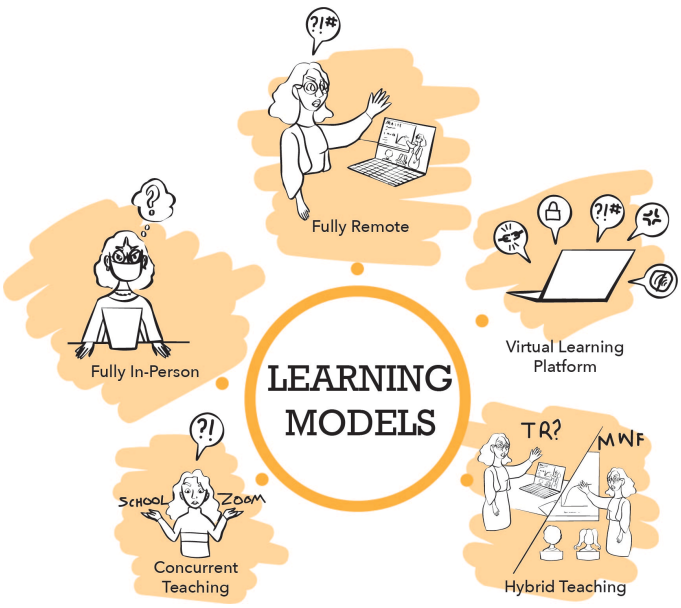
Learning Unboxed: Hacking School, part 1.

Annalies Corbin, PAST Foundation

The disruption in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light many long-standing issues around equity, technology, and pedagogy that reveal the current model of education doesn't work to prepare students for life or for the workforce. There is a tremendous disconnect between learning in school and applications in the real world. The ubiquity of technology makes rote memorization unnecessary—data is at our fingertips, yet learning in school largely focuses on learning facts and not thinking critically, leaving students unprepared to solve today's problems.

The Pandemic Opportunity

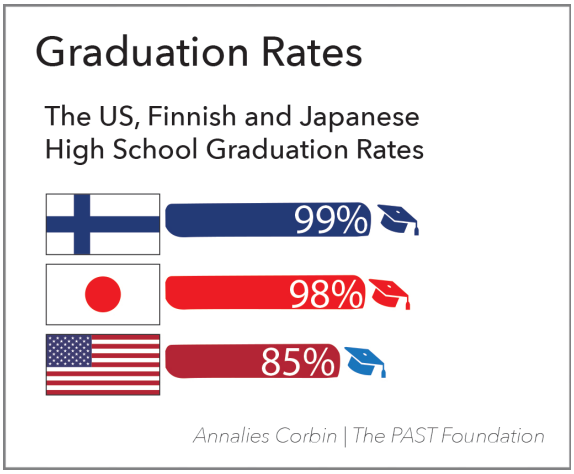
The COVID-19 pandemic unsettled almost every aspect of what we traditionally think of as school. The disruption in education goes far beyond moving from in-person to virtual instruction. The pandemic has called into question our ideas about instruction, attendance, testing, funding, content, the role of technology, as well as the role of school in socialization and human interactions. In essence, the pandemic forced focus and attention on every aspect of what we traditionally think of as school.



The largely quiet, decades-long conversations questioning the purpose, quality and meaning of education have become louder and more heightened since 2020. The pre-pandemic educational system was inherently inequitable in regard to race, disability, or income; and the glaring disparities did not just bubble up during the pandemic, but surged to the surface with the force of a hurricane. Many school districts struggled with obtaining and offering the most basic of resources necessary to reach, and teach, children. Teaching materials, technology and training for virtual

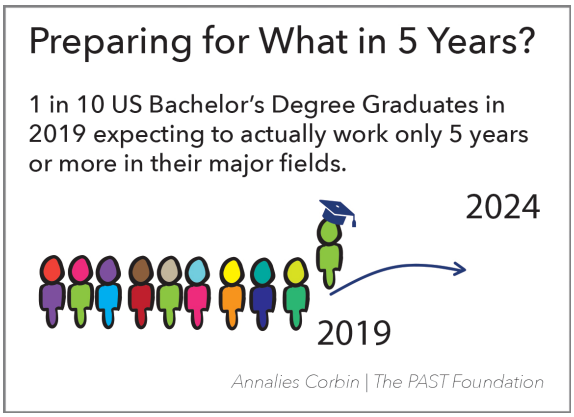
instruction, and the role of school in providing food and basic necessities was thrown into stark relief, not to mention how best to handle the growing social and emotional trauma that only grew while the world paused at home. And yet, through it all, there has been a growing call to return to normal.[i]

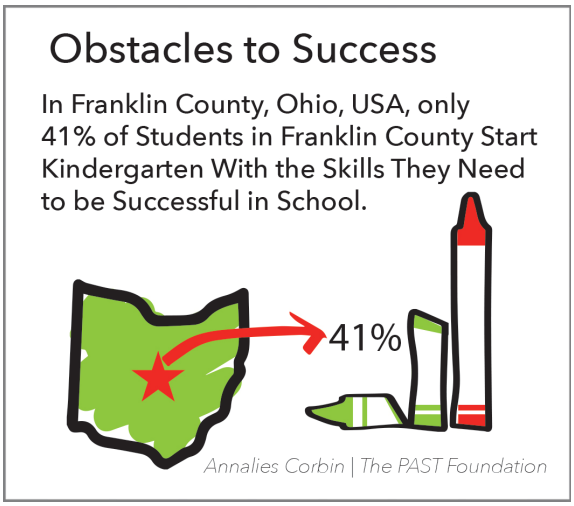
Ironically, we have a long history of wrestling with the idea of "what is school?" The late Sir Ken Robinson holds the global record for the most watched Ted Talk of all time with over 71 million viewers for his "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" talk. Angela Lee Duckworth's TedTalk and book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* has over 24 million viewers and remains a popular watch and read for most aspiring educators. The list goes on from every corner of the world. One can find robust discussions, debates, and conversations about all the reasons why the present state of education is obsolete.



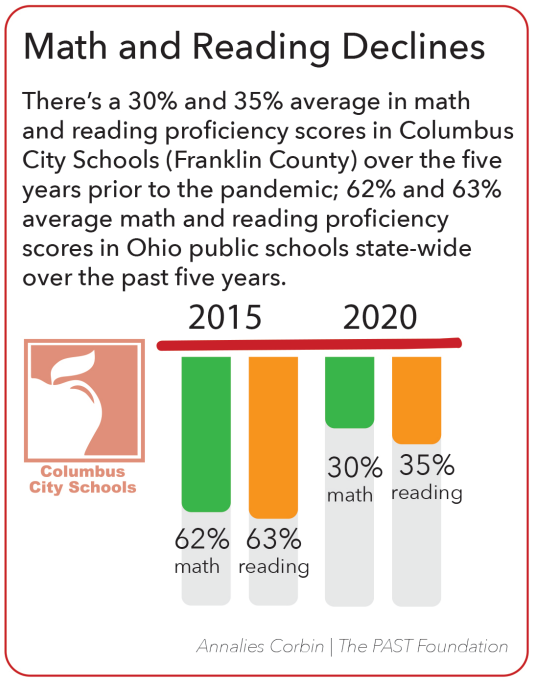
What the Data Has to Say

Little dispute remains that the "normal" of the pre-pandemic world was not working for the majority of our kids. I would argue that getting back to a "new normal" is the absolute wrong aspiration. After all, normal, in terms of global education, was pretty dismal in many parts of the pre-COVID-19 world. Let's look at it this way; prior to the impact of COVID-19, on a global scale, 58 million children of primary school age were not able or permitted to attend school. In 2019, just two in three children attended either lower or upper secondary school, and only one in two children attended either upper secondary school or higher education. Although huge progress has been made in the past few decades, challenges remain in reducing regional disparities and inequalities among secondary school-age students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.[ii]





The data does not get any better as we focus on the Unites States. The US has an 85% average high school graduation rate, compared with 99% in Finland and 98% in Japan; with 1 in 10 US bachelor's degree graduates in 2019 expecting to actually work only 5 years or more



in their major fields. Pulling in closer to PAST's home, in Franklin County, Ohio, USA, only 41% of students in Franklin County start kindergarten with the skills they need to be successful in school. In addition, there's a 30% and 35% average in math and reading proficiency scores in Columbus City Schools (Franklin County) over the five years prior to the pandemic; 62% and 63% average math and reading proficiency scores in Ohio public schools state-wide over the past five years.[iii]

This data is not new nor unique to Ohio; we have been in an epic battle to be better at education in the US for many decades. In 1983 the landmark publication, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, by President Reagan's Commission on Excellence in Education, first explored the deteriorating test scores in science and technology among high school students.[iv] By the mid-1990s - industry, politicians, and educators noted that Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores continued to fall, and trends in the number of students graduating from college in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math were discouraging. For the first time in the 20th century, American industries could not fill their quotas for job opportunities with US graduates.[v]

This level of failure rate will not move humanity forward. These stats represent a single community in a single state in a single country. This problem is not unique, and in fact, these stats, as appalling as they are, are better than some places in the world. But the pandemic has provided communities with an opportunity to do better, for an unplanned grand experiment. We learned that we can teach differently; we can plan and implement from the perspective of an entirely different paradigm, but we have to be collectively willing to let go of what was, or how it's always been, and recognize instead, what is possible.

PAST Foundation's passion is redesigning school to be hands-on, transdisciplinary, and focused on integrating learning into life to better prepare the students of today to join the workforce of tomorrow. -
Annalies Corbin, Ph.D., PAST Foundation President & CEO

Stay tuned for Learning Unboxed: Hacking School, part 2 as we continue to explore what's possible.

References Cited:

[i] https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/15/pandemic-school-year-changes/ (Accessed 09.22.2021).

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[iv] Gardner, David, et al. A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, Washington, DC, 1983.
[v] Smith, Sheli O. and Annalies Corbin. Problems, Projects and Products. The PAST Foundation, OH, 2014.