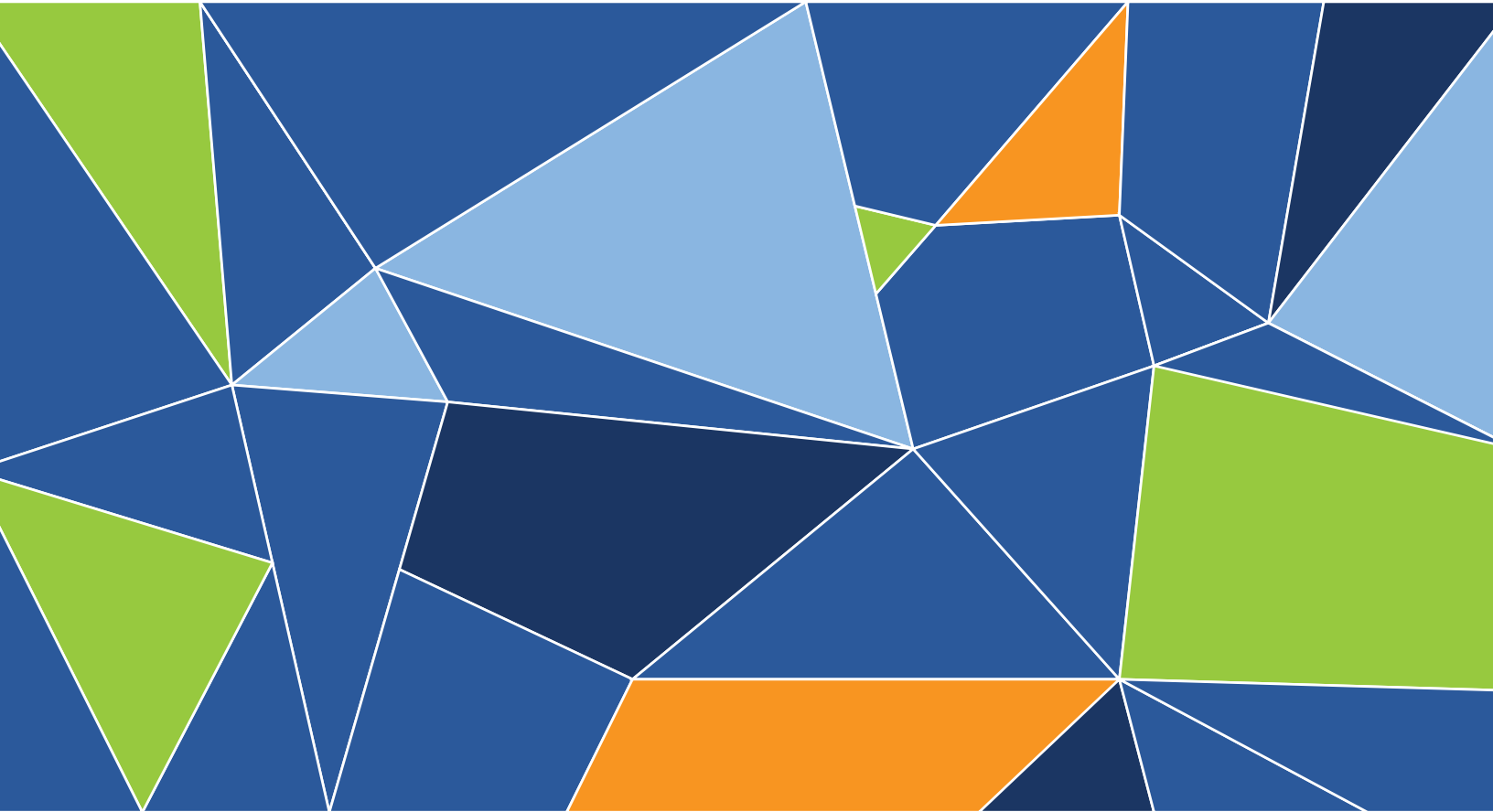


# The Flexible Future: Reimagining School for the 21st Century

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## INTRODUCTION

Education has changed very little over the past century. Educators have certainly refined their craft and know more today about how students learn, but if Rip Van Winkle fell asleep in his math class in 1919 and woke up a hundred years later, he would immediately recognize the structures and routines of the school day. Our school systems weren't built for change.

This lack of change is one reason why pandemic-related disruptions have been so challenging for students, families, and educators alike. These disruptions have also sparked the growth and innovation that were key to surviving the constant changes schools faced. Suddenly, teachers and school leaders had unprecedented freedom to try new approaches to meet student needs.

As Policy Fellows with Teach Plus Illinois and Illinois Teachers of the Year, we believe that innovations spurred by the pandemic should be leveraged to build a better education system with students at the center. As comfortable as "normal" was for some, many teachers, students, and families were poorly served by the status quo. We believe that we must seize this moment to learn from the experiences of the past year and build a new normal that is both more effective and more equitable.

To imagine this new normal and learn from teachers' innovations, we employed a two-pronged approach. We held a series of design thinking sessions for educators in spring 2021 to explicitly spark innovation. We also held a contest to encourage educators to share innovations that emerged organically as they responded to student needs during the pandemic.

One key theme emerged from both the design sessions and the contest: **Teachers shared the importance of flexible learning in and out of school and the need to restructure the school day to allow for this additional flexibility.** In our report, we explore this theme in more detail, including associated recommendations for Illinois and district leaders.

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# BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

We began our work by reviewing emerging research into the pandemic's impact on education to identify areas where innovation is needed. We were especially interested in any positive effects of the shift to remote or hybrid learning. Our literature review brought several issues to the fore:

1. **Socioeconomic inequality:** The pandemic widened opportunity gaps that already existed<sup>1</sup>, as many students were left without access to education due to a lack of technology or internet access<sup>2</sup> and even basics such as meals<sup>3</sup>.
2. **Social-emotional needs:** Another long-standing need is greater focus on interpersonal connections and students' mental health<sup>4</sup>. The pandemic spotlighted inequitable access to mental health services,<sup>5</sup> and student mental health suffered due to social isolation<sup>6</sup>.
3. **Executive functioning:** When classroom supports were taken away and students were forced to learn more independently, students cited a lack of executive functioning skills as one of the biggest barriers to learning<sup>7</sup>.
4. **Flexibility:** The traditional structure of the school day was designed a century ago, and reminiscent of a "mass-education" assembly line<sup>8</sup>. Increased flexibility and control over learning was one of the most frequently cited benefits of remote learning for students<sup>9</sup>.
5. **Accelerating innovation:** Early studies show that some students were able to retain more knowledge in a remote setting due to their ability to work at their own pace<sup>10</sup> as well as instructional design that was "deliberately cultivating" independent learning<sup>11</sup>.

Based on these findings, we decided to explore how innovations in both the delivery of instruction and the structure of school might improve equity, accessibility, mental health, and executive functioning skills. We combined two approaches to harness teachers' innovation: A contest to collect instructional ideas already generated organically by teachers, and a series of design thinking workshops to prompt systemic innovations in a more structured way.

For the contest, we narrowed the submissions to five finalists whose ideas were judged to be innovative, equitable, impactful, sustainable, and engaging. These finalists were then evaluated by a team of award-winning educators to determine the Grand Prize and First Prize winners.

To generate new ideas from teachers, we worked with a design thinking expert to create a protocol that would lead participants rapidly through the design process ([see Appendix A](#)). Drawing on our literature review, each design sprint posed one of two questions:

How can we redesign the structure of school or the delivery of instruction to:

1. Make education more equitable and accessible for all students?
2. Support students' mental health and executive functioning skills?

In each two-hour session, participants began by brainstorming and then selected or combined the best ideas to identify one or two proposed solutions that they developed into a "prototype" and stress-tested to identify weaknesses. These sessions produced seven fully prototyped solutions, and a larger number of initial ideas that helped us understand teachers' priorities.

# LEARNINGS

## Design Sprints

The same theme emerged time and again among demographically and geographically diverse groups of teachers in our design thinking workshops: Five of the seven fully prototyped final ideas called for restructuring the school day to implement more flexible learning models.

Many teachers suggested limiting the time allotted to “core content,” leaving more space for social-emotional learning, student choice, and personalized learning or interventions. Others offered a variety of ways for students to connect to content outside the school building or scheduled day. Still others pointed out that structural shifts could enable learning centered on mastery rather than linear progression.

While details varied, teachers consistently advanced flexible learning as the best solution to a variety of ills, and emphasized the need to restructure the school day to provide that flexibility. They pointed out that this shift would allow for more systemic equity by enabling personalized learning and student choice to help ensure each student's individual needs were met.

## Innovation Contest

Contest finalists ([see Appendix B](#)) were selected using a rubric, and we had no preconceived notions of what goals teachers' innovations should accomplish. Yet when we took stock of the submissions, we noted a recurring theme similar to the design sprints: Teachers were breaking down barriers between school and community, offering more flexible learning opportunities.

Several finalists extended learning beyond the classroom, as with the Grand Prize winner who helped students create art at home using common household items as their materials. Students turned Kool-Aid powder into watercolor paint; drew with makeup, nail polish, and charcoal from their grills; and created clay out of flour, water, and salt. They connected class content to their world at home, making learning deeper and more accessible. One finalist set up tutoring sessions in a local park, offering flexibility to families who could not bring their children to school, and another sent home STEM learning kits for English language learners and provided weekly tutorials in their native language for families to engage together.

Others leveraged technology to connect the world to their classroom, like the finalist whose students engaged with others across the country to study economics and share proposals addressing global economic issues, or the group of speech coaches across multiple districts who came together for practice, allowing each competitor to receive coaching from an expert in their event even if that expert worked in another district.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. School districts should restructure the school day to enable more flexible, personalized learning that better serves students.

In both the contest and design sprints, teachers repeatedly elevated the same idea: Learning must be restructured to better meet student needs. These changes can take many forms, and local contexts vary. Local education agencies should study and enact models that will best meet their students' needs and leverage their community's resources.

### **Illinois school code already permits districts to implement flexible learning models.**

As we investigated policy shifts to enable more flexible models, virtually everyone we spoke with identified seat time requirements as a barrier. Yet we found that the school code expressly permits districts to implement blended learning models, a fact of which many teachers and school leaders are unaware:

*“(k) Pupil participation in any of the following activities shall be counted toward the calculation of clock hours of school work per day:*

*(4) Participation in a blended learning program approved by the school district in which course content, student evaluation, and instructional methods are supervised by [a licensed teacher]” - Illinois School Code, Section 10-19.05*

Belief in seat time as a barrier was so widespread it is worth emphasizing again that districts already have the power to implement more flexible models—and they should use it.

**Equity is an important concern in implementation.** Teachers, parents, and students should help shape local learning models to ensure equitable access. It is easy to imagine abuse of flexible models that draws lines between which groups of students attend in person and which are limited to remote access. But we also found evidence of flexible models promoting equitable access. For instance, one superintendent described how her own son was able to access advanced math content and earn an honors credit remotely<sup>12</sup>. Yet later, when offered a traditional in-person honors class, he refused because he didn't see himself as one of “those kids.” Race, class, and identity have tremendous influence on student placement, and offering flexible learning options can help break down those barriers.

## 2. The Illinois State Board of Education should expand access to Competency Based Education (CBE) pilot programs to enable and incentivize flexible learning models.

While seat time may not be a barrier to restructuring schools, other barriers exist, including graduation and licensure requirements that limit ways content delivery might be reimaged. The CBE pilot program offered waivers of some requirements, enabling districts to implement new ideas that don't fit neatly into existing structures.

As we emerge from the pandemic with a wealth of new learning, another round of CBE pilot programs would incentivize and accelerate continued innovation. The Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act requires the State Superintendent

to “make recommendations to ISBE and the General Assembly for elimination, modification, or expansion of the pilot program” during the 2021-2022 school year, and we believe expansion is the best option.

We further recommend these opportunities be evenly distributed among schools in all of Illinois’ four funding tiers. While we generally advocate for resources and support for the highest-need schools first, in this case we feel that targeting low-income schools creates a risk that these practices could be perceived as “what poor schools do,” rather than innovations crucial to advancing 21st century learning. When well-resourced schools with unlimited options choose flexible learning, it is more likely to be recognized as best practice.

### **3. Educators and policymakers at all levels should provide more flexibility for students by leveraging inter-district collaboration made possible by technological advances.**

One of the greatest benefits of the shift to remote learning was the ability to connect across geographical distances and bring experts into classrooms everywhere. Inequitable access issues must still be addressed, but the benefits to students are too great to ignore. Harnessing the power of virtual connections can help extend flexible learning opportunities for students and we urge teachers and building leaders to continue to explore how best to leverage these to bring the larger world into the classroom.

At the systemic level, we also see the potential to expand access to high-level or specialized coursework to areas that might not otherwise be able to provide these to students. A small rural district that is unable to find a qualified AP Physics or Chinese language teacher might now be able to connect students to one virtually. These remote connections can offer students greater flexibility to plan learning around their needs and interests without limiting them to locally available offerings. We encourage state-level policymakers to study how inter-district or statewide collaboration might expand access for students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way students learn. Now we have an opportunity to reimagine a new normal that improves on a flawed status quo. We must embrace the lessons and new possibilities teachers’ innovations have created. Now is the time to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the pandemic and transform our system so it works for all students

In Spring 2020, union leaders in Kankakee School District held focus groups with teachers to share priorities for the use of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. Almost 50 staff members participated in the focus groups, and 113 elementary teachers responded to a follow-up survey. One key recurring theme from the focus groups and survey was that flexibility should continue after the pandemic. Smaller class sizes and shorter school days resulted in a change in school climate, with improved behavior, focus, and interaction.

A planning team used these responses to brainstorm ways to better address student needs on their return, focusing on elementary scheduling as an entry point: Would it be possible to reimagine the school day to offer greater flexibility and more targeted support?

The team proposed a schedule splitting traditional classes in two: half of each class would be with their teacher for core instruction in the morning, the other half in the afternoon. During the other half of the day, students would receive interventions, go to specials, attend STEM class or the library, or participate in a passion project. This scheduling concept ([Appendix C](#), Matrix 1) would result in smaller class sizes, more targeted intervention, and more flexibility for students.

District leadership committed to using ESSER funding to add staff that would enable this schedule. Unfortunately, teacher shortages made this impossible. The team went back to the drawing board and adopted a modified schedule built to enable small group interventions, uninterrupted blocks of core instruction, and time for student-led projects ([Appendix C](#), Matrix 2).

Kankakee's planning demonstrates that it is not only possible to imagine a flexible learning environment for elementary students, but also to create a more flexible school structure even when outside factors or limited resources make an ideal schedule impossible to implement.

This elementary school shift was not Kankakee's first experience with flexible scheduling. Before the pandemic, the district was awarded a Competency-Based Education grant from the state board of education that enabled a transition to a hybrid model for "learning anytime, anywhere." Students there have been able to learn remotely since 2018.

Kankakee Superintendent Dr. Geneva Walters says the grant's waivers provided important staffing and seat time flexibilities that enabled a rapid shift in instructional delivery<sup>13</sup>. Beyond that, she said the biggest barriers district leaders can expect in making a similar transition are "adult problems." Both educators and parents had grown accustomed to the traditional model and expressed concerns about both the newness of the approach and its impact on established routines. Even so, 40 percent of students and parents opted for a non-traditional schedule.

Dr. Walters said independent, flexible learning under adult guidance prepared students for college and careers, and noted that students in district 111 suffered no adverse academic effects from the pandemic—with one elementary school actually reporting statistically significant gains in student achievement. Flexible learning has been so successful in Kankakee that the district continues to offer remote, hybrid, and in-person options in fall 2021 and continues to seek new ways to build in more flexibility for all students, as evident from the new elementary schedules adopted for fall 2021.



# APPENDIX A: DESIGN SPRINT PROTOCOL

## Welcome / Introductions (10 minutes)

Each person introduces themselves with name, role, school, location, surprising fact

## Explanation of Project and Session Topic (5 minutes)

- + **Project overview**
- + **Session topic and core question**
  - + **Topic 1 (Equity and Accessibility):** How can we redesign the structure of school or the delivery of instruction to make education more equitable and accessible for all students?
  - + **Topic 2 (Executive Functioning and Mental Health):** How can we redesign the structure of school or the delivery of instruction to support students' mental health and executive functioning skills?

## Sketch: Crazy 8's (20 minutes)

- + Give directions as each team member divides their piece of paper into eight sections
- + Crazy 8s (set 8 min timer): Each team member sketches one idea in each rectangle until all sections are filled. Facilitator marks time at each 1-minute mark until timer goes off.
- + Each person adds their best four ideas to a Google Slides presentation

## Decide (25 minutes)

### Round 1: Pairs (15 minutes)

1. Each person has up to 3 minutes to talk through their ideas and answer questions
2. After sharing, pairs have 4 minutes to select the most compelling idea to advance
3. Take 5 minutes to add this new idea to the slide marked "Pair A/B/C/D"

### Round 2: Quads (10 minutes)

1. Each pair has up to 2 minutes to share the idea they generated and answer questions
2. The team of 4 has 6 minutes to decide on the most compelling idea to advance.

## Prototype (15 min)

- + **Groups of 4 progress to implementation planning:** Describe what the end-stage version of this would look like in schools, plan out the steps and resources needed to implement it, and identify any barriers (but assume they'll be solved)

## Test (30 minutes)

- + Hyper-consultancy Protocol (14 min x 2): Group A shares out its idea and planning steps, and Group B asks simple, clarifying questions. Group B discusses the idea and surfaces concerns - Group A is silent. Group A then responds to feedback

## Closing (5 min)

- + Thank group for their participation and contributions to the ideas that emerged
- + Ask participants to complete evaluation / survey



## APPENDIX B: CONTEST FINALISTS

**GRAND PRIZE: Art Supplies at Home** - Cristina Correa, IDEA Public Schools, TX



This innovation involved pairing traditional art lessons with non-traditional materials to ensure every student could engage without fear of being left out or left behind due to finances during the pandemic. Students painted with food coloring, toothpaste, and coffee, turned Kool-Aid powder into watercolors, and mixed crushed Hot Cheetos with glue to make textured mediums. They drew with makeup, nail polish, burnt wood, and charcoal from their barbecue grills; sewed onto paper; and created clay out of flour, water, and salt.

**FIRST PRIZE: Rise Up - Tutoring in the Park** - Rebecca Kinnee, High School District 214, IL



This teacher set up a one-week Saturday morning session in a community park, where all students were encouraged to meet with teachers for academic support. Students were able to get additional tutoring in their academic areas from content teachers and free instrumental lessons from the music teachers, expanding access and engaging the community.

**Take-Home Family STEM Kits** - Monica Baker, Webutuck Central School District, NY

Elementary English Language Learners were provided with take-home STEM kits. While these kits are not a new concept, here they were paired with virtual weekly meetings for families to engage together, expanding learning beyond school, supporting culturally important family structures, and transcending barriers preventing families from engaging in school activities.

**Speech Practice Across District Lines** - Julie Roos, Clark County School District, NV

Because speech competitions are individual events, Las Vegas Valley Schools held practices online across school boundaries, with the most experienced coaches in each event even if they came from another school. While impact was limited to the extracurricular speech team, the essence of this innovation is connecting students with mentors and experts beyond traditional school boundaries, a concept that can be applied to any subject matter.

**Global Economic Symposium** - Patricia Page, East Greenwich Public Schools, RI



Middle and high school students from varied backgrounds presented research-based economic solutions to global and local issues. Organizers took advantage of the virtual format to scale the program beyond their district to include students from New England to Texas, providing a blueprint for how schools might collaborate across district and state lines to connect students in an increasingly global world.

# APPENDIX C: KANKAKEE SCHEDULE OPTIONS

## Initial Schedule Plan

	Group 1 ABC	Group 2 BCA	Group 3 CAB
8:55-9:40	A Core Class B Intervention	Whole Class Science & Social Studies	Teacher Plan: Student Choice (Genius Hour)
9:40-10:25	A Core Class B Special	A Core Class B Rotation	Whole Class Science & Social Studies
10:25-11:10	A Core Class B Rotation	A Core Class B Special	A Core Class B Intervention
11:10-11:55	A Lunch first, then outside/gym B Outside/gym first, then lunch	A Core Class B Intervention	A Core Class B Special
11:55-12:40	A Special B Core Class	A Lunch first, then outside/gym B Outside/gym first, then lunch	A Core Class B Rotation
12:40-1:25	A Intervention B Core Class	A Rotation B Core Class	A Lunch first, then outside/gym B Outside/gym first, then lunch
1:25-2:10	A Rotation B Core Class	A Special B Core Class	A Intervention B Core Class
2:10-2:55	Teacher Plan: Student Choice (Genius Hour)	A Intervention B Core Class	A Rotation B Core Class
2:55-3:40	Whole Class Science & Social Studies	Teacher Plan: Student Choice (Genius Hour)	A Special B Core Class

## Transitional Schedule Plan (no added staff)

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8
8:55-9:40	Science/SS	Science/SS	Math Block	Math Block	Genius	Genius	Genius	Genius
9:40-10:25	ELA Block	ELA Block			Math Block	Math Block	Special	Special
10:25-11:10			Special	Special			ELA Block	ELA Block
11:10-11:55	Special	Special	Lunch/Play	Lunch/Play	Science/SS	Science/SS		
11:55-12:40	Lunch/Play	Lunch/Play	ELA Block	ELA Block	Intervention	Intervention	Science/SS	Science/SS
12:40-1:25	Math Block	Math Block			Lunch/Play	Lunch/Play	Intervention	Intervention
1:25-2:10			Intervention	Intervention	Special	Special	Lunch/Play	Lunch/Play
2:10-2:55	Intervention	Intervention	Science/SS	Science/SS	ELA Block	ELA Block	Math Block	Math Block
2:55-3:40	Genius	Genius	Genius	Genius				

## ENDNOTES

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