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Real World Problems

"When the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near." (Jack Welch, Former CEO, General Electric)

The Challenge. Despite decades of investment in people, time, and resources, two out of three American students still fall below proficiency in reading and mathematics. How can education leaders continue to support practices that produce these results? And more urgently -- what bold steps can we take now to reverse this trend and rebuild reading and mathematics as the foundation for future-ready learning?

Back Story. Even before COVID-19, student achievement in reading and mathematics was in decline. **Virtual learning** was mostly optional -- used selectively by districts to enhance in-person instruction. Then the pandemic hit. School closures forced a rapid shift to digital learning. Districts scrambled, deploying everything from learning management systems to free apps, worksheets, and video tools. The result? Stark disparities emerged across the U.S. in:

- student access to technology,
- teacher readiness to deliver quality virtual learning, and
- support for students with special needs -- especially in low-income communities.

Meanwhile, parents saw firsthand what online instruction looked like -- and many asked, *Is this really what learning looks like in the digital age?*

Impact. Across the U.S., every school is under pressure to ensure students meet their standards in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. Yet, decades of progress were undone in just two years.

Mahnken (2022) notes: "Two decades of growth for American students in reading and mathematics were wiped away by just two years of pandemic-disrupted learning." Dorn et al. (2021) echoed this, reporting widespread learning losses.

The Nation's Report Card (NAEP, 2022) confirmed historic declines in reading and mathematics scores for 4th and 8th graders nationwide -- and the 2024 NAEP results show that, while there have been some signs of stabilization, overall recovery has been slow and significant achievement gaps persist.

These facts demand urgent action: *How do we reverse these learning losses and lift all students to new levels of achievement?*

Playbook. When COVID-19 shut down schools, educators had no playbook for delivering quality, district-wide learning at home -- especially as parents juggled jobs and remote schooling. While some districts built on prior digital efforts, system-wide solutions were scarce. Now, educational leaders are now faced with three jobs to create a playbook for ***teaching and learning at the speed of light***:

1. Improve virtual learning -- making the most of digital tools during current and future disruptions.
2. Blend in-person and virtual learning -- to recover lost ground and restore stability.
3. Reimagine learning for the future -- combining proven practices, pandemic lessons, innovation, equity, and quality to ensure every student thrives.

Setting the Stage. Educators who effectively use technology have seen firsthand how it boosts productivity and enhances learning. Many now see technology not just as a tool -- but as a catalyst for transforming their roles for future-ready learning.

These forward-thinking teachers, facilitators, and leaders are ready to evolve with new curricula, digital tools, AI, social media, cloud computing, and vibrant professional learning communities.

The goal? To combine people, teaching, and technology in ways that improve student achievement and reinvent how learning happens. This powerful combination is what sets the stage for ***teaching and learning at the speed of light***.

Current Thinking and Practice

"The field cannot be well seen from within the field." (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Status Quo. Most educators still view technology as something to integrate into traditional classrooms -- not as a catalyst to rethink the system. The common phrase "technology integration" reflects this mindset: adding digital tools to an old paradigm.

That paradigm? A fixed 180-day school year, one certified teacher for every 25–30 students, subject-based courses, seat time requirements, and a system where time is constant and achievement varies. In this structure, technology simply reinforces the status quo. Teachers use smartboards, slides, and online research within the same blocks of time. Students complete digital assignments, but still file paper worksheets into binders. Learning remains tied to schedules -- not results.

Despite billions spent on reform, little has changed. Why? Because the system adapts technology to fit itself -- instead of transforming to fit what students need.

The pandemic cracked the door open. Now is the time to step through with bold ideas to rebuild a system where teaching and learning are no longer confined by outdated structures.

Paradigm Shift

"From technology integration to learning integration" (Nicholas Hobar)

Learning Integration. To move beyond the status quo, educators must flip the script -- **from** *integrating technology into learning* **to** *integrating learning into technology*. This shift, known as **learning integration**, opens the door to anytime, anywhere education, where every student can learn in a personalized environment supported by teachers, facilitators, teams, and technology.

When learning, teaching, assessment, and professional learning are embedded within digital platforms, we unlock new roles, strategies, and opportunities. The old model fades -- and a more adaptive, learner-centered platform takes its place.

Pioneers. Dustin Heuston¹, a pioneer in educational technology, famously compared "technology integration" to trying to improve the pony express by adding a

combustion engine to the horse. Instead, the telegraph redefined communication -- delivering messages at the speed of light. The pony express didn't evolve. It vanished. That's the lesson: incremental improvements to an outdated system can't compete with a paradigm built for the future.

Clayton Christensen's² theory of **disruptive innovation** reinforces this point. Real transformation happens when new models emerge -- not to compete with the old -- but to replace it over time. His **"jobs to be done" theory** helps educators ask: What do students, teachers, and leaders truly need to accomplish -- and how can we design learning to meet those needs in the new paradigm?

Visionary Thinking and Practice

"What would teaching look like if students and teachers could learn at the speed of light?" (Nicholas Hobar)

Learning Venues. Post-COVID, the idea of learning anytime, anywhere has taken hold among students, educators, parents, and employers alike. Technology has revealed new possibilities for how, when, and where learning happens -- beyond the boundaries of school walls. Three key venues have emerged, each offering valuable lessons and new opportunities for shifting to a **learning integration paradigm**:

1. **The COVID-19 Learning Venue.** During the pandemic, virtual schools shared years of best practices, while educators across the globe launched bold, untested efforts to deliver home-based learning. Amid school closures, districts experimented with loosely coordinated virtual options -- laying the foundation for more structured blended learning models to follow.
2. **The Post COVID-19 Startup Venue.** Many districts started by refining their early lessons. Blended learning became an intentional part of the curricula, helping close learning gaps and ensure continuity. Improved virtual professional learning equipped educators to coordinate tech-rich learning across home and school, while parents and students began to experience the benefits of more effective digital instruction -- even during crises.
3. **The Disruptive Learning Venue.** Here, visionary leaders take the next leap -- designing bold, **New Rules for Learning** that drive disruptive innovations and make learning integration a reality. Imagine districts evolving into **Dynamic Learning Networks** -- offering academic, social, and professional content to learners of all ages, anytime and anywhere.

These networks shift learning from traditional school buildings to **PLACES for Learning®** built around developmental needs rather than grade levels:

- **Core Learning Spirals** for learners ages 4 - 9
- **Exploratory Learning Studios** for learners ages 9 - 14
- **Real-world Learning Spaces** for adolescent learners ages 14 - 18

Learners might leave home in the morning to engage in blended, personalized learning -- and return home with full access to the same network, peers, teachers, facilitators, and support staff.

In the disruptive learning venue, time becomes flexible, achievement becomes personalized, and learning becomes resilient -- ready to adapt to any future disruption. It's not just better schooling. It's a redefinition of learning itself.

Learning Layouts. As disruptive learning networks take hold, traditional schools -- as we know them -- will begin to fade. They simply won't be able to compete with the accessibility, affordability, and personalization offered by dynamic **Learning Layouts** delivered through powerful, technology-driven networks.

These new learning layouts won't be limited by buildings or bell schedules. Instead, they'll be powered by evolving digital ecosystems that reach learners wherever they are.

- **Web 2.0 tools** will continue to support collaboration, content sharing, and learner-driven experiences.
- **Web 3.0 and AI-powered platforms** will personalize learning in real time -- adapting to each student's interests, strengths, and needs.
- **Smart devices** with voice, touch, handwriting recognition, and behavior-tracking capabilities will extend learning into homes, communities, and workplaces.

Meanwhile, global for-profit learning companies are already partnering with data and content providers to offer mass-customized education experiences across borders and sectors.

In this new reality, **Learning Layouts** are no longer confined to classrooms. They are adaptive, learner-centered, and always on -- designed for a world where learning follows the learner, not the other way around.

Dynamic Learning. In the emerging paradigm, learning becomes on-demand, just-in-time, and in real time. Students, teachers, facilitators, and parents work individually and in teams -- guided not by rigid curricula, but by dynamic learning networks and learning layouts tailored to each learner's goals.

Teachers shift from instructors to **designers, curators, and facilitators** -- coordinating people, learning, and technology. Their role is to help students navigate personalized paths through evolving digital ecosystems. With smart support, learners thrive both virtually and face-to-face -- building essential academic and "people + tech" skills for the future.

At the heart of this shift is a powerful new process: **Dynamic Learning**. Instead of relying on **static standards**, Dynamic Learning continuously benchmarks and improves quality based on actual student performance. The best student work becomes the new standard -- setting no predefined limits.

Thanks to smart apps, these quality benchmarks are refreshed in real time, driven by learning -- not bureaucracy. Student achievement fuels the evolution of the learning network itself.

Dynamic Learning makes it possible to:

- Analyze what students actually produce
- Use their best work as evolving standards of excellence
- Elevate outcomes beyond the constraints of one-size-fits-all instruction

Traditional classrooms and teacher-student ratios can't support this growth. But new digital tools and platforms -- like LearningFRONT -- can. These tools help educators deliver adaptive learning layouts and professional learning services aligned with student needs and interests, not fixed programs or curricula.

In Dynamic Learning, students drive quality, and technology supports continuous learning improvement -- locally and globally.

Advancing Frontiers. As learning networks and layouts evolve, they will not only deliver knowledge -- they will generate it. Students, facilitators, and teachers will shift from passive recipients of content to active contributors of new ideas and insights.

Learning will become a dynamic process of creation, collaboration, and application to real-world challenges.

This transformation will begin in disruptive innovation settings, then rapidly scale as tools improve, strategies mature, and public confidence grows. Ultimately, success will be defined not by test scores or fixed standards, but by how learners apply knowledge to personal growth, career development, and global impact.

The highest achievement will come when learning networks and layouts become the new benchmarks -- outpacing the outdated model of schooling that merely integrates technology into legacy systems.

In the **Learning Integration** paradigm:

- Schools evolve from physical buildings to PLACES for Learning®, where learners access rich digital experiences.
- Teachers and mentors focus on nurturing learners, while technology handles the data and delivery.
- Each student's device becomes a gateway to global learning, with access that extends anywhere -- even beyond Earth.

Learning Integration will become the primary delivery system for education -- replacing traditional schools as the center of learning.

LearningFRONT is committed to leading this future: empowering educators and learners with professional-grade digital tools and services designed for a world where ***teaching and learning happen at the speed of light.***

Contact

Ready to spark visionary thinking in your school, district, business, or organization?

Let's co-design an **interactive webinar** to explore bold ideas like Learning Networks, Learning Layouts, and PLACES for Learning® -- all focused on combining people, teaching, and technology to create new and better ways of learning.

We call it ***"Thinking at the Speed of Light."*** You'll collaborate with us to plan and deliver a session that inspires your team to break free from outdated models and reimagine what's possible.

You're also invited to join the LearningFRONT community -- where educators, leaders, and innovators come together to share insights, build content, and launch **professional learning raves** that drive real impact.

Let's lead the future of learning -- together.

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Author's Notes:

¹ **Dustin Heuston:** I learned about the concept of learning at the speed of light through many professional and personal meetings with Dustin Heuston and by reading many of his professional papers. I dedicate my adaptation of his idea, "learning at the speed of light," in this paper to honor his numerous innovative contributions to education.

² **Clayton Christensen:** I read Clayton Christensen's book entitled, *Disrupting Class*, and discovered the power and potential of a "disruptive innovation" for improving teaching and learning. I believe disruptive innovations and Christensen's applications of *Jobs Theory* represent the best pathways for changing and improving schools and other learning organizations.

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