



4 Ways Education Has Changed for Good

What has the pandemic taught us?

Introduction



The rapid shift to remote learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic upended the lives of students, families, and educators around the country and set off ripple effects throughout the education system. Suddenly, parents and caregivers had a front-row seat to their child's schooling. Teachers quickly devised new ways to connect with their students via a screen. Schools scrambled to provide students with access to devices, online learning materials, and other critical resources—such as meal assistance and health care—that they normally delivered inside their buildings.

The past two academic years have shown that we must prioritize building students' relationships and key life skills, and engage families and caregivers in teaching and learning.

After more than a year, it's clear that these emergency measures weren't just temporary. They will have lasting impacts on our education system. Although the pandemic has brought anguish and hardship for many, it also has presented an opportunity to rethink many aspects of our schools that desperately need to change. At Gradient Learning, we believe that we must seize this rare moment and ensure that we help rebuild our education system to be better than it was before the pandemic.

The past two academic years have shown that we must prioritize building students' relationships and key life skills, and engage families and caregivers in teaching and learning. We also must not shy away from leveraging technology to do all of this. This white paper lays out **four ways that education has changed** since the pandemic began and shares our vision for how we must advance these changes, rather than returning to the status quo.



1 Prioritizing one-on-one relationships helped students and teachers thrive during the pandemic—and will remain essential to engage and support all students.



Educators know that strong relationships are crucial for student success, and many often see relationship-building as a primary part of their job. Moreover, [research](#) shows that relationships are core to students' academic success and personal growth. A trusting relationship helps students develop confidence and strong social-emotional skills that are essential to setting them up for success in school, careers, and life. That's why mentoring is one of the pillars of [Summit Learning](#), a research-based approach to education used by nearly 400 schools across the country. Regular mentoring sessions help Summit Learning students develop trusting connections with a

teacher and give them a safe space to go to for support, academic or otherwise.

These critical teacher-student relationships were turned upside-down when the pandemic forced schools to close. Suddenly, it became more difficult for teachers to find those small moments to check in and connect with students—like making a joke or sharing a comforting word. Furthermore, in schools that began the 2020-21 school year remotely, many educators and students met for the first time through their computer screens. They had to build relationships and trust through video-conferencing platforms—a vastly different experience than the casual, ad-hoc connections that happen organically in person.

The pandemic underscored how important teacher-student relationships are—and how when students feel seen, they show up differently. Also, it's not just educators who are searching for ways to meaningfully connect—students also crave this connection.

A trusting relationship helps students develop confidence and strong social-emotional skills that are essential to setting them up for success in school, careers, and life.

The 2021-22 school year will require another pivot. Educators will be focused on onboarding their students as soon as possible so they understand how to best support them academically. Given the short ramp-up until the start of the school year, teachers will need at-the-ready tools and resources so they can dive into a pretty intense year quickly. We know a lot can get in the way of a powerful connection, which is why we built [Along](#), a digital reflection tool that enables educators to exchange quick, one-on-one reflections with each student so they can respond without peer pressure. Along was designed to provide educators with an easier, more meaningful

way to check in and know each student on a deeper level, and to let students interact with teachers in their own way and on their own time.

So far, our team has worked closely with educators around the country to shape Along in time for the 2021-22 school year. And while we're just getting started, we've been inspired by all the ways educators and students have used Along to open up about who they are and what's really on their mind.

"Because it's a one-on-one forum, students can be honest and open in their responses," [writes](#) educator Tava Dennis, who uses Along with her fourth-grade students at Sonoma Heights Elementary School in Winnemucca, Nevada. "I can pose a range of questions to see how they are really doing, from asking them to share about a time they helped someone to talking about how they cope with stress. It has created a space that is comfortable for them to reflect on their learning, while introducing me to their interests and hobbies—all of which carry great weight in the classroom."

Understanding where students are, both emotionally and academically, will be vital as we work to help students recover from the pandemic in the upcoming school year. Taking the time to establish trusting relationships will pave the way for addressing unfinished learning. Tools like Along can help teachers understand their students more deeply and pinpoint how they can meet their unique needs.



2 Meaningful learning, customized for students' individual needs, can help them excel beyond the pandemic.



The shift to remote learning not only changed where students learned—it also changed how and what they learned. In the process, many students have become more in tune with how they learn best. Some students—such as those who became easily distracted in traditional classrooms—[found](#) that they learned better remotely. Some [reported](#) that they liked being able to learn at their own pace, set their own schedule, and be free from the “stressful environment of school.” Other students [discovered](#) that they had trouble concentrating during remote learning and longed for their schools to reopen.

The variability in students’ reactions to remote learning underscored the need to provide a spectrum of options as we return back to school, enabling students to learn in the way that best suits their needs. It also emphasized the need to give students ways to explore other modes of learning and reflect on how they learn best. The pandemic also made it more critical than ever that students

know how to structure their time, manage tasks, deal with stress, and be resilient in the face of challenges. These are key “Habits of Success,” which are lifelong learning skills that students will need as they navigate obstacles throughout their lives. One of the driving philosophies behind Summit Learning is that education should help students develop these habits. We heard from many of our partner schools that students in the Summit Learning program were leveraging the habits they developed through the self-directed learning cycle to ease their transition to remote learning.

The pandemic also made it more critical than ever that students know how to structure their time, manage tasks, deal with stress, and be resilient in the face of challenges.

As we look ahead, we must continue to give students opportunities to self-direct their learning by providing flexibility, choice, and high-quality curriculum that recognizes students’ experiences and backgrounds.

School isn’t a place for students to practice skills in preparation for real life, it is real life. We strive to empower our students to tap into the strengths and growth edges in order to continue their journey towards leading a fulfilled life.



Holly Wright
Habits of Success Specialist
Gradient Learning

3 Communication and partnership with families and caregivers enable student achievement.



The transition to remote learning wasn't only jarring for students and educators—it also drastically changed family routines. Many caregivers had to figure out how to juggle work, school, and play while navigating new anxieties. Although families and caregivers received more access to their student's education during the pandemic than ever before, they had many questions. What was expected of their students and them? Who should they contact for help? How would their student's school support them?

Some schools relied on one-way, transactional communications to inform families and caregivers of plans (such as posting the school schedule on social media, in a newsletter, or emailing caregivers a progress report with a reminder to read at home). But the schools that were more successful in engaging families used transformational communication strategies. This included convening a town hall with the school community to collaboratively plan the school reopening,

conducting virtual or in-person home visits to share hopes and dreams for the school year, and hosting a family workshop to provide tips, practice, and take-home resources to support learning. This transformational communication approach, which emphasizes ongoing dialogue and collaboration, helped schools to build families' trust and encourage partnership within the school community.

Now that many families have a new perspective and a deeper understanding of their students' learning, we must find ways to keep them engaged, even as more schools reopen. Schools need tools to offer families insight into their students' progress in real time—as they had during the pandemic—rather than just after a test or on a report card. For example, Summit Learning lets families and caregivers see their students' progress at any time in the online platform. Caregivers can log in when it's convenient for them and see what their student is studying, where they may need help, what they are preparing for, and what goals they are setting. This information can help families better understand how to support their students' success.

Now that many families have a new perspective and a deeper understanding of their students' learning, we must find ways to keep them engaged, even as more schools reopen.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that while some families were able to be more involved in their students' learning during the pandemic, others faced structural barriers—such as a lack of access to technology or resources available in their language—that prevented them from being able to fully engage in their students' learning. The pandemic reminded us that we must bridge these gaps by finding new ways to meet families where they are. We also must work harder to address the underlying root causes of these inequities that hinder too many families and students.

The pandemic forced teachers and families to find innovative ways to communicate, connect, and collaborate. From virtual meetings that allowed everyone to participate to emphasizing personal calls and texts from educators, we've reimagined what community engagement can and should be.



Vicki Raines
Community Engagement Lead
Gradient Learning



4 Technology will continue to be an important tool as schools reopen.



It seems unfathomable that just two years ago, some schools questioned the need for take-home devices for students and reliable at-home internet access. The pandemic challenged that perception. More than ever, our society has acknowledged that using technology is a critical skill for success in school, careers, and life. The pandemic also highlighted inequities in access to consistent internet and technology services. We've now seen how technology can help level the playing field, build and maintain relationships, and support each student on their unique path to success.

We've now seen how technology can help level the playing field, build and maintain relationships, and support each student on their unique path to success.

Still, the pandemic shows that schools need to proactively evaluate and consider which technology tools they adopt and how they use them. At the onset of the pandemic, many schools scrambled to implement a hodgepodge of digital curricula, video-conferencing platforms, learning management systems, and other ed-tech tools—each with its own login, terminology, and learning curve. The glut of tools confused, overwhelmed, and frustrated some educators, students, and families.

A comprehensive technology platform that supports the instructional model can make teaching and learning inside and outside the classroom more seamless. For example, Summit Learning provides an all-in-one platform that houses curriculum, assessments, projects, goal-setting, and provides access for families. The platform is part of a comprehensive program that includes standards-based curriculum, weekly mentoring sessions, and life skills-building. This all-inclusive approach offers a better experience for educators and families and stronger learning for students.

Conclusion

The pandemic changed so much about our world and was devastating to so many. It also helped us uncover new ways that we can do better—including in our education system. As we emerge from two school years of unprecedented challenges and changes, we have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to use this experience to make education more meaningful, equitable, and engaging for students and their families. At Gradient Learning, we're eager to help lead the way toward what education can and should be.