



EDUCATION WEEK / Summit

## BIG IDEAS

Thursday, Sept. 19, 2019  
1 to 3 p.m. ET

### Key Takeaways: Big Ideas in Education Summit 2019

The Education Week newsroom and researchers took a deep dive with our readers into the issues that have the potential to define—or *redefine*—education. What do these ideas have in common? They all share a sense of urgency.

We looked to you, the Education Week reader, to weigh in, get your questions answered, and think deeply on how to address the Big Ideas in K-12 education. Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Thursday, Sept. 19, 2019. Below, you can read the key takeaways that the reporters identified with Opinion Editor and Big Ideas Executive Project Editor Elizabeth Rich.



#### Are the Kids Right? Is School Boring, And Can We Do Something About It?

*Out-of-school learning is often more meaningful than anything that happens in a classroom. How can educators make school more interesting for students? How can schools surmount the relevance gap?*

► **Guests:**

- **Kevin Bushweller**, Assistant Managing Editor, Education Week
- **Andrew P. Minigan**, Director of Strategy, Education Program, Right Question Institute

► **Moderator: Michelle R. Davis**, Senior Writer & Social Media Strategist, EdWeek Market Brief

In our discussion, Kevin Bushweller, Andrew Minigan, and I explored the question of whether the most meaningful learning for students happens outside the classroom rather than inside of school. Participants noted the impact that project-based learning can have on student engagement, but said

barriers prevent getting teachers from implement this strategy effectively. One is the lack of professional development and time. Another is a lack of support from principals and administrators who don't feel comfortable with this type of learning, which can be "messy."

Additionally, we discussed the role ed-tech tools can play. Many teachers agree that technology seems to increase student engagement, but there are lots of concerns that digital tools need to be used in thoughtful ways—not just because the district has something new and shiny. It's not about replacing a paper worksheet with its equivalent on a screen.

But the reality is that districts are already wasting millions of dollars on digital tools, particularly software they already own but aren't using. So, what are the best strategies to make sure educators are making optimal and effective use of ed tech? Through my reporting, I've noted that one key is professional development—something that many districts don't make time for or invest in. When teachers have the opportunity and the training to use educational technology in an innovative way, students reap rewards.

Several participants noted that we weren't asking students about what they found boring and what inspired them when it comes to learning. Education Week recently produced a report about student-centered learning which addresses some of those issues and [provides examples of schools engaging and incorporating students](#) into that meaningful learning.



### Does K-12 Have an Innovation Problem?

***Are education leaders spending too much time chasing the latest tech trends rather than trying to maintain what they have? Is there a way to bring students into the process of making decisions that are right for the schools and the teachers who educate them. And how can schools and districts be more thoughtful and realistic about what innovation means within limited budgets?***

► **Guest: Lee Vinsel**, Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and Society, Virginia Tech Public University

► **Moderator: Alyson Klein**, Assistant Editor, Education Week

This discussion cast a skeptical eye on innovation. My guest was Lee Vinsel, a researcher from Virginia Tech, and he believes that innovation must be balanced with a "maintenance mindset." He encouraged readers to not just buy new tech for innovation's sake. First, make sure you're getting the most out of purchases within your existing systems.

That means taking stock of what you have. Assess your facilities and current staff. Consider trying out new innovations via small pilots. Think through what you're already doing and see if it's working or not, and then consider the connection points to new innovations.

Vinsel thinks districts should recognize the “maintainers” who are keeping the trains running on time. Usually, it's the folks who bring the shiny new idea that get the accolades.

Some participants questioned those conclusions. One argued that schools haven't changed very much, and innovation is needed to shake things up.



### How Do Educators See Innovation?

***Innovative—sometimes disruptive—changes sparked by technology and other forces are on the radar of education analysts. But how do educators currently working in schools and districts think about innovation? How much of a priority is it for them? And what unanswered questions do you have about innovation in education? In this conversation, analysts from the Education Week Research Center offered insights and takeaways from their national survey. They look forward to hearing your thoughts and ideas. Your feedback and insights will inform future studies.***

► **Moderators:**

- **Holly Kurtz**, Director, Education Week Research Center
- **Sterling Lloyd**, Assistant Director, Education Week Research Center

We explored the results of the Education Week Research Center's survey which examined educators' views on innovation. In this discussion, audience members acknowledged their innovation challenges and suggested potential solutions.

In the survey, educators reported that time pressures and deadlines often prevent them from innovating. One audience member suggested that a potential solution would be for school districts to reserve time for educators to experiment and try out new ideas. These education “sandboxes” would allow room to play around with innovative concepts seemed promising.

The survey results also showed that educators aren't monolithic. For instance, when teachers and school principals try to innovate, they might be driven by different motivations than district leaders. In our survey, both teachers and school principals most often said their efforts to innovate are driven by the goal of increasing student achievement. District leaders most often cited a need to keep pace with a changing economy.

Summit participants reacted to those results and recommended strategies to bridge those gaps by bringing various stakeholders to the table, changing administrative structures, improving professional development, and helping educators deal with the fact that change can be intimidating.



### Special Education Is Broken. Where Do We Go From Here?

***What is the future of special education? More than 40 years after students with disabilities were legally guaranteed a “free, appropriate public education,” many still don’t receive the education they deserve. Policies, practices, and funding are at a crossroads with the education law, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is more than 10 years overdue for reauthorization. What questions should we consider if Congress picks up the law again?***

- ▶ **Guest: Melody Musgrove**, Co-Director of the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning and Assistant Professor of Special Education, University of Mississippi
- ▶ **Moderator: Christina A. Samuels**, Associate Editor, Education Week

There is no question that special educators, students with disabilities, and their families are working hard every day to make special education work. But special education presents some unique pressures. Many who participated in this summit pointed out the training, retention, and development of special education teachers as a top issue facing the field as a whole.

Among the issues discussed:

- Special educators in some cases earn less than their general education peers;
- Teaching students with disabilities can be a high-pressure area;
- Special educators must be familiar with the law and the paperwork required to document that they’re following students’ education plan; and
- Special education teachers often feel isolated in their schools.

Among the solutions discussed: a bigger push towards “dual certification” programs that prepare teaching candidates to education both general and special education students. Summit participants also talked about changing the mindset of school leaders and other teachers, so that students with disabilities are seen as learners first, rather than perceived as being someone else’s concern. And, even though the IDEA is overdue, there was concern that today’s political climate might not be favorable for discussing an overhaul of a law that summit participants feel is essential to ensuring students’ rights. Even with its imperfections, they see the overall principles of the law worth maintaining.



## Year-End Testing: Are We Learning Yet?

***A world without annual testing may be closer than you think, but it would come with some serious tradeoffs. Is it really time to kill annual testing? What would be the alternatives and the disadvantages?***

- ▶ **Guest: Andrew Ho**, Charles William Eliot Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- ▶ **Moderator: Stephen Sawchuk**, Associate Editor, Education Week

My Big Ideas article was essentially born out of frustration over circular debates in testing. We're currently locked into a system that requires us to test annually. And despite advances, this makes it a lot harder to measure more complex knowledge and skills, because that takes money and time. I posed a few different options for rethinking annual testing, and the potential benefits (and sacrifices) that they'd entail.

Our readers were intrigued by some of these options, and they offered further criticisms of our current system. One pointed out that annual testing is predicated on producing more information for school systems and families. But, in fact, the results aren't available in a timely fashion, so teachers generally can't use them to support students.

Another focus of the discussion: "benchmark" or interim assessments. These tests aren't required, but districts give them over the course of the year to predict how students will score. One participant said he'd had a hard time even scheduling them all in; others spoke about their perceived lack of quality, alignment to the curriculum. Ultimately, as guest Andrew Ho pointed out, if teachers find them useful and informative, that's great, but if they are not valuable, they are simply contributing to "over testing." Our current landscape isn't going to change much for now, Ho suggested, but there will continue to be interest in improving the quality and ease of use of digital (online) assessments, probably more experiments with local control (under the Education Department's pilot program), and research on how large datasets about achievement can be used to supplement test results.

The audience was also interested in teachers' use of assessments, with some supporting new models that would deepen teacher buy-in, and others expressing concern about the quality of teacher-made exams and their preparation to make them.

The bottom line: Testing is complex, and how we use it and for what purposes involves trade-offs. We need to look at those in the face if we want to create a system that works better for teachers and students.



### The Black Achievement Paradox Nobody's Talking About

***What can we learn from how military-affiliated K-12 schools educate children whose lives—and learning—are constantly disrupted by moves, new friends, emotional challenges, and more. Emerging research on military-connected students and a new ESSA mandate will be able to shine light on an unusual finding: Black students in these schools outperform their civilian peers.***

- ▶ **Guest:** Doug Mesecar, Research Fellow for Education, Lexington Institute, Arlington, Va.
- ▶ **Moderator:** Daarel Burnette, II, Staff Writer, Education Week

Military communities are often more organized than community advocacy groups and can articulate the sorts of academic programming they want for their children. The military can be willing to pour millions of dollars in grants into a district to meet those demands.

Many participants asked what schools that serve military-connected students do that's different than schools that don't serve a high population of military-connected students. They also asked what sorts of new requirements ESSA has of states and how researchers can use that data to provide clues to military students' performance. There was also broader talk about some of the underlying causes of the achievement gap and how districts can address it.

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**For more information about the Big Ideas in Education, read the entire report here:**  
[www.edweek.org/go/K12BigIdeas](http://www.edweek.org/go/K12BigIdeas).

The Big Ideas in Education 2020 special report will be published on Jan. 8, 2020. Be sure to look out for it. We want your ideas, too, as we develop this report now and in the future.

Please feel free to reach out to us at [BigIdeas@EducationWeek.org](mailto:BigIdeas@EducationWeek.org)