



# READY FOR THE *Challenge*

IDEAS and EVIDENCE from STUDENT-CENTERED  
LEARNING in a PANDEMIC

## Executive Summary Of a Year-Long Blog Series



# READY



## FOR THE Challenge

IDEAS and EVIDENCE from STUDENT-CENTERED  
LEARNING in a PANDEMIC

In 2021, we ran a year-long blog series asking the question: were student-centered schools more ready for the challenge of Covid-19? And if so, why?

The answer to the first question: a resounding yes. As to why, we noted a common set of learning practices and strategies for gauging success that they used.

Our series explored those practices and strategies. First, in a series of case studies of five partner schools we studied (Part 1). Then, through a series of analysis posts (Part 2).

Our conclusion: to equitably serve all students—during times of broader world turbulence and times of relative stability—our system has always needed to be and will always need to be more agile, adaptive, and responsive. Covid-19 merely made the need for a student-centered future unmistakably apparent.

Our series built the evidence base for that argument.

*Read more about the series in the kickoff blog post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/1](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/1)*

## Table of Contents

<b>Part 1: Student-centered school profiles from the Covid era</b>	
At UCLA Community School, student-centered learning means honoring identity and core needs	At Norris Academy, real-world connections and career exploration drive student learning
At Crosstown High, student agency flourishes on a bedrock of strong relationships	At West Hawaii Explorations Academy, students drive inquiry into the natural world
At Spring Lake Park Schools, students and teachers buoy districtwide innovation	Learning as a <i>comunidad</i> in a pandemic
<b>Part 2: Analysis of themes and ideas from across the schools</b>	
Rethinking student engagement: from “showing up” to active and deep participation	Leading with wellness: tracking and supporting mental health to unleash learner potential
Stories as evidence: capturing unsung learning in immeasurable ways	What should accountability look like for student-centered learning?
<b>Part 3: Conclusion and key lessons</b>	
Key student-centered practice in a pandemic? None. Rather: a culture of adaptation.	

Read full versions of all the series blog posts at: [www.educationevolving.org/ready](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready)

## Part 1: Student-Centered School Profiles



### **At UCLA Community School, student-centered learning means honoring identity and core needs**

*Acknowledging and celebrating our shared humanity matters just as much as attending to individual differences—especially in a global pandemic*

UCLA-CS, located in Los Angeles, showed us the central importance of meeting students' foundational needs, and the strategies they use for collecting and acting (quickly) on data about those needs.

One particular foundational need that UCLA-CS values is a positive sense of identity. We saw how they capture student stories and narratives to document this rich, but hard-to-quantify, dimension of student development.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/2](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/2)



## At Norris Academy, real-world connections and career exploration drive student learning

*For a program already built around students mastering learning outcomes at their own pace, the pandemic was a bump in the road—not a seismic shift*



Norris Academy, in rural Wisconsin, showed us how they quickly pivoted their career exploration and skill-building emphasis to a virtual world. They helped us picture: what could a virtual internship look like? For whom might it work better?

We also saw how Norris leaned into their existing competency-based learning program, enabling new pathways for mastering learning goals and progressing to graduation. The flexibility built into their program mattered now more than ever.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/3](https://www.educationevolving.org/ready/3)





## **At Crosstown High, student agency flourishes on a bedrock of strong relationships**

*A culture of care, trust, and persistent checking-in means students stay plugged in—whether in-person or over distance*

Crosstown, in Memphis, showed us what it means to prioritize relationships in practice, through small-group advisories, regular 1-on-1 check-ins, and a weekly “how are you doing” survey. And, we saw how their team pored over and acted on that data in real time.

Ultimately these relationships created trust that enabled the second main part of their model: community-embedded, project-based learning. We saw how Crosstown students documented and showcased that learning.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/4](https://www.educationevolving.org/ready/4)



## At West Hawaii Explorations Academy, students drive inquiry into the natural world

*For a school that centers hands-on learning among sharks and coral, the pandemic required reimagining the spaces and schedules of learning*



WHEA, on the big island of Hawaii, helped us imagine: what if students managed their own calendar? We saw how large blocks of flexible work time could mesh with a few fixed courses, all driven by student interest.

The real world doesn't run on a 6-period schedule; flexible days also enabled students to pursue projects they were passionate about. What's the best way to deter sharks? How can farm-raised tilapia be more sustainable?

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/5](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/5)





## At Spring Lake Park Schools, students and teachers buoy districtwide innovation

*In a district used to exploring different ways of personalizing learning, Covid-19 accelerated new approaches to keeping students at the center*

The old adage goes: firm on the objectives, flexible on the means. For education, this is the essence of “competency-based learning”. We saw how SLP, near the Twin Cities in Minnesota, carved personalized pathways through these competencies.

Often a truly personalized pathway through content also requires more freedom with time. We saw how SLP created flexibility in daily schedules, including things like the times courses were offered and the pace students moved through them.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/6](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/6)



## Learning as a *comunidad* in a pandemic

*Relationships of grace and trust carried this student-centered high school community through a most difficult year*

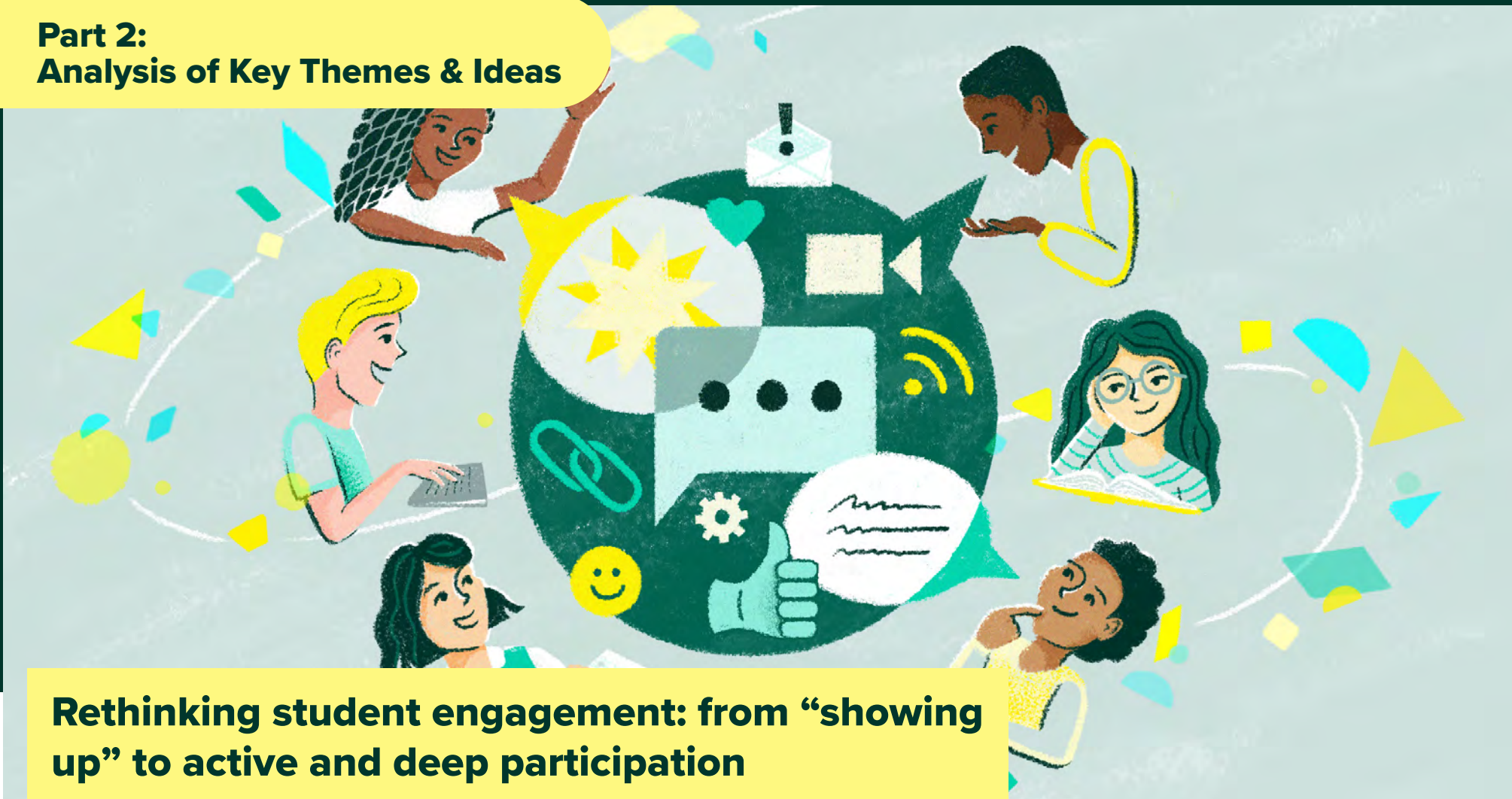


In a guest blog post, students shared how important relationships were to them in navigating a pandemic. They expressed their gratitude, and shared their reflections on some of the new software tools being used in this era.

As always, we were humbled by the optimism of the students. They focused on opportunities that enabled them to grow in new ways, not on roadblocks.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/7](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/7)

## Part 2: Analysis of Key Themes & Ideas



### Rethinking student engagement: from “showing up” to active and deep participation

*Why schools see engagement as a critical ingredient for student-centered learning—and how they measure it with integrity*

Most people—educators, parents, students—value engagement. But things get blurry when we try to define what, specifically, it means. And even more blurry when we try to measure it.

We explored the different definitions, strategies, and data points schools are using to elevate the idea of “engagement” from a fuzzy idea to one which is central, important, and actionable.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/8](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/8)



# Leading with wellness: tracking and supporting mental health to unleash learner potential

*How student-centered schools made wellness a priority—both before and during the pandemic*



It's not enough to say wellness matters. Schools need systems to track how students are actually doing, and then act on that data. We reported on schools using highly innovative approaches to doing that.

And these schools aren't just reacting—they're proactively teaching skills to support students' social and emotional wellbeing. What does it mean to be a healthy and productive person? How do you advocate for your needs? Covid put a spotlight on the non-academic side of learning.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/9](https://www.educationevolving.org/ready/9)





## Stories as evidence: capturing unsung learning in immeasurable ways

*How student-centered schools looked to narrative data to document student learning during the pandemic*

Progressing toward educational equity requires us to understand and track measurable student outcomes. But we also need to consider the processes and products of schooling that are less easily quantified.

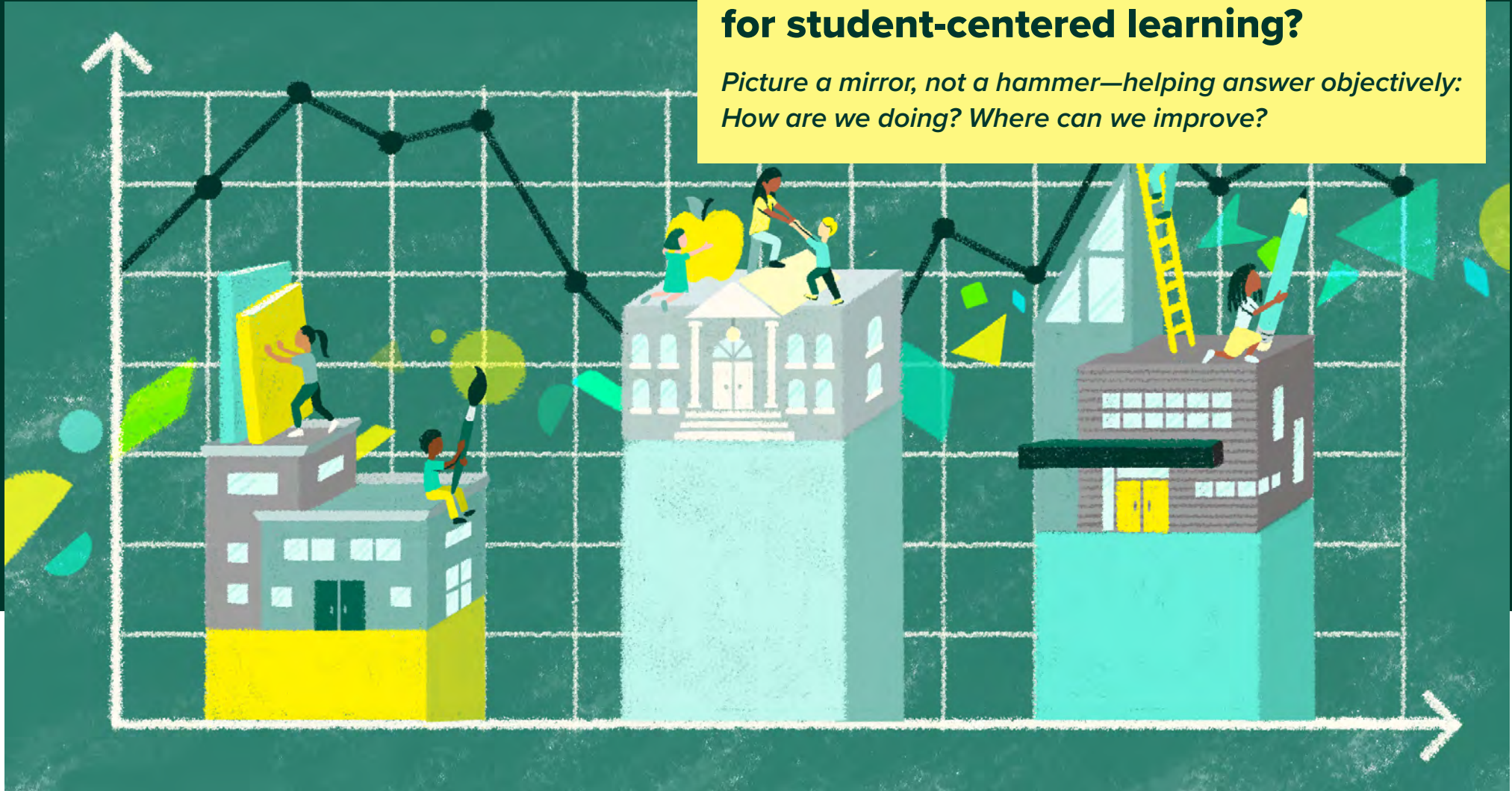
We looked at ways schools have documented the learning process, for example in student projects. And we looked at how they valued tough stuff like learning about the self. Both are hard to measure. But important.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/10](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/10)



## What should accountability look like for student-centered learning?

*Picture a mirror, not a hammer—helping answer objectively: How are we doing? Where can we improve?*



Having appropriate, comparable system-level measures and accountability is a key part of keeping tabs on how we're doing and challenging persistent systemic inequities.

But how could these measures yield student-centered data that is more meaningful, timely, and actionable? And how can that data be used—by schools and those around them—to actually improve learning? We explored these questions in depth.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/11](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/11)



## Part 3: Conclusion & Key Lessons



### **Key student-centered practice in a pandemic? None. Rather: a culture of adaptation.**

*Being student-centered isn't a static "thing you do", but an approach of continually adjusting—both for each student and school-wide*

In our final post of the series, we reviewed a set of common student-centered pedagogical practices and strategies for gathering and documenting evidence of learning. And we look at some deeper truths about the culture in the schools we studied.

We conclude: to equitably serve all students, our system has always needed to be—and will always need to be—more agile, adaptive, and responsive. Covid-19 merely made that unmistakably apparent.

Read the full post: [www.educationevolving.org/ready/12](http://www.educationevolving.org/ready/12)



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