



A VOICE FROM THE FIELD

Covered Wagons Meet the Networked Age: Reflections on the Road with Education Reimagined

by Margaret Black, Senior Director of Operations, Big Thought

SELF-DESCRIBED STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: That’s Education Reimagined—the staff, the advisors, and the admiring fans. Now that I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know this intrepid group, I would I call them a force to be reckoned with on a path to educational metamorphosis.

I joined Education Reimagined on stage last month in Austin at their SXSWedu summit to dissect the question: How do we realize a new future of learning in which every child fulfills their boundless potential? Talk about your proverbial baptism by fire. Not only did I get instantly familiar with this discerning community, I stared wide-eyed at a standing-room-only crowd for a three-hour afternoon summit.

And yet, something odd began to unfold. Here I am sitting next to the other panelists sharing [Big Thought’s](#) Dallas City of Learning story about our citywide experiment that incorporates all five elements of the [transformational vision for education](#), when I was suddenly transported back to *Little House on the Prairie*. The organizers, the summit participants, and the Twittersphere referred to Big Thought staff as “Ed Pioneers.” So, I’m thinking Laura Ingalls Wilder, not business as usual at Big Thought.



Margaret Black

I kept hearing the same thing, that reference to Big Thought as an “education pioneer.” I was flummoxed. My imagination began to work double time as it filtered our work through the eyes of advocates and practitioners of learner-centered design. How would Big Thought programs resemble the spirit of American pioneers? Do we have our own little house on the prairie?

PIONEERS

Pioneers are first to explore—to settle a new area, which then opens the gates for others to occupy and develop. Big Thought launched in 1987 with the bold theory that the arts had the power to help children learn. Did our founders discover an unfamiliar territory and pave the way for creativity to flourish in Dallas schools and communities for decades to come? The organization has since grown to serve nearly 150,000 students each year by bringing relentless optimism, innovation, and imagination to the biggest challenge facing education today: the opportunity gap.

Sure, we are intimately aware that our latest venture, Dallas City of Learning, is an innovative approach using an emerging technology. But, are we pioneers? Our model is inspired by MacArthur Foundation-led research on Connected Learning, the Chicago City of Learning structure led by the Digital Youth Network, and the Wallace Foundation-led efforts to reduce summer learning loss. Our model is powered by the technology [LRNG by Collective Shift](#). Then, it dawned on me: Perhaps our joint progress towards a learner-centered paradigm is not unlike the western frontier. Maybe it does indeed share a kinship with groups of settlers in covered wagons travelling across the plains and mountain passes while banded together for mutual assistance—and survival.

This brings us back to SXSWedu, the Oregon Trail for Ed Pioneers. As I reflect on the whirlwind of inspiration that characterized those few days in Austin, I’m reminded that Ed Pioneers are not always well-known leaders or practitioners. SXSWedu does bring together educators of all kinds who are driven to make change, but it also unites policy advocates, tech entrepreneurs, journalists and (by golly!) even students. The major theme throughout the week: personalized, competency-based learning. How fitting, then, that the folks at Education Reimagined attracted such inquisitive participants during our afternoon summit.

But, I quickly learned that this group is sharp in every setting. They didn’t miss a beat during socializing at their Texas-style cocktail party. The learner-centered conversations just kept buzzing.

BAPTISM BY FIRE

My baptism by fire continued days later in another time zone. Now we’re in Arlington, Virginia where Education Reimagined convened their Advisory Board and guests for a daylong conversation on how learner-centered education could meet the needs of those students most disadvantaged in the current system. We exchanged brief handshakes, and then something became instantly clear—the signatories of the vision document could not be more diverse in their perspectives and experiences. That’s when the document sprung to life for me. Its content, theories, and elements struck me as that much more powerful. I saw firsthand that conflicting viewpoints could find harmony in a single north star.

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Margaret Black presenting at Education Reimagined's Visionary Leader Meeting (March 2016).

transforming the whole system, I again felt the pioneering presence. The word pioneer comes from Old French “peonier,” meaning foot soldier. The metaphor fits—foot soldiers do active, difficult, and unglamorous work to support a movement.

“The work is hard,” a phrase echoed by every practitioner that shared firsthand stories. Maybe this shared experience as learner-centered foot soldiers ties all of these advocates and advisors together, marching in unison on the front lines to bring the vision to life for all students. The topic was always the same: How to ensure we are serving all, including the most disadvantaged.

In Dallas, diverse stakeholders conceived the student-centered community model by asking the question: How do we level the playing field? Dallas City of Learning is a public-private citywide commitment that ensures all students have access to summer learning opportunities as we combat the growing opportunity gap disproportionately affecting low-income youth (see sidebar). While Dallas was recently named home of the fastest-growing population of millionaires, poverty in our community is intensifying. We have a 59% child asset poverty rate in Dallas, second highest of the 25 largest US counties.¹

DRIVING QUESTION

The driving question when we began the summer pilot in 2014 was: Can we create a system where low-income youth can access interest-driven programs and learn like their more affluent peers? By our second summer, we served 34,743 students—70% of whom live in the highest concentrations of poverty in Dallas. We have a long way to go to fully realize the vision, but we’re learning that it can be done. We can serve students traditionally disadvantaged by the current system through a learner-centered model.

Education Reimagined characterizes their path towards change approach as pull-from-the-bottom rather than push-from-the-top. After a mere glimpse of this group’s pioneering spirit and fresh leadership, I know the movement of foot soldiers marches on.

¹ United States Census Bureau / American FactFinder. 2009-2014 American Community Survey – 5 year. U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey Office. Tables S1501 and/or B17024 <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

COMPONENTS OF DALLAS CITY OF LEARNING

Expand the quality and reach of summer learning programs to underserved neighborhoods, acknowledging that learning programs are **open-walled** and can happen in any environment.

Comprehensive searchable catalog of learning experiences. This website is **personalized, relevant, & contextualized** because it makes visible all learning experiences, whether in-person or online, and can be searched by interest, age, location, and price. The discovery feed involves **learner agency** because each experience invites the learner to participate and provides instructions on how to engage. The learner makes the choice to engage, at the learner’s pace and in the learner’s way.

Credentialize learning in the community through digital badges, a **competency-based** tool linked to transferrable 21st century and workforce skills. The learning is **socially embedded** because earned badges may require peer review. They may be issued by a mentor or industry professional. They can be shared with peers, teachers, employers, and other gatekeepers.

Break down barriers to access by providing transportation to take kids out into the community; invest in neighborhoods to bring programs to students; deploy mobile technology to specific sites and produce free hands-on family events.