Reimagining Education in Challenging Times: Listening to Voices of Change
EdSurge reports on the people, ideas and tools shaping the future of learning.

Education is changing, now more than ever. It is shaped by technological advancements, scientific research, demographic shifts, business interests and other socioeconomic forces that impact not just teaching and learning, but also the world that students will enter. And education will increasingly take place not just in schools, but in homes, at work and throughout life.

EdSurge is at the forefront of reporting on these changes and their consequences. We do this through award-winning journalism, research and analysis. We share stories that elevate the voices and experiences of educators, entrepreneurs, researchers and other stakeholders working to support equitable opportunities for all learners.

Through our work, EdSurge aims to bridge the information gaps that often exist between those who drive change in education, and those they serve.

In 2019, EdSurge was acquired by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), a nonprofit membership organization for educators. EdSurge operates as an independent news and research initiative of ISTE.
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Acknowledgements

This report covers a new phase of a multi-year project called Voices of Change, in which EdSurge set out to highlight educator’s experiences as they faced the unique challenges of the 2021-2022 school year through storytelling, journalism and research. To deepen our understanding of how school communities are adapting to meet the needs of all learners, we launched an educator writing fellowship, published a collection of stories and conducted multiple research and engagement activities.

We are deeply grateful to the educators who shared their powerful voices with us—through the fellowship, as contributing writers and sources and as research participants—to help tell these invaluable stories.

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Introduction

The teaching profession has long had its challenges from supporting students’ diverse learning needs to effectively engaging families and making limited resources go a long way—all while trying to earn adequate pay and respect from the public. Recognizing that educator voice is essential to understanding and solving some of the most complex issues in teaching and learning, EdSurge started a new phase of a multi-year project called Voices of Change, to invite educators—including school-based practitioners working directly with students—and other educational stakeholders to reflect on how they’re navigating these unprecedented times.

Focusing on amplifying the powerful voices of educators, EdSurge launched its first-ever educator writing fellowship; published a collection of stories; conducted research including focus groups, surveys and in-depth interviews; and hosted virtual convenings to gain a deeper understanding of educators’ experiences, how their mental health is being impacted and how school communities are adapting in response to the pandemic and the national conversations about racial justice.

Entering the third year of disrupted schooling, educators across the country found themselves juggling to balance continuity of students’ academic learning with their social and emotional development, mental health and well-being. Many teachers rose to the occasion, quickly adapting their practices to meet new professional demands with various constraints and limited resources. Despite their herculean efforts though, many educators recognized how their individual determination cannot sufficiently address their students’ academic, social and emotional needs, especially when confronted with structural conditions beyond their control that actively work to sustain educational inequities.

Overwhelmingly, the educators we heard from described these past few years as the hardest they have faced, sometimes after decades in the field. In many cases, their experiences provoked feelings of distrust and disappointment that their perspectives and concerns were often neglected during decision-making processes, and frustration as they struggled to get their voices heard.

Some expressed that the pressure-cooker of the profession has led them to consider leaving it, not because they don’t love teaching, but because the increasingly burdensome demands of the job, when coupled with inadequate support and resources, have become unbearable. And
it’s not just the public health crisis exacerbating these challenges. It’s also the compounding effects of political, economic and racial unrest that have taken a toll on educators, students and entire communities.

EdSurge reporters and researchers dove deep into these issues through the project’s three key elements:

**Introduction**

**Voices of Change Fellowship**

In September 2021, we launched our inaugural *Voices of Change Writing Fellowship*, bringing together a diverse cohort of educators from underrepresented backgrounds to drive important conversations about teaching and learning during times of crises. We recruited seven educators representing a wide range of identities, experiences, and perspectives who worked closely with our editors to write first-person essays reflecting on their positionalities and tackling timely and relevant educational challenges with real solutions. Their stories were published in EdSurge from fall 2021 through spring 2022. The cohort of fellows includes:
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Kelli Kauakanilehua Adams, English teacher at Kealakehe High School in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

Geoffrey Carlisle, eighth grade science teacher at KIPP Austin College Prep in Austin, Texas

Deitra Colquitt, co-principal at Pershing Elementary School in University City, Mo.

Aisha Douglas, academic dean at Achievement First Brooklyn High School in Brooklyn, N.Y.

César Martín Moreno, science teacher at San Francisco International High School in San Francisco, Calif.

Helen Thomas is the Office of Indian Education’s professional learning specialist for the Arizona Department of Education in Phoenix, Ariz.

Collection of Stories

Throughout the project, we published over 50 stories written by fellows, contributors, reporters and researchers unpacking the multilayered effects of the pandemic, the economic recession and racial unrest on various aspects of education.

Drawing attention to new challenges in teaching and learning, and longstanding issues that have been exacerbated over the past two years, these stories addressed how emergency remote learning magnified educational inequities and highlighted how some students thrived while many others got lost in the system. They reflected a bumpy road that schools had to take as they pivoted in response to difficult situations and how teachers stretched themselves thin to maintain high-quality instructional standards, but sometimes at the expense of their own mental health and well-being. Pandemic-related stressors and trauma became prevalent themes across stories. Not only did teachers carry a tremendous emotional burden to support their students and communities, they also needed to manage hate and bias incidents at their schools without structural guidelines in place.

There is no shortage of obstacles presented in the stories. But within the collection, there are also glimmers of hope—stories highlighting positive changes that have been enacted by individual educators and school communities. To mitigate the negative effects of disrupted schooling, educators proposed concrete solutions such as experimenting with different teaching models, preparing flexible short- and long-term plans for reopening school, designing creative ways to boost student engagement and shifting mindsets to meet students where they are. Some found ways to address isolation through peer connections, while others focused on strengthening relationships with families. Many called for rebuilding structures of support for teachers, democratizing classrooms to empower student voices and implementing restorative practices to revitalize school communities.

A number of the stories in this collection explore how teachers and students bring their own identities, backgrounds and experiences to the classrooms, and how that shapes teaching and learning. Our writers shared about how addressing implicit bias and developing a culture of curiosity can help improve school communities. This comes at a critical time, as hate crimes in the nation rise and reports of hate and bias incidents in schools increase. Many school communities are paying more attention to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and committing to creating safe and welcoming spaces, especially for minoritized groups, such as students of color, immigrant students, English learners and LGBTQIA+ students.
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Focusing on large-scale matters related to the teaching profession, our collection also explores the topics of teacher recruitment and retention, including what it takes to attract more teacher candidates into the profession post-pandemic and how to support aspiring educators who are historically minoritized in teacher education programs. Additionally, two EdSurge reporters—Stephen Noonoo and Emily Tate—published long-form feature stories investigating workforce issues.

The Mental Health Crisis Causing Teachers to Quit
By Stephen Noonoo

Noonoo’s story takes an uncomfortable but necessary look at the next great labor crisis, shining a light on the mental health crisis engulfing the teaching profession. Speaking with researchers, historians and more than a dozen former teachers, Noonoo, who has covered teacher burnout for years, has compiled an account of the growing teacher shortage and the dwindling pipeline fueled by burnout, exhaustion and extreme anxiety, and how it affects former teachers personally.

Our Nation’s Teachers Are Hustling to Survive
By Emily Tate

Tate’s story follows American public school teachers who work second (and sometimes third or fourth) jobs to supplement their income because their teaching salary is not enough to make ends meet. Tate conducted more than 45 in-depth interviews including 30 with current teachers who double as bartenders, Lyft drivers, Instacart shoppers, real estate agents, retail associates and more to understand their personal stories. She has also examined data to understand the pervasiveness of this issue and the inequities underpinning it. This issue isn’t new, but it is urgent, with the pandemic leaving many teachers burned out and overextended and with rising inflation forcing them to stretch each dollar even further.
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Research and Community Engagement

Our research and community engagement activities focused on connecting with various education practitioners and fostering learning communities. To deepen our understanding of educator experiences, EdSurge researchers engaged more than 90 K-12 educators including teachers, administrators and school-based support staff from diverse school communities across the country through focus groups, surveys, interviews and virtual learning circles—structured small group discussions where educators could connect and learn from each other about topics relevant to their practice.

Each activity served a different purpose. The four focus groups were designed to better understand what propels educators to make change. EdSurge researchers brought educators together to explore how they prioritize, value and act on different types of education-related articles, and to learn more about the kinds of additional resources they would find most helpful to inspire action.

The eight virtual learning circles we convened were designed as community engagement and learning activities where educators came together to connect, share resources and discuss topics such as teachers as researchers and ways to reduce educator trauma, burnout and compassion fatigue.

We also surveyed all virtual learning circle participants and followed up with one-on-one in-depth interviews with 10 of the participating educators to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of participating in these virtual learning circles on their practice.

Across these year-long conversations with educators, we learned how teachers, administrators and school staff in varying

Why We Need to Talk About Teacher Trauma

By Diana Lee

Lee's story shines a light on why having a common language is key to understanding and being able to act upon timely and urgent issues affecting educators, such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious and secondary trauma. Drawing from research activities that included dozens of structured group conversations and ten in-depth one-on-one interviews, educators shared how the exacerbated stressors of this past school year have profoundly affected their health and well-being and how having the language and space to process their experiences with each other was critical to helping them care for themselves, their students and each other.
contexts were adapting to existing and new teaching and learning challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and social unrest.

Among the important themes that emerged from these conversations were the immense stress that educators faced and how in caring for students and families, educator health and well-being was often overlooked by school communities. Our research team published two articles about the importance of having shared language around these issues and having safe, supportive spaces to process the collective trauma educators reported experiencing.

This report is a synthesis of the various components of the project but centers a thematic analysis on stories by the Voices of Change fellows. It spotlights the rich perspectives of these educators who strongly believe in their profession and in the potential of their students to learn, thrive and enact positive changes in society. With a critical perspective on teaching and learning, the fellows emphasized existing systemic problems in education and how they have worked tirelessly to address them in their daily practices. Based on a close analysis of the fellows’ professional experiences and pedagogical approaches as explored in their published articles, this report presents the following themes:

- **Understanding Systemic Problems and Educational Inequities**
  Recognizing interlocking systems of oppression that hinder teaching and learning

- **Leveraging Communal Strengths and Knowledge**
  Adopting culturally responsive pedagogy to value students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and leverage communal wealth of knowledge

- **Sustaining Hope Through Activism**
  Sustaining hope in creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment that fosters the well-being of students, teachers and communities
Understanding Systemic Problems and Educational Inequities

Decades of educational research shows that American public schools—as a microcosm of society—were inequitable and highly segregated long before the COVID-19 pandemic. But the sudden shift to emergency remote learning laid bare many of these inequities—the digital divide, disparities in school funding and spending, unequal access to classroom resources and high-quality learning opportunities. Recent research reveals that the adverse effects of the pandemic on children are widespread, but vulnerable groups such as students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners and students with disabilities were impacted the most as they faced multiple challenges and barriers. As such, equity has become a forefront topic in public discourse about teaching and learning since the global health crisis forced school closures, magnifying existing problems in the U.S. education system.

Even though the pandemic has created many hurdles, it also opened a portal for educators to critically examine their practices and find innovative ways to address equity issues at their schools. Through their stories, the educators who participated in the Voices of Change fellowship documented how they have wrestled with interlocking systems of power and oppression in their classrooms, and have actively resisted practices that were harmful to their students. They engaged in deep reflections, examining how their identities and backgrounds, often underrepresented and marginalized, impact their pedagogical approaches.

Cutting across the fellows’ articles is a strong emphasis on how a monolithic understanding of race, culture, gender and language dominates educational practices. Many fellows critiqued the lack of diversity in terms of the teaching workforce, mainstream curricula, pedagogical approaches and language use that are often centered around whiteness, cisgender heteronormativity and English language and frame these as normal and standard. This limited view fails to recognize the intersectional identities and lived experiences of marginalized learners and perpetuates racial, cultural and linguistic hegemony. Moreover, research shows that when students do not see themselves reflected and valued in learning materials, it has a negative impact on their engagement and identity development.
**Demographic Mismatch**

Voices of Change fellow Aisha Douglas explores the demographic mismatch between students and teachers at her school, Achievement First Brooklyn High School in Brooklyn, New York. As academic dean, Douglas is responsible for teacher development, and she has been grappling with preparing her colleagues to effectively work with the diverse student body at their school, specifically how to overcome barriers that she noticed were preventing white teachers from connecting and establishing meaningful and authentic relationships with students of color.

In one of her stories, Douglas reflects on an in-class teaching demonstration with a white, male colleague. She was excited about the lesson, she writes, but when it came time to debrief, she recognized that she couldn’t ask him to mimic the lesson because her teaching approach was closely connected to her positionality as a Black female educator. “The lesson I designed was heavily rooted in how I experienced the scene because of my social identities, and replicating my demonstration would put Daniel in a disingenuous position,” she explains. This moment led her to ask: “How do I empower our white teachers to be their most authentic selves while creating culturally responsive experiences for our students of color.”

One step, she has found, is supporting them to critically examine white privilege. To interrogate whiteness in the classroom, Douglas suggests that white educators should “decenter their emotions, reactions and assumptions” and critically reflect on “potentially problematic beliefs and ideals” that they may hold about certain content before teaching it.

Douglas proposes asking questions such as, “What beliefs or values do you hold that may show up in unproductive ways during instruction?,” and “How will you respond to strong feelings your students may have about content?” This, she says, can help white educators “prepare for student experiences and feelings to reflect diversity in all its facets.” She has seen this approach support her colleagues develop learning environments where students feel safe, especially when exploring emotionally-charged content.

**Lack of Diversity in Curriculum**

Many education scholars have highlighted that mainstream curricula are often based on Eurocentric perspectives that privilege and legitimize white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied,
male knowledge as the standard. Most textbooks feature white Americans in more than half of their pictorials and illustrations and reinforce a master narrative centering white achievements and experiences while marginalizing nondominant ways of knowing and being.

Exploring the lack of diversity in curriculum, Geoffrey Carlisle, an 8th grade science teacher at KIPP Austin College Prep in Texas, discusses how heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia strongly determine the content of curricula, especially in sex education. His stories reveal how institutional oppression operates in schools, from reinforcing heterosexuality as normative practice to silencing queer-related content and pathologizing and stigmatizing LGBTQIA+ experiences. This, in turn, impacts identity development, teaching and learning.

Carlisle also reflects on his identity as a queer teacher in Texas—where, in the past, he has been told he is not allowed to be open about his sexual orientation—and brings readers into his experience as a queer teenager, explaining the challenges he faced experiencing homophobia while growing up. “Withholding my identity consumed nearly every aspect of my middle school experience. I made up fake crushes on girls to appear straight, concealed the deepest parts of myself from my best friends, and hid during lunch while my classmates played ‘smear the queer,’ a game where a mob of boys picked a ‘queer’ who they chased and beat,” he writes. Carlisle’s middle school years have informed the kind of teacher he aims to be and the type of environment he aspires to create for students.

But as Carlisle discusses, there are barriers, especially in Texas, a state with an “existing law that purports that being gay is unacceptable” and “one of four states that have what is colloquially known as a ‘No Promo Homo’ law, an umbrella term for anti-LGBTQ curriculum legislation.” He shines a light on an invasive heteronormative culture of schooling that fuels discrimination and violence against both LGBTQIA+ students and teachers, and he draws attention to how non-inclusive sex education can cause harm to students.

“The culture of silence about LGBTQIA+ people in my school left me with the impression that I was taboo or too irrelevant to get the same level of health information my cisgender, heterosexual classmates received”

-Geoffrey Carlisle
heterosexual classmates received,” he recalls. Carlisle emphasizes that “only six percent of sex education programs in Texas public schools use curriculum that addresses sexual orientation or LGBTQIA+ health needs.” However, he adds that many of them perpetuate unfounded stereotypes and provide little useful information to LGBTQIA+ students. A recent national survey of middle and high school students administered by GLSEN Research Institute shows that over 24 percent of LGBTQ+ students have never had school-based sex education. Of the students who have, only 8.2 percent reported that it was inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics.

Sex education is critical and should provide reliable medical information on sexual health, but that requires schools to acknowledge the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations, and to implement inclusive curriculum. The use of non-inclusive, heteronormative-focused sex education has a negative impact on LGBTQIA+ students, as explained by Carlisle: “It’s no wonder that schools often reinforce internalized homophobia and transphobia, a form of oppression where LGBTQIA+ people learn to fear or hate their true self, which can manifest in many ways, including shame, depression, stigmatization, and adverse health outcomes.”

**English-Only Policy**

César Martín Moreno, a science teacher at San Francisco International High School in California, a school designed for recent immigrant students, discusses the problems that arise when schools normalize English as the only accepted language in the classroom. As a former English learner, Moreno recognizes that bilingual students, especially newcomers, are often underestimated for their learning potential and rarely receive adequate linguistic support and accommodations to help them learn a new language and academic content simultaneously. Adhering to state language policies that limit the use of languages other than English, many schools adopt an assimilationist approach, in which students are immersed in an English-only learning environment, with restrictions on using their native languages in the classroom. Too often, this results in students losing their first language and becoming monolingual. Education researcher Angela Valenzuela refers to this process as “subtractive schooling,” which she says strips off students’ original cultures and languages.

Recalling their own schooling, Moreno describes that teachers didn’t allow students to communicate in their native languages, forcing assimilation to English. “Being a designated English learner kept me in classes focused on acculturation and behavior management
while my ‘native English speaking’ peers took courses entirely separate from English learner classified students,” they write. Moreno’s story provides a glimpse into the collective struggle of 5 million English learners, most of whom are immigrants or children of immigrants attending segregated and underfunded schools and often suffer from linguistic discrimination and forced assimilation.

Decades of research on bilingual education reveals that education policies and programs designed to serve bilingual students often treat bilingualism as a problem with English monolingualism as the desired outcome. Moreno has learned, from both personal and professional experiences, that English-only policies and practices not only dismiss bilingual students’ linguistic and cultural capital but also function to devalue and eventually erase knowledge of nondominant communities. Therefore, Moreno actively resists this type of approach, opting for a more student-centered model when teaching bilingual students, intentionally shaping their practice to acknowledge and celebrate students’ full linguistic repertoire.
Seeking to transform teaching and learning practices and to improve students’ learning experiences, many fellows proposed structural changes in their classroom, school, district and in some cases, at a broader systemic level. Many of the educators who penned stories for this project recognized that practices rooted in deficit thinking—whether intentionally or unintentionally—can cause harm by locating the sources of educational problems in individual students rather than acknowledging and fixing oppressive systems. Further, the deficit perspective risks perpetuating the message that cultural, linguistic practices and lived experiences of nondominant students are not valuable, which can lead to students feeling ignored, marginalized and contested. Hence, the fellows’ stories constitute a collective voice advocating for using inclusive curriculum and culturally responsive teaching to embrace students’ diverse backgrounds and leverage communal strengths and knowledge.

Aiming to diversify school curricula and modes of instruction, many fellows shared about their use of culturally responsive pedagogy. This pedagogical approach has been promoted through the work of prominent education scholars including Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Christine Sleeter, Sonia Nieto, and more recently, Django Paris and Zaretta Hammond. It is grounded in the sociocultural perspective of schooling, which theorizes that learning occurs through social interactions and is strongly influenced by culture. Therefore, teaching and learning do not happen in a vacuum; they are context-based practices enacted by social and cultural beings with diverse beliefs, values, perspectives and lived experiences. For that reason, using instructional materials that reflect and value diverse cultural backgrounds and knowledge is critical in creating meaningful learning experiences for students, especially those who have been historically marginalized.

As explained by Geneva Gay, who has studied the topic for more than 20 years, the central goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.” Gay also emphasizes other purposes of culturally responsive pedagogy, such as connecting students’ in-school and out of school learning, creating diverse communities and developing student agency, efficacy and empowerment.
Leveraging Communal Strengths and Knowledge

This pedagogical approach has a decades-long history with multiple frameworks created and adapted by various researchers and educators. Zaretta Hammond, educator and author of the book “Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain,” refers to the approach as an “antidote to education inequity,” but Hammond also says the term is often misinterpreted and therefore not easily translated into daily teaching practices.

Sometimes, in an attempt to connect to students’ diverse culture, school communities add multicultural days to the calendar, hold superficial celebrations or use tokenistic practices such as displaying cultural artifacts or incorporating holidays, music and food into lessons. This touches on a concept that anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward Hall refers to as “surface culture,” or the observable norms that can be easily seen but do not reflect deeper elements such as beliefs, values, ways of living shared by a certain cultural group. Criticizing the use of surface culture, fellow Helen Thomas, a Hunkpapa Lakota educator and a professional learning specialist for the Arizona Department of Education’s Office of Indian Education writes, “Culturally responsive teaching is more than just a surface level recognition of multiculturalism. It requires educators to affirm and leverage what—and how—students learn in their homes and communities.”

While many of the educators we interacted with expressed the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, the fellows stress that implementing the approach with fidelity requires a few key commitments: school communities must recognize and prioritize the value of diversity; educators must reflect critically on their own cultural lens, assumptions and biases; and educators need to understand the sociohistorical and political contexts of communities and value communal wealth of knowledge. Community cultural wealth, as outlined by scholar Tara J. Yosso, refers to the strengths, knowledge, resources, skills and abilities students of color bring to school.

Understanding the value of diversity in all shapes and forms can help educators make teaching practices more culturally responsive. For Moreno, the California science teacher, that means recognizing the richness of bilingual students’ cultural backgrounds and encouraging them to tap into their full linguistic repertoire in multiple languages to effectively engage with academic content.

Moreno also centralizes the use of multimodality in the classroom, exposing students to different kinds of texts, visuals and graphic organizers and inviting them to demonstrate their knowledge through various forms beyond writing. In the classroom, linguistic scaffolding and
support is provided by both peers and teachers to foster a collaborative learning community. Moreno says this has been validating as an educator and has helped students “focus their attention on challenging and affirming their knowledge and cultural wealth.”

Adopting culturally responsive pedagogy also requires teachers to critically reflect on their own cultural lens and develop an awareness of how their biases could potentially influence their pedagogical choices and interactions with students. Kelli Kauakanilehua Adams, an English teacher at Kealakehe High School in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, explores the power dynamic between teachers and learners in the classroom. “No matter where you are, teachers are in a position of power. We dictate what children learn, when they learn it, and how they do it,” she writes, adding that in her school, which serves a large population of historically marginalized populations, teachers have a disproportionate amount of power.

Adams has seen this power abused. “I’ve witnessed teachers denying students the opportunity to explore thought-provoking and challenging texts under the guise of “cultural relevancy,” she says. It is damaging to students because it disempowers them, widening equity gaps, she adds. Criticizing this mentality, Adams says, “A teacher that does not have a firm belief in every student’s ability to achieve success cultivates a classroom culture that actively prevents learning—whether that is their conscious intention or not.”

Links between teacher beliefs and expectations and student success is well-researched. When teachers set low expectations, students often doubt their learning potential and in many cases, conform to their teachers’ expectations, which can strongly affect learning outcomes.

For Thomas, the professional learning specialist in Arizona, culturally responsive pedagogy includes understanding the sociopolitical and historical contexts of the communities she serves. In her experience working with Indigenous students and educators, this has been critical as she navigates the intersection of culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma-informed practice. For trauma-informed practices to be meaningful for students, Thomas says that teachers and school leaders must roll them out in a culturally
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responsive way, and that requires them to pay close attention to historical trauma, which involves “the ways collective and massive traumatic events can impact multiple generations of individuals.” Discussions of trauma in schools, she adds, are typically related to interpersonal harm, but collective trauma resulting from ongoing events, such as colonization or structural racism are rarely considered. Without understanding where trauma comes from, Thomas warns that there’s a risk of framing students and communities as inherently damaged. For that reason, Thomas insists on using a strength-based approach, which recognizes communal strengths and knowledge.

Thomas also emphasizes the community-centered component of culturally responsive pedagogy. She explains that Indigenous Knowledge Systems—which she defines as “the ways that Indigenous peoples make sense of the world around them, and how they recognize, value, share and use knowledge in their daily lives”—have instilled the value of community throughout her learning and development. She describes that as an Indigenous educator, she has always understood the power of the communal wealth of knowledge and the crucial role community plays in educating children. Thomas says, “All educators, whether they are Indigenous or not, can learn from these systems how to root their teaching and learning in community and place-based context.”

Thomas offers concrete advice on how to leverage existing strengths of the community, starting with establishing reciprocal relationships among teachers, students, communities and the environment. She urges other educators to take the inquiry-based approach and treat students, families and communities as equal partners and experts of their own lived experiences. She has found that learning from community members helps educators create more meaningful learning experiences for students.
Sustaining Hope Through Activism

With an equity-centered mindset, the fellows recognize that celebrating diversity isn’t enough when social inequities are fundamentally baked into the educational system. Transforming schools requires educators to actively resist multiple forms of oppression and to push the limits of their imagination about what an ideal learning environment can look like.

A theme shining through many of the stories is sustaining hope through activism. These educators are engaging in the process of redesigning and implementing concrete action plans to create more equitable and inclusive classrooms that prioritize the well-being of students, teachers and school communities. To achieve that goal, the fellows propose taking action against social injustices, building a community of trust and working towards collective healing.

**Taking Action**

The belief that criticizing and disapproving of any broken system is insufficient in spurring change is rooted in critical pedagogy, a teaching philosophy and social movement that foregrounds the great potential of education in dismantling existing systems of oppression and transforming societies.

Educators and researchers who embrace this philosophy see classrooms as a space to foster critical consciousness, stage social resistance and sustain hope through activism. In the book, “Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope,” Critical educator and social activist, bell hooks argues that hopefulness is rooted in the teaching profession and that hopeful education happens when both teachers and students recognize each other’s humanity, engage in true dialogue and willingly participate in the processes of personal and social transformations.

We saw this type of hopeful education emerge from many of the fellows’ stories. Through narrative storytelling, they shared about actively engaging in co-designing and building stronger systems, starting with their classrooms and taking an action-oriented stance as they turned their classrooms into inclusive and liberatory spaces.

Fellows wrote about transforming their practices, curriculum, classrooms and schools—and
behind each change was an underlying story about developing strong, respectful relationships with students and a deep understanding of the student experience.

Responding to the current political turmoil about curriculum restriction and teacher surveillance, Jennifer Yoo-Brannon, an instructional coach from El Monte, California, reveals what’s really happening in her classroom. She explains that sometimes in her daily practice, she intentionally addresses topics outside of the curriculum and deviates from lesson plans because strong teachers prioritize student needs over adhering to a fixed set of prescribed practices. And she stands behind these decisions.

“As teachers, we teach students not subjects. I don’t teach English language development, I teach Maria, Alex, Yun Mei and Linh,” she writes. “Although my own professional growth as an educator has been shaped by educational research, brain science and cultural theorists, my only real guiding principle has been, ‘Teach the students in front of you.’”

Yoo-Brannon takes a firm stance on providing students with opportunities to find their own voices, deepen their understanding of critical topics and develop their rhetorical skills—even if that means pivoting plans for the day to address a timely event or modifying the sequence of a lesson or unit to meet students where they are.

Instilling the power of hope through activism in her students, Yoo-Brannon concludes, “I often hear people say that a teacher’s job is to prepare students for ‘the real world.’ I have always bristled at this kind of language. My students already live in the real world. It is insulting to their experience to say they do not. My job is to prepare them to change the world, to navigate the unpredictable with critical thinking and resilience.”

Moreno, the high school science teacher who advocates for cultural and linguistic diversity, sees curriculum as an opportunity to enact change. After hearing from a student who criticized the climate change curriculum for being depressing and lacking guidance toward activism, Moreno sought out an alternative method for teaching the complex issue, settling
on the Wholistic Science Pedagogy framework. This instructional approach anchors into real-world problems, centralizing social justice issues in the curriculum. It is designed to address learners’ holistic needs by motivating students to see themselves as active social agents who can foster positive changes in society.

Applying this framework, Moreno rewrote their lesson plans on environmental justice, incorporating experiential, inquiry-based learning opportunities. This new unit provided students with opportunities to learn about the underlying social inequities contributing to climate change and draw from generational knowledge in their communities to better understand the issue and investigate movements that address the systemic injustices at the root of climate change. Moreno says this curricular shift improved engagement, led to an increase in self-awareness, and helped students realize that science can be used as a tool for change, ultimately providing a more hopeful outlook.

For Carlisle, the middle school science teacher who has been actively advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights through different channels and platforms, taking action involves demanding safe and inclusive learning spaces for students and teachers where all members of the community can be open about their identity, standing up for a more inclusive curriculum and pushing back against harmful legislation. He isn’t doing it alone. Carlisle is inspired and energized by the students around his state who have staged their resistance against gender censorship and anti-LGBTQ+ legislations.

“At MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas, students staged a walkout after teachers were forced to take down ‘safe space’ stickers for LGBTQIA+ students. In Clyde, Texas, Trevor Wilkinson, a former student at Clyde High School, refused to remove his nail polish after repeatedly being put in in-school suspension. I also think about the transgender students who have repeatedly testified at the Texas Capitol over the last ten months in opposition to harmful anti-transgender legislation.”

Carlisle calls upon his peer educators to raise their voices. “Educators: you have LGBTQIA+ students in your classroom right now. They shouldn’t have to come out or be left without a vision for navigating sex and society to remind us of the necessity of this work,” he writes, encouraging educators to take action by sharing their stories, inviting an elected official into their classrooms or testifying at a public hearing. “The humanity, health, and dignity of our LGBTQIA+ students are sacred, and it’s time we treat them like that.”
Building Community

A sense of belonging can deeply impact students. It is often associated with high learning engagement and motivation, and it contributes to academic self-efficacy and well-being. Similarly, the development of a strong school community has many lasting benefits: it leads to a more positive school climate and strongly influences students’ academic, behavioral and social outcomes. This tracks with many of the educators we heard from, who prioritized fostering a sense of belonging for students and creating classroom and school communities based on trust.

Sharing this mentality, Thomas, the Hunkpapa Lakota educator who centralizes Indigenous knowledge and the concept of relationality in her writings, uses restorative practices in her work with students and educators to nurture relationships to develop a strong sense of community in the classroom. While often connected to the term “restorative justice,” which Thomas explains as an alternative approach to discipline that focuses on repairing relationships when harm has been caused, restorative practices focus on developing and sustaining strong social connections and trust.

Thomas recognizes that restorative practices have ties to the U.S. criminal justice system but also draws connection to Indigenous Knowledge Systems, describing how her own understanding of restorative practices is rooted in what she has experienced and learned from her relatives and Indigenous teachers.

This approach has shaped Thomas’ teaching practice, not only in terms of classroom management, but also regarding her decisions about curriculum and instruction as she considers how to offer opportunities to help students develop skills related to relationship-building.

Thomas reflects on hearing a group of her 8- and 9-year-old students independently discussing an interaction that resulted in a student feeling excluded and asking questions such as, “What can we do to make this right?” and “How can we make sure this doesn’t happen again?” This moment, she recalls, was made possible through intentional community-building in the classroom.

Recognizing that socialization in Indigenous community has prepared her for implementing restorative practices, Thomas calls on all interested educators to “center and learn from
Indigenous communities who have been implementing restorative practices as a holistic way of being since time immemorial.”

Adams, the high school English teacher who closely examined classroom power dynamics, echoes Thomas’ emphasis on community building as she writes on the importance of teaching empathy. Adams voices her hopes for her students: “I want them to leave my classroom with the ability to work kindly with others and care about the people around them. I want them to leave with a strengthened sense of empathy and grace.”

Drawing attention to the overemphasis on individualism in current schooling practices, Adams intentionally disrupts traditional classroom hierarchy by shifting individual assignments into collective activities. She also encourages students to facilitate group discussions and nurtures the connection between life in and out of school to bridge the gap between home, school and community.

To dismantle hierarchy, Pershing Elementary School in University City, Missouri, implemented a co-principalship model to distribute leadership. Fellow Deitra Colquitt, co-principal at the school, gives readers an inside look at the experimental redesign process and how it impacted her community.

Colquitt, an alumni of the same district as the school she now leads, says her desire to serve her community is personal. Reflecting on the decision to try a new model, she says the timing was right: “My school needed a radical change to increase academic achievement and enrollment and revitalize the sense of pride, confidence and joy in the school and our surrounding community.” And she was energized at the idea of collective leadership, which she says places a strong emphasis on leaders’ shared responsibility and maximizes collaborations with students and families.

Throughout the transformation, Colquitt and her co-principal prioritized family engagement and community building in their practices. They conducted community think tanks, inviting families to participate in school decision-making processes and actively sought student input through “empathy interviews“ to affirm the power of students’ voices and build trust between students and school administrators. These steps empowered students, built trust and developed community.
**Collective Healing**

The extended period of crises has forced educators to manage multiple forces that threaten their own well-being and the mental health and wellness of their students and colleagues. Across stories, fellows open up about the obstacles they’ve faced navigating trauma, discuss the importance of relationship development and highlight how a human-centered approach has helped them transform their classrooms into a safe space where collective healing can happen.

The multiple layers of crises that have taken place over the past two years have impacted so many people, leading many educators to discuss trauma as a shared experience and healing as a collective process that takes a whole community to address together. Engaging in honest conversations about loss, grief and trauma related to the ongoing pandemic can help educators and students establish meaningful connections and build solidarity. Adams writes on managing her own emotions while trying to support her students. “I picked up [my students’] heartache, grief, and confusion and carried it with me the best I could—all while trying to carry my own.” But it also comes at a high cost when she is left alone to cultivate a healing space without any support. Sharing her struggle, she writes: “I was so, so angry. I felt abandoned by my school. I was navigating trauma and burnout simultaneously, and my own health was suffering because of it.”

Many fellows raise relationships as a key factor in moving forward, stressing that humanizing schools requires teachers to understand their students and colleagues deeply and through multiple lenses. Colquitt calls on teachers to “see students beyond labels, test scores and socioeconomic status,” and describes the power of loving students during challenging moments. And as Yoo-Brannon urges us to make schools human again, she reminds readers that educators are humans too: “We are mothers of multiple school-aged children, parents of special needs students who need a higher level of support, individuals with anxiety disorders exacerbated by the worldwide anxiety of the pandemic.”

Individual efforts can certainly contribute to the healing process, but fellows call for high-level structural changes as well. It is not realistic to ask educators to stay resilient without addressing the sources of trauma and building stronger support systems. As Adams explains:
“The work culture of teaching is rooted in the unabashed expectation of toxic resilience, and the broken system that we operate on is utterly dependent on it.” Yoo-Brannon suggests some strategies for turning schools into more welcoming spaces, not only for students but for educators. Similar to Adams, she recommends building a better support system for teachers by replacing toxic positivity with more listening and validation of educators’ concerns, offering professional development with flexibility, involving teachers in the decision-making process and finding ways to build trust among staff.

The bulk of her advice is directed at leadership as she calls for more systemic change. “You cannot fight demoralization with a gift card or a spa day,” Yoo-Brannon notes, urging readers to move beyond the individual-focused temporary mode of healing and start investing in systemic changes with lasting effects.

She highlights a valuable lesson that the pandemic has offered the educational community: a small window into our interconnection as human beings, because “we can’t forget that we saw each other’s humanity—shared a universal human experience—and then return to business as usual. We must make schools human again.”
Editors’ Picks

Throughout the project, we published a collection of over 50 stories—some penned by educator writing fellows, others by contributing writers with diverse roles in teaching and learning, and some by reporters and researchers asking big questions about the experiences of teachers and students during this complex year. Our team of editors worked closely with these writers to support them in crystallizing their ideas, finding their voice and sharing their stories. Every story is powerful in its own way. We asked our editors to highlight a few that brought to light critical issues and unique perspectives. Here are our editors’ picks.

School Counselors Have Implicit Bias. Some Are Ready to Address It, by Emily Tate

In the last year, many school counselors have been pondering what they can do differently to support all learners and how they can be more intentional allies. In pockets across the country, this question ignited work to address bias and blind spots. Some districts have led anti-racist training. Others are learning about microaggressions. “We all make mistakes, and we’ll make more mistakes,” one counselor says. “But if we are dutiful, we will be better going forward.”

The College Program Attracting — and Retaining — Black Male Teachers by Becky Koenig

Black men weren’t always rare at the front of the classroom, but now they make up only a small share of teachers. To change that, for two decades a program from a South Carolina college has recruited Black male students into education departments and offered them a sense of community. The result? In the state’s schools, there are “all these people of color in these positions of power.”

How Art Class Became a Rare Bright Spot for Students and Families During the Pandemic by Daniel Lempres

For some students, art classes during the pandemic were a welcome escape; for others, they were a critical release. Art teachers also noticed greater family engagement and had a chance to rethink their practices, in a way that many other educators have not. Read about how art has become a rare bright spot in a turbulent time.

Teachers Don’t Just Use Research — Some Are Designing It Themselves by Stephen Noonoo

It can be hard to get classroom teachers to apply education research to everyday practice, either because it’s too dense or they just don’t have time. But what about when they design it themselves? As part of a new program from The Learning Agency Lab, more than 40 teachers are conducting their own studies in class and sharing out results. It’s also imparting some valuable research skills along the way.
Here Come the Virtual Academies by Emily Tate
Kali Klingler had never tried learning online before the pandemic. Then she had no choice. Now, the 16-year-old says she can’t imagine anything else—and doesn’t want to. She is one of thousands of K-12 students who will attend one of their district’s new virtual academies moving forward, created to accommodate the children and families who didn’t want to return to in-person school, even as the pandemic subsides.

We Need to Make Schools Human Again. That Means Treating Teachers With Respect. by Jennifer Yoo-Brannon
“As an instructional coach, the most important role I have is as a listener,” writes Jennifer Yoo-Brannon. Lately, she’s heard how teachers are frustrated, demoralized and tired of toxic positivity. Her solutions include real listening, real change and making schools more human. “There are so many dehumanizing workplaces,” she adds. “We cannot let schools be those spaces.”

Students’ Career Interests Are Changing. Here Is Why Our Teaching Must Change, Too. by Aisha Douglas
Social media has become a habitual part of everyday life for most people in the U.S. What most take for granted as mindless scrolling and posting for followers and likes, today’s students are seeing as a lucrative career path. Aisha Douglas writes, “This work requires a depth of discipline and perseverance from our students that can at times be difficult to foster within the limits of traditional instruction.” As times change and social media shapes the future, Douglas says teachers must change, too.

Students Benefit When Teachers Show Up With Curiosity, Not Assumptions by Cassandra Herring
Why aren’t colleges preparing future teachers to deal with classroom diversity? Most think they are, writes Cassandra Herring, CEO of the nonprofit Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity. Yet she argues that colleges set students up for failure by not challenging stereotypes they may have about people from different cultures. Herring writes that higher ed should train future teachers to be curious and ask questions, not make assumptions.
Conclusion

As schools across the country transition back to normal routines, dominant narratives around the impact of the pandemic on education emerge from different sources, spanning from news media to education research. These narratives often center around the devastating effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning, widening the achievement gap and leading to a reading crisis and teacher exodus.

What is often missing are stories of hope and possibility. While the pandemic has caused major upheaval in schools, it has also created a rare opportunity for school communities to consider teaching and learning practices with a more critical eye, to reimagine education and transform classrooms, schools and systems to better serve all learners. Educator voices remain crucial in this process.

Recognizing the importance of educator voices and perspectives that are central to driving change, EdSurge set out to document educators’ pandemic-related experiences, their approaches to teaching and learning, and how they addressed challenges through their practice.

For the first time, we recruited a cohort of underrepresented educators from across the country to participate in the Voices of Change fellowship, inviting them to examine the intersection of identity and practice, and to grapple with a very fundamental belief of what it means to be a strong teacher.

This report illuminates three interconnected themes emerging from the fellows’ stories:

- Understanding Systemic Problems and Educational Inequities
- Leveraging Communal Strengths and Knowledge
- Sustaining Hope Through Activism

Centered in the fellows’ stories is the critique against the lack of diversity in relation to the teaching workforce, curriculum and school language policies and how these underlying systemic problems breed educational inequities. Instead of conforming to school norms and perpetuating inequities, the fellows propose a different theory of change—change that can happen when educators actively resist forces embedded in mainstream curriculum and instruction that aim to assimilate and erase nondominant ways of learning and living. Seeing
themselves as competent social agents, the fellows’ stories reflect on how they have worked towards dismantling complex barriers to teaching and learning.

These educators have opened their classroom doors to welcome all students and to embrace diversity. Many leverage culturally responsive pedagogy to recognize students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and value their communal wealth of knowledge. Adopting culturally responsive pedagogy requires educators to critically engage in the practice of reflexivity, learn from students and communities and expand their knowledge and understanding of social, historical and political contexts of schooling.

Emphasizing the importance of sustaining hope through activism, the fellows have created a learning environment that cares for the well-being of students, teachers and communities. These educators use social justice-oriented curricula to raise students’ critical consciousness and advocate for inclusive curriculum and practices. Through activism, the fellows have started the first steps of transforming schools into a more humane and liberatory space that fosters students’ belonging, community building and collective healing.

Through insightful narrative writing, these educators open up about their personal and professional experiences. They offer unique perspectives, looking at classrooms from the inside out and showing that schools can be beneficial for some and harmful for others and examining how teachers play a significant role in either reinforcing or disrupting this reality.

These voices of change provide a view of teaching and learning as a space of possibility, where educators, students, families and communities can collaboratively develop and sustain their hopes and dreams for a more inclusive, just and equitable system.
Appendix: Voices of Change Fellows and Their Stories

Kelli Kauakanilehua Adams

Kelli Kauakanilehua Adams (she/her) is a ninth grade English teacher at Kealakehe High School in Kailua-Kona, HI and an EdSurge Voices of Change fellow. She received a bachelor’s degree in English literature and creative writing at the University of Washington and earned her teaching certification in English language arts from Chaminade University of Honolulu.

- To Teach in Hawai‘i, Educators Must Honor Indigenous Land
- Empathy Is a Crucial Skill. Here Is How We Are Teaching It to Our Students.
- To Close the Educational Equity Gap, Teachers Have to Understand Their Position of Power

Geoffrey Carlisle

Geoffrey Carlisle (he/him) is an award-winning eighth grade science teacher at KIPP Austin College Prep with 11 years of teaching experience. Outside of the classroom he facilitates professional development for teachers and is an advocate on education policy issues. He is pursuing a Master’s of Public Affairs at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs.

- Now More Than Ever, LGBTQIA+ Students Deserve Inclusive Sex Education
- Teachers Should Be Allowed To Come Out in the Classroom. In Texas, An Outdated Law Stands in the Way.
- Science Has a Diversity Problem. For the Sake of Our Students, We Have to Change
- Teachers Can Positively Impact Education Policy, We Just Have to Use Our Teacher Voice
Deitra Colquitt

Deitra Colquitt (she/her) is currently a co-principal at Pershing Elementary School, completing her second year after embarking on a successful, community-based redesign of the school’s leadership model. She is an alumna of the University City school district, graduating in 1998. Upon graduation, she pursued post-graduate studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

- The Greatest Lesson I Learned As a New Teacher Was the Power of Saying ‘I’m Sorry’
- How an Experimental Redesign in School Leadership Saved the School and My Community
- When Best Practices Fail Black and Brown Students, We Must Challenge Our Moral Contradictions

Aisha Douglas

Aisha Douglas (she/her) is an academic dean at Achievement First Brooklyn High School. After completing a Master of Science in Teaching degree in Adolescent Education from Fordham University, Aisha made her move into the world of charter school education as a middle school teacher. As an academic dean, Aisha focuses on teacher development and curriculum adaptation in the humanities. She is a mom of two who spends her spare time wondering if she will ever nap again.

- Students and Teachers Wanted Cultural Authenticity. Here Is How My School Led the Way.
- To Connect with Students of Color, White Educators Must Confront Their Privilege
- Teachers Have Little Say When School Districts Make Decisions. Here’s How We Change That.
- Students’ Career Interests Are Changing. Here Is Why Our Teaching Must Change, Too
César Martín Moreno

César Martín Moreno (they/them) is a first-year biology and chemistry teacher at San Francisco International High School. They completed their master’s in education from Stanford University and have bachelor’s degrees in chemical engineering and neuroscience from the University of Notre Dame. César is interested in developing curricula that centers holistic science pedagogy, engages students in science and emphasizes its practices as a transformative agent.

- For English Learners to Thrive, Community and Culture are Necessary
- Science Curriculum Can Be Gender-Inclusive. We Just Have to Embrace Students’ Questions.
- My Students Wanted Hope in the Curriculum. I Found the Answer in Wholistic Science Pedagogy.

Helen Thomas

Helen Thomas (she/her) is a Hunkpapa Lakota educator who works as a professional learning specialist for the Office of Indian Education in Arizona. She is a former Title VI Native American Student Achievement Teacher for an urban public school district in Arizona. She has a Bachelor of Arts in economics, education and public policy from Dartmouth College and a Master’s in elementary education from the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University.

- Why Our Trauma-Informed Teaching Must Be More Culturally Responsive
- Indigenous Knowledge Is Often Overlooked in Education. But It Has A Lot to Teach Us.
- Restorative Justice Does More Than Solve Conflict. It Helps Build Classroom Community.
Appendix: Voices of Change Fellows and Their Stories

Jennifer Yoo-Brannon

Jennifer Yoo-Brannon (she/her) is a professional learning leader devoted to developing collective teacher efficacy as an instructional coach in El Monte, Calif. With a passion for serving culturally and linguistically diverse students, Jennifer works with teachers and educators to build learning communities of competence, care and compassion.

- Concerned Parents and Lawmakers: Here's What You'll Really See in My Classroom
- We Need to Make Schools Human Again. That Means Treating Teachers With Respect.
- Trauma Is Everywhere. My Experience With It Made Me a Better Teacher.
- There’s No Easy Protocol for Handling Classroom Conflict. We Must Challenge Ourselves.