOREWORD BY GEOFFREY CANADA

AYLON SAMOUHA · JEFF WETZLER  
JENEE HENRY WOOD

*Extraordinary*

LEARNING

FOR ALL

HOW COMMUNITIES DESIGN SCHOOLS  
WHERE **EVERYONE** THRIVES

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## **PRAISE FOR EXTRAORDINARY LEARNING FOR ALL**

“In my experience as an educator and leader, I’ve seen bold visions for educational change fall short when the community is not part of the solution. That is what makes this book so important: it shares lessons about how communities come together to make lasting, meaningful change so every student has the ability to succeed.”

—**Kaya Henderson**, Former Chancellor of the District of Columbia  
Public Schools

“The future of public education depends upon communities coming together to learn, envision, and develop approaches that truly put learners at the center. As a leader with decades of experience in public schools, I have witnessed firsthand the powerful impact of Transcend’s work. Transcend is my ‘go-to’ organization for innovative thought leadership, and I am thrilled that their approach is now captured in this book. It’s essential reading for leaders at every level of the system who care about ensuring that *all* young people thrive in the 21st century.”

—**Susana Córdova**, Colorado Education Commissioner

“As a system leader driving innovation and transformation across multiple districts, I saw the profound power of community-based design. This book offers you inspiring stories of real districts doing this work combined with practical tools and insights that you and your community can implement immediately. This is required reading for any system looking to move beyond the industrial model toward one that truly unlocks the potential of each and every learner.”

—**Christine Fowler Mack**, Former Superintendent of Akron  
Public Schools

“At a moment in American history when the clarion call to help ‘all children’ has morphed into a rhetorical placeholder for polite conversations between legislators, researchers, and philanthropists, this book breaks through fashionable clichés and decades-old misconceptions about what it takes to create a meaningful learning environment for urban and rural communities. By utilizing a school design framework, the authors provide a smart mix of science- and professional-based practices we must consider to truly place a premium on supporting principals, teachers, students, and families.”

—**Gerard Robinson**, Former Secretary of Education in Virginia  
and Florida Education Commissioner

“If our transformation journey in Lindsay Unified has taught us one thing, it would be that engaging the community in a design process with learners at the center matters deeply. Transcend has played a pivotal role for years as a key partner in our journey, and I’m thrilled that this book will enable far more communities to benefit from Transcend’s insights and actionable tools. If you are a leader looking to put your learners first, this book is for you.”

—**Tom Rooney**, Superintendent, Lindsay Unified School District

“Systems produce the outcomes they’re designed to produce. That’s a truism when it comes to our schools, but fortunately Jeff, Aylon, and Jenee offer us a roadmap to reinvention so that all students can thrive through a robust and practical design process with inspiring real-life examples of educators doing the work. It’s time to design our way to success for all!”

—**Michael Horn**, Author of *From Reopen to Reinvent: (Re)creating School for Every Child*

“Too often, our field looks for silver bullets that do not exist. This book doesn’t fall into that trap. Rather, it shares practical methods and powerful examples of communities coming together to imagine and build a promising future for public education. The book expresses wisdom that Transcend has accumulated by working with hundreds of school systems across the country. I hope it spreads far and wide, so innovators know they are not alone!”

—**LaVerne Srinivasan**, Vice President, National Program, and Program Director, Education, Carnegie Corporation

# **Extraordinary Learning for All**



# **Extraordinary Learning for All**

**How Communities Design  
Schools Where Everyone  
Thrives**

AYLON SAMOUHA  
JEFF WETZLER  
JENEE HENRY WOOD

**J** JOSSEY-BASS™  
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*To our heroes: all the courageous and hard-working educators,  
administrators, young people, their families and caregivers,  
and those who support their challenging but important work  
to create extraordinary, equitable learning for all.*



"And how are the children?"

–Daily Maasai greeting



# Contents

<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>Authors' Note</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>xxiii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Two Schools, Two Districts, Two Possible Futures	1
Our Case for Change	2
School and Its Industrial-Era Design	4
How to Read This Book	7
Who Is This Book For?	8
About Us	9

## **PART I**

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### **Extraordinary Learning for All**

<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>Extraordinary Experiences and Outcomes</b>	<b>13</b>
Extraordinary Outcomes for All	14
Extraordinary Experiences for All	16
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>Community-Based Design</b>	<b>33</b>
The Basics of Community-Based Design	35

**PART II****Stories from Four Community Design Journeys****CHAPTER 3****DC Public Schools' Van Ness Elementary | Washington, DC 55**

Community and Leadership Context 59

The Blueprint: Overview of the Whole Child Model

Learning Environment Design 60

The Blueprint: Goals and Guiding Concepts 62

The Blueprint: Student Experience 69

The Blueprint: School and System Elements 75

**CHAPTER 4****Northern Cass | Hunter, North Dakota 81**

Community and Leadership Context 84

Early Innovations Toward Competency-Based Learning:  
Pursuing Greater Learner Customization 85How the Design Cycle Guided and Supported Northern  
Cass's Design Journey 92**CHAPTER 5****Brooklyn STEAM Center | Brooklyn, New York 103**

Community and Leadership Context 106

The Blueprint: Overview of Brooklyn STEAM's Learning  
Environment Design 108

The Blueprint: Goals and Guiding Concepts 109

The Blueprint: Student Experience 115

**CHAPTER 6****Intrinsic Public Schools | Chicago, Illinois 127**

Community and Leadership Context 129

The Academic Model: How Community-Based Design  
Strengthened Learning 132

**PART III****How to Embark on a Community-based Design Journey****CHAPTER 7****Launching Your Design Journey 143**

- “Gear Up”: Lay the Foundation for Your Community Design Journey 145
- “Map It”: Craft a High-Level Vision for the Entire School or System 150

**CHAPTER 8****Deepening Your Design Journey 167**

- “Zoom In”: Craft a Detailed Vision for a Specific Aspect of the Student Experience 168
- “Test-Drive”: Test and Refine the Student Experience 177
- “Look Ahead”: Prepare to Continue the Journey 185

**CHAPTER 9****Advancing and Sustaining Your Design Journey 189**

- Shift from “Test-Drive to Full Speed”: Advance a Component of the Student Experience from Testing to Multiple Cycles of Implementation 191
- “Zoom In Again”: Design Additional Components of the Student Experience 199
- “Map It Again”: Continue to Refine the High-Level Vision for the Entire School or System 202
- “Perform Routine Maintenance”: Maintain the Process and Leadership Over the Long Haul 207

**PART IV****How to Turbocharge Your Community Design Journey****CHAPTER 10****Your Leadership Matters 213**

- A Special Kind of Leadership for a Special Kind of Challenge 215
- What Do Learner-Centered Leaders Do? 215
- How Do Learner-Centered Leaders Have Impact on Conditions? 220
- The Source of This Framework 223
- Be a Learner-Centered Leader 225

---

<b>CHAPTER 11</b>	
<b>The Policy Environment Around You Matters</b>	<b>229</b>
Policy Impact	230
Assessment and Accountability Systems	231
Seat Time and Graduation Requirements	236
Funding for Innovation	238
Navigating Your Policy Environment	241
Conclusion	245
<b>Conclusion: You Are Not Alone</b>	<b>247</b>
Explore New Models that Make the Leaps	247
Find a Design Partner	248
Where Do I Find Design Partners?	250
Build Your Own Capacity	251
Join a Growing Network	252
Extraordinary Learning for All	252
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>271</b>



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# Authors' Note

The stories within these pages are drawn primarily from the communities Transcend has been privileged to support and partner with throughout the years. In some chapters, we also highlight examples from innovative communities we haven't partnered with directly. Names and details vary in whether they are real or altered to protect privacy or are part of composites to best illustrate key concepts. First and last names are used in places where we have permission or we are referencing something already in the public domain. Student names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Schools and models are worthy of learning from for many different reasons. When we cite examples of school communities, our intention is to highlight particular aspects of their design, parts of their learning experiences, or dimensions of their journeys that illustrate concepts and points we share throughout these chapters. We do not aim to imply any example we share is a model of excellence on *every* dimension—this would be an unrealistic bar for any school. When we bring in relevant student data, we only share information that honors student privacy regulations.

As we are writing this book, artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities are rapidly evolving. We avoid making specific claims about how AI will impact the future of K–12 education innovation because it is too early to know for sure how AI will influence school communities and young people. It is also too early to know for sure the benefits and risks AI will raise. What we do know is that the world is changing very fast. We firmly believe that any technology, including AI, needs to be thoughtfully designed into school, never as a replacement for talented and committed human beings. We will continue to offer our thoughts on the possibilities of AI for education. You can stay up to date by using the following QR code:







# Foreword

I believe in the brilliance and infinite potential within *all* young people. When we invest wholeheartedly in our young people, we place them, their families, and their communities on a path to a more prosperous future. And a quality education is the foundation of that path. Our young people deserve an education that unleashes their potential, allows them to thrive personally, and equips them to make a difference in the lives of others. Every child is capable of rising to high expectations when they have the right educational experiences and opportunities for growth.

Every child deserves schools outfitted with the people, culture, and services that ensure their academic success *and* healthy physical and emotional development. Every child deserves enriching experiences to foster learning within and beyond the four walls of the classroom. We need every single young person's potential realized to tackle the most important issues of our time—from the local and community level to national and even global challenges. We all must commit to this effort, in service to our kids and our nation's future.

We live in a country with immense wealth, but to make it possible for *all* kids to succeed—especially those who are furthest from opportunity—we need to think differently than we have before. The way that mainstream schooling is designed—which hasn't fundamentally changed in more than one hundred years, by the way—is particularly ill-suited for what many of our young people need today. In a rapidly ever-changing world, the education provided for young people needs to reflect the realities they face as lifelong learners and contributors. Our young people also deserve experiences of schooling that fit who they are and what they care about. They deserve schools that can foster a sense of deep connection and community with those closest to them. All of this can happen both within and outside the four walls of schools.

I know firsthand that transformational change *is* possible. I've seen this kind of change happen through my work at Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). For more than twenty-seven years, HCZ has worked to advance student success in our schools and transform the neighborhood environment in Central Harlem to disrupt cycles of intergenerational poverty. We have closed the

Black-White academic achievement gap and sent more than one thousand young people to and through college by saturating our ninety-seven-block neighborhood with a comprehensive pipeline of wraparound supports that meet the needs of young people from birth through early adulthood.

We will never realize our educational aspirations for young people with answers that are imposed on communities in top-down ways. We've seen time and again that this doesn't work. The most important, relevant, and lasting solutions come from *within* communities—those who are most impacted by issues of poverty and inequity. Communities have deep reservoirs of assets—starting with the love they possess for all young people—as well as insights, ideas, and resources. Collaborations between schools, nonprofits, local businesses, and community organizations can offer students real-world learning opportunities, mentorship, and access to resources like internships and job shadowing that enrich the curriculum. This kind of coalition can also come together to design schools that better serve *their own* young people. But we can't leave all the burden of redesigning schools on communities alone. They deserve deep reinvestments of resources and support, and they deserve to benefit and learn from the evidence and expertise of those doing this work elsewhere.

Transcend is an organization created to support communities in just these ways. In its earliest days, Transcend's founders visited with me at Harlem Children's Zone, and I had the opportunity to share my advice as they built this promising organization. We discussed the importance of *both* rigorous academics *and* broader learning outcomes. We discussed the importance of *both* community leadership *and* support from expert partners. We discussed the importance of serving *every* young person, regardless of their starting point or needs. We discussed how important it is to understand the unique challenges *and* assets in every community, engage deeply with the communities to understand these dynamics, and support the design of schools that are responsive to local contexts. In short, we discussed what became many of Transcend's deeply held tenets.

Nearly a decade later, I could not be more thrilled to see how far they have come. Their work with communities from New York to North Dakota and everywhere in between has shown what's possible when leaders come together to design schools where all children can thrive. In my own New York City backyard, Transcend is partnering with amazing schools, from the Bronx to Brooklyn, from charter to traditional district to independent. For example, in the Bronx, their work to co-create the Rev-X model with the Concourse Village Elementary School community has shown how project-based learning can be relevant, rigorous, and community-based—all while addressing real needs. Their work with the Brooklyn STEAM Center gives young people the

opportunity to take charge of their learning, get on-the-job training, access relevant paid internships on-site, and pursue careers that create wealth. In both cases, not only do academic outcomes improve, but young people get the kinds of experiences they deserve, they work on things that matter to them and their communities, they develop professional skills in real-world settings, and much more.

The community design journeys that Transcend supports are not another top-down solution. But neither do they leave under-resourced educators to figure it all out by themselves. Transcend has found a third way: an approach to help communities harness their inherent strengths while also offering proven models and expertise to support them. Transcend's expertise in learning science, design thinking, and change management are all in service of each community's unique vision for its young people—one that reflects the community's hopes, dreams, assets, and realities. What they're sharing in this book is not a hypothetical theory. It's based on their work in hundreds of different places—rural, urban, big, small. It's an actionable, manageable, and achievable approach for transcending the outdated factory model of school and reimagining what's possible—to build learning environments where *every* young person thrives.

In this book, you'll not only find real stories of diverse communities doing this work, but you'll also find practical ideas and methods for your community to start innovating. And if you're already down the path of redesign, what you'll find will enable you to accelerate and deepen your work, and perhaps share it with others beyond your realm. It takes a village, but every village is made of individuals with the ability to work in service of our young people, and we must all take accountability. Let this book be your guide—whether you are a superintendent, central office administrator, school principal, educator, concerned parent, funder, policymaker, employer, or, yes, a student. We *all* have important roles in leading and supporting the work of making opportunities for kids great.

The work of transforming our schools has never been more possible. We have methods, tools, and examples—even new technologies—that put the wind at the backs of communities committed to doing whatever it takes on behalf of young people. The time for doing this work is now! I am inspired by the real-life stories in this book about young people whose opportunities are forever changed and whose potential for greatness is possible because of the courage and persistence of the changemakers dedicated to doing whatever it takes. Join me in learning about this important, innovative approach to help all children thrive.

—Geoffrey Canada

*Founder and President of Harlem Children's Zone, and  
Founder of William Julius Wilson Institute*



# Introduction

**Y**ou've come to this book because you believe that all children have infinite potential. But to realize this potential, we must redefine "schooling" as we know it. Perhaps you have already witnessed the power of extraordinary learning in your school or an out-of-school experience and it has ignited a spark within you. While the current educational system may seem intractable, you refuse to be discouraged. You recognize that our young people deserve nothing less than the very best, and you are ready to be a catalyst for this transformation.

## **TWO SCHOOLS, TWO DISTRICTS, TWO POSSIBLE FUTURES**

Joanna is a ninth grader at General High School. All her life she has been artistic, creative, and curious. Her family moved to this community because all the common wisdom said that it was a "good school district." Test scores were high, as were graduation rates. By all measures, this was an enviable place to be. But over time, Joanna's family notices that their artistic and adventurous child appears stressed and withdrawn. Her creative spirit has dimmed. She is buried underneath homework, grades, and test prep.

Joanna's school day is typical of many American students. She arrives around 8:30 a.m., sits in fifty-five-minute content subjects with students her same age, takes notes from a teacher at the front of the room, hurries through lunch, and completes mountains of work that she finds disconnected from the issues she cares about most. Joanna likes her teachers, who are thoughtful and hardworking, but school is tedious.

Across town, Ali is having a very different experience at Discovery High School. Like Joanna, he is highly creative and has long shown interest in filmmaking. When he was in middle school, he participated in a yearlong learning experience that helped him to understand his passions and sense of purpose. He discovered that he loved interviewing people and telling stories. He created a thirty-minute documentary about the experiences of small business owners in his downtown. The experience was transformative. Now, Ali's high school experience looks very different from Joanna's.

When Ali arrives, he's already completed a math and science class, focused on the fundamentals. His school offers online courses for students who want to expedite their learning and have shown they can master competencies. In person, Ali attends a math and science hybrid seminar—his working group is attempting to create efficient solar ovens. They are applying concepts from geometry, optics, and energy. They are varying the designs, angles, and thickness of materials to test hypotheses. Ali's team is solving a challenge he and his classmates care about: life on a warming planet.

Ali's next experience is a small-group Advisory Circle, where he reflects on his weekly goals with peers. He then attends a writing workshop where he tests ideas for a documentary series he's creating. His friends from Advisory encouraged him to expand his horizons, so he is taking a hands-on construction class where he and a small group are exploring how to prevent flooding in a greenhouse they are building.

Ali is motivated to be at school. His learning environment allows him to practice new skills, learning from his triumphs and failures. Ali has a sense of control over his learning, being able to pick how fast or slow he progresses through content. Every day, he has opportunities to increase his self-understanding and feels that he belongs here.

Joanna and Ali are not radically different young people with wildly divergent dreams for their futures. However, they are immersed in fundamentally different learning environments that are creating different outcomes and experiences. Joanna attends a high school that many of us recognize. It is what we call “industrial-era education”—schooling that reflects the needs and structures of a bygone age when jobs in factories or fields were the expectation. Her learning is characterized by a set of experiences that are often narrow, inflexible, and confined to the four walls of the school building.

When you think about the learning environment that you want for your own children or the children in your district, which would you choose? While Joanna and Ali still have so much more life to experience, their life trajectories could be different. Students from Ali's high school are not guaranteed a perfect future, but they are armed with myriad experiences that have cultivated growth in all kinds of transformative ways. Ali's learning environment is one nearly everyone would choose for their children *and* themselves.

What makes Discovery High School and the school system that supports it so extraordinary? It's the design.

## **OUR CASE FOR CHANGE**

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**In this book, we ask and answer one big question: *How do communities create extraordinary learning for all?***