Leaps for Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

At Transcend, we believe learning environments must prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. However, the traditional industrial design of schooling that is still common today—and which originated to efficiently establish basic knowledge and skills across a mass of young people—too often functions to sort, separate, and rank students in oppressive ways that reproduce the inequities and opportunity gaps of our broader society. The list below describes ten "leaps" that Transcend's research and work with school communities reveals as important to move from inequitable, industrial-era learning to learning that is equitable and responsive to the demands and opportunities of the 21st century. At core, these leaps derive from a fundamentally different purpose of education— one that centers on equity, liberation, and human flourishing, so that all young people will not only maximize their own potential but also see, confront, and tackle society's greatest challenges.

Inequitable, Industrial-Era Learning

Unequal Expectations & Opportunities
The expectations and opportunities learners experience are determined at a young age and are modest for most, high for some, and disproportionately low for others, too often based on factors connected to a learner's identity and background.

Narrow Focus
Learners engage in experiences focused primarily on the cognitive dimension of learning.

Rote Activities
Learners engage in memorizing and recalling a broad array of content and are assessed primarily on their ability to recall and explain this information.

Irrelevance
Learning is disconnected from young people's interests and goals, as well as the real professional, personal, and societal challenges and endeavors they encounter in life.

Assimilation & Marginalization
Learners from marginalized groups—such as people of color, LGBTQ learners, those living in poverty, multilingual learners, those with a disability, and others—are pushed to either conform to the dominant culture or risk alienation.

Reinforcement of the Status Quo
Learners' experiences are situated within societal structures related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and more that are implicitly accepted, directly perpetuated, or studied in ways that do not motivate massive change efforts.

Isolation
Building strong relationships is not prioritized; learners and adults work together in the same space, but often without knowing one another deeply, and teaching and learning approaches prioritize independent work and competition.

Inflexible Systems
Learners experience rigid structures and policies that batch those of the same age in the same content through the same activities at the same pace—holding some learners back from more advanced content and activities, and leaving others behind.

Passive Compliance
Learners are expected to passively absorb the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and behaviors modeled and taught by adults and are pushed to comply with rules and routines developed for them through extrinsic rewards and punitive consequences.

Siloed Schooling
Learning is largely confined to school—a physical space with a fixed schedule and teachers who take on all, or most of, the responsibility for educating students—and learning outside of school is far more available to those with substantial economic and social capital.

Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities
All learners experience high expectations and have equitable access to many opportunities, enabling them to progress toward their aspirations for themselves, their families, and the community—regardless of the time and support needed.

Whole-Child Focus
Learners engage in experiences that nurture the totality of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors that impact their learning, development, character, and overall health and well-being.

Rigorous Learning
Learners use critical thinking skills to make deep meaning of diverse, complex ideas and are assessed on their ability to apply, analyze, and use their knowledge in creative ways across contexts.

Relevance
Learning explores young peoples' interests and goals, is connected to their communities, and enables them to understand and tackle real problems in authentic contexts.

Affirmation of Self & Others
Each learner develops a unique, positive sense of self and purpose as well as a deep respect for the identities of others; these diverse identities are celebrated, nurtured, and leveraged in meaningful and anti-oppressive ways to support everyone's learning.

Social Consciousness & Action
Learners critically examine social problems and work toward a more just world; they develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to continue taking anti-oppressive actions that disrupt and dismantle racism and other inequities.

Connection & Community
The environment is relationship-rich: learners are deeply known and respected by a variety of adults and peers; collaborate closely; and form meaningful relationships across lines of difference that nurture empathy, foster belonging, support well-being, and build social capital.

Customization
The focus, pace, and sequence of learning, as well as the resources and supports provided, are tailored to each learner's identity, prior knowledge, development, way of learning, and life experiences, ensuring that all learners have what they need to be successful and those who need more receive more.

Active Self-Direction
Young people are active drivers of their learning; they grapple directly with concepts while receiving adult and peer guidance and support; they have a voice in decisions about how and what they learn, so that the process grows agency and meaningfully builds on their interests and prior knowledge.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning
Learning can happen anywhere and at any time for all learners with teachers, families, community members, and other important figures in a young person's life all playing important educational roles.