


# **Identifying the Most Pressing Needs of Kansas City Schools**

Findings from LEANLAB Education's  
Listening Tour





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# The Need

I grew up in a suburb of Kansas City, raised by a Puerto Rican transplant and a fourth generation Kansas Citian—both entrepreneurial community organizers committed enough to spend the last 35 years fighting for social justice in Kansas City’s most under-resourced neighborhoods, yet privileged enough to move to a nearby suburb with a high performing public school district. This awareness of such dualities and disparities in our city provided a consistent backdrop to my upbringing. Such inequities were constant conversation topics at the dinner table of my youth; and drilled into me from a young age was an unnerving awareness of how these disparities revealed themselves systemically—in healthcare, housing, and education.

As a lover of learning from an early age, I understood the freedom associated with access to knowledge but I couldn’t imagine a world where other children—many also of latin parents from distant places—couldn’t access a quality education. It was inconceivable to me that such a world existed merely minutes from my house.

Ten years ago, I returned to Kansas City to teach in our city’s schools. I taught in a district school that closed and then helped a charter school open. I’ve watched our district lose Superintendents, accreditation, and enrollment, only to rebuild its board of directors, attract a dynamic new leader and reopen schools. Over this last decade, it’s important to note, on the aggregate, our schools have improved. And while our student achievement numbers do not yet reflect all of the progress that needs to be made, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the incredible gains in public perception, stability of leadership, and general hopefulness that has begun surrounding our city’s schools—both charter and district. This positivity, this bend of the arc, keeps me committed to this work and refuels me year after year.

When I initially started LEANLAB Education, it was in response to a different, but related, problem. I felt that even when I was making solid gains with the students in my middle school math classroom, I was never making them quickly and meaningfully enough. I was never able to confidently look into each of my students’ eyes and promise them a fair shot at the future.

Instead, I was teaching in under-resourced classrooms, using century-old teaching models to address astonishing gaps in a learning, in a world evolving at an unprecedented rate. I became convinced that we would need to radically reevaluate and even reinvent our approach to school if my students were ever going to have a chance in this newly emerging world. It would require the development of a new, inclusive

process that would allow for the creation of new services, resources, pedagogies, and tools that could better prepare our students of today for the realities of tomorrow. And this process would require that we listen intently to those closest to the issues of education—parents, students, and teachers—and collaborate with them throughout the entire innovation process, from concept through refinement and on to the launch of initiatives into schools.

Since we began our journey, we've trained over 400 education entrepreneurs, convened thousands more and launched 22 new ventures that have impacted 8,000 of our region's children and more than 1,000,000 nationwide. Last year, we launched an annual listening tour to better understand the needs of our school community. The following paper reveals our newest findings from our community. Their voices now act as the guide and foundation of our work.

New to 2018, we will be partnering with select school sites to create living laboratories where innovators will collaboratively design innovations alongside students, teachers, and administrators. However, while I am sincerely proud of this progress, this progress is not enough.

The current rate at which students are improving their learning outcomes in Kansas City is insufficient if we want to ensure that all students in our classrooms today are able to receive a quality education. According to the Missouri Comprehensive Data System (MCDS), in the 2015-2016 school year, 35% students attending traditional public and public charter schools within the boundaries of Kansas City Public School were proficient or advanced in ELA and math combined. Since 2013, this number has increased at a rate of only 1% per year. In comparison, the Missouri state average of students proficient or advanced in English Language Arts is 55%, revealing a 20% gap. At this rate, it would take at least twenty years to close that gap in student outcomes between our Kansas City schools and the state average. This means that the majority students sitting in our city's classrooms today will not experience a high quality education by the time they graduate.

Too many classrooms and teachers face the same frustrations I faced five years ago. We still have much work left to do. While I write this with urgency, I also write this with hope. We can leverage the progress that has been made and harness it as momentum. This momentum can propel us into a new, unprecedented future where all children have access to the future they deserve.

To that future,

**Katie Boody**

*CEO & Co-founder, LEANLAB Education*

# Introduction

The slowed rate of change in Kansas City schools along with a quickly evolving world, necessitating rapid shifts in existing educational models, leaves those working for educational equity at a moral crossroads; if we continue on the path of tried-and-true, best practices, we risk making incremental gains that insufficiently prepare the millions of students being under-served by our current education system. So, it can be reasoned that we must do two things:

1

Learn why gains in student outcomes are occurring at such an incremental rate from those most impacted by the system itself—students, parents, and educators.

2

Cultivate the research and development of new initiatives, technologies, and practices that can rapidly accelerate educational outcomes.

In 2017 we launched an annual listening practice to help us better understand the needs of our education landscape. We then used this information to inform our innovation practices and programs for the remaining year, namely our K12 Fellowship program that provides support for emerging education innovators who are developing solutions in alignment with our community's needs.



In 2018 we wanted to build upon our learnings in 2017 and better understand what schools in Kansas City need in order to prepare students for the future. To do so, we conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with a diverse set of students, parents, teachers, and administrators who were representative of the Kansas City population at large and distilled the commonalities between these stakeholders.

## INNOVATION PRIORITIES

- Lack of coordination between schools, communities, and industry.
- Communication breakdown between parents and schools.
- Students desire more engaging learning opportunities.

"Innovation Priorities" are those problems felt deeply throughout our community that we focus on during our K12 Fellowship. These priorities guide our fellowship recruitment, selection processes, and programming.

To frame the conversations this year, we culled data from Pew<sup>1</sup>, McKinsey<sup>2</sup>, and the U.S. Global Change Research Program<sup>3</sup> in order to inform participants of demographic, climate, and labor-force data. We presented this data to give participants a general idea of what potential challenges students might face and what the world would look like in 2065, when our kindergarteners today will be ending their time in the workforce. Our goal was to learn what skills the Kansas City community felt would be most vital to a students' success in the decades to come. Though there exist reputable analyses from McKinsey and Pearson<sup>4</sup> about what skills will be in demand in the future, we thought it imperative to hear from our community first; and in doing so, we are not only giving the community a voice in the innovation process but looking to the community to lead the innovation process. We believe that, ultimately, this will create better received and more effective education innovations.

Some of the more meaningful observations occurred where our research and the listening tour data overlapped. The McKinsey Global Institute's Report on automation (McKinsey, 2017) states that six out of ten jobs could have 30% of their work automated right now and that 15% of the workforce could be displaced by automation by 2030, but the best preparation for this eventuality isn't solely to increase STEM skills but to also focus on those skills that cannot be automated like social and emotional learning.

1. "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (September 28, 2015).

2. *Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: Workforce Transitions in a Time of Automations*, McKinsey Global Institute, December 2017.

3. *U.S. National Climate Assessment: Climate Change Impacts in the United States*. U.S. Global Change Research Program

4. *Future of Skills: Employment in 2030*, Pearson, September 2017

McKinsey states that, “adaptation will require higher educational attainment, or spending more time on activities that require social and emotional skills, creativity, high-level cognitive capabilities,” (2017) and this focus was mirrored in the data from the listening tour. We discovered a meaningful sample-size in Kansas City that were also focused on honing students’ social and emotional skills.

Along with a focus on social and emotional learning, the two other skills Kansas City views as paramount in the preparation of students in the decades to come are critical thinking and literacy. These three skills, though distinct, all serve a similar purpose. They are skills focused on allowing students to better understand the world around them and make purposeful decisions in their lives beyond the education system.

## AUTOMATION

6 of 10

current occupations have more than 30% of activities that are technically automatable

15%

of the workforce could be displaced by automation by 2030

The need for social and emotional skills for students in Kansas City is not only a call for students to learn social behaviors and appropriate ways to deal with emotional stressors but a reaction to—as one administrator puts it—“the extreme mental health crises we have going on in our area right now,” and the need for the education system to take a trauma-informed approach to education.

Literacy skills are an ongoing focus of Kansas City schools (referring to Kansas City Public Schools and public charters) but at the current rate of growth, literacy skills in Kansas City won’t be on par with the rest of the state for another twenty years<sup>1</sup>. Literacy interventions are a key lever to improve student outcomes and are also crucial because many of our respondents saw literacy as a foundational element to serve our third area of focus: critical thinking. Many of the stakeholders we interviewed expressed varying degrees of frustration with the structural elements of the education system and wanted to prepare students for the future with more critical thinking skills instead of an education model that was geared toward testing. Though the world of 2065 seems distant and fundamentally uncertain, one of the best tools we can give our students is the ability to think critically.

These three innovation priorities guide us in our innovation work, as we seek startups that are addressing these problems. Our listening tour is conducted so that we may uncover the most pressing problems affecting Kansas City schools and find education entrepreneurs in alignment with these problems. The reliance on the community doesn’t

1. Missouri Comprehensive Data System: *District Report Card*, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

end with our listening tour, though. Our goal is to involve the community at every stage of the innovation process; we depend on the community to surface problems, give feedback on innovations, and use iterative methods in the development process of innovations. We believe that this method creates optimal results for the community, who receive the best solutions for the problems they are facing in education right now and for the years to come, and also for the entrepreneurs that are able to gain immersive experience in the communities that they hope to serve.

2018

## INNOVATION PRIORITIES

- Mental health and social-emotional learning supports.
- Advanced literacy skills.
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills.



# Methodology

Individuals and focus-groups participated in either a scripted interview process or an online survey. Those individuals and focus-group interviews were audio recorded and ranged from seventeen minutes to an hour and a half. These recordings were transcribed in order to be coded for research purposes. In total, there were thirty-six individual interviews, one focus group, and twenty-eight online survey completions.

Target schools were those within the Kansas City, Missouri metro area that had the highest concentrations of student populations qualifying for Free & Reduced Lunch (FRL), qualify as special education (SPED), are English Language Learners (ELL) or identify as minorities.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- *What are the high points of your day at your position?*
- *What are the low points of your day at your position?*
- *In 2065, when kindergarteners would be at the tail-end of their careers, America will consist primarily of people of color, as reported by Pew Research. White people will make up around 48% of the population and there will be a majority foreign-born population. McKinsey also came out with a study that stated in 2030, at least 60% of jobs will be 30% automated. And in regard to climate, we will have more extreme weather in the United States, increased precipitation in the Midwest, and an increased frequency of hurricanes on the East Coast. Given this, what do you think students need to be learning now to be ready for that future?*
- *What should schools be doing right now to help kids gain the skills needed for this future?*
- *Who is responsible for implementing these changes to prepare students for the future?*
- *Where and how do you see yourself in building this future?*

Three counseling psychology doctoral students from UMKC worked together to complete transcriptions of all audio recordings. Two of those doctoral students, who have extensive qualitative experience, collaborated on coding the transcripts and online responses. Coding was examined for recurring themes and both coders participated in discussion in order to agree on themes.

# What are the high points of your day at your position?

## Themes

- 29 Interpersonal interactions
- 17 Seeing growth in children
- 11 Completing job duties
- 7 Advocacy
- 4 Great staff
- 4 Student environment
- 3 Collaboration
- 2 Teacher environment

n=

### What are the high points of your day at your position?

The majority of responses indicated that interpersonal interactions and seeing growth in children were the high points of their day. Interactions specifically referred to interacting with students through one-on-ones, groups, or instruction. A teacher at a target school stated, "I love interacting with my kids. Even when I get to go in and finally sit down with my small groups inside the classrooms, that's great to be able to interact with them and help them out."

In regard to growth, seeing students learn, understand, and grow was another high point of respondents' days. A principal at a target school, stated, "They're hilarious, tiny human beings and seeing them grow and learn and work through something and seeing the progress from day to day or week to week; it's really fulfilling. This is why teachers get the job.

You don't teach because of the money. You don't teach for the other helpers in the building. You don't teach for the parents. You teach for the kids."

**"You don't teach because of the money. You don't teach for the other helpers in the building. You don't teach for the parents. You teach for the kids."**

Respondents discussed completing their job duties as a high point of their day in reference to how those duties directly or indirectly benefit students or how the respondents found their job tasks enjoyable. Also, some respondents identified advocacy as a high point, which are efforts that range from improving school infrastructure to access to resources.

Student environment was another theme, defined as students being well-behaved and the school providing opportunities for the schools to be successful. Another teacher at a target school stated, "I feel like I'm good enough at planning the curriculum and

implementing the curriculum that if my kids are in class and they behave, [...] they can usually do the learning they need to do.”

Collaboration referred to the respondents’ position allowing them to work with others to improve the educational experience. The theme of teacher environment referred to teachers feeling supported and autonomous.

## Question 2

### What are the low points of your day at your position?

#### Themes

n=	31	Culture/environment
	14	Job duties
	9	Communication barriers
	4	Mental health
	4	Student readiness
	3	Above school-level barriers
	2	Guilt
	2	Other
		<i>Did not provide enough context to understand the meaning</i>

#### What are the low points of your day at your position?

The majority of responses were in regard to the culture and environment of the workplace. This included not having enough time to teach, teachers yelling a lot, students having disciplinary issues, lack of resources, and poor leadership.

A teacher at a target school stated, “my building is very... a very negative place right now. The mood is really bad. Teachers feel very defeated and very unsupported and that just rubs off on everyone. And so, there are some kids who are kind of out of control and you don’t feel like you’re getting any support there; so what do you do?”

Many respondents reported their job duties were low points as they either had too many meetings, tasks, or felt overworked. One teacher at a target school stated, “all of the duties. [...] My time, to me, is more effective teaching than walking around



**"My time, to me, is more effective teaching than walking around making sure the kids are following directions."**

making sure the kids are following directions. [...] I was not hired to be a duty person. I'm here to teach."

Other respondents identified communication barriers with parents and a lack of communication among school staff as the low points of their day.

Respondents also noticed the students' need for mental health supports due to general stressors and traumas and the difficulty of accessing mental health resources. A principal at a target school stated, "the mental health. The extreme mental health crisis that we've going on in the area right now. [...] it's just a system that is almost impossible to navigate. I say it all of the time[...] if I cannot navigate the mental health system, how are my parents doing it that are working three jobs to keep food at the table and don't have time to call or it's a foreign language. Literally. [...] So, you have that whole piece. That is the hardest part. And the level of trauma that my students are incurring is gut-wrenching at times."

Student readiness referred to students not having the necessary/expected level of academic skills, student apathy, and low student expectation from others. Above school level barriers referred to how the United States' sociopolitical climate is impacting students, district, and state constraints on testing, and the relocation of upper level school administration. Guilt referred to respondents' sense of responsibility to students but being unable to "help" the student.

*"The level of trauma that my students are incurring is gut-wrenching at times."*

In 2065, when kindergarteners would be at the tail-end of their careers, America will consist primarily of people of color, as reported by Pew Research. White people will make up around 48% of the population and there will be a majority foreign-born population. McKinsey also came out with a study that stated in 2030, at least 60% of jobs will be 30% automated. And in regard to climate, we will have more extreme weather in the United States, increased precipitation in the Midwest, and an increased frequency of hurricanes on the East Coast. Given this,

# what do you think students need to be learning now to be ready for that future?

## Themes



### What do you think students need to be learning now to be ready for that future?

The majority of responses were in regard to life skills; specifically, critical thinking, communication skills, living in a pluralistic society, social skills, and survival skills. Respondents stated that students need more self-direction and also need to be able to use technology to solve problems, decipher faulty/flawed arguments, display growth intra- and interpersonally in regard to communication and empathy, display resilience, flexibility, time management, express their ideas and emotions, and develop high levels of cultural competency.

A principal at a target school stated, "but on top of that, with the world changing the way it is, they need to be able to think and to analyze to make critical decisions [...] Companies need people who can think, who are creative, who can make decisions. They don't need people standing on the assembly line anymore."

The theme of educational experiences encompasses the need for curriculum changes to either incorporate "real world" experiences (e.g. internships), provide more opportunities to develop computer literacy, STEM skills, or coding. A board member at a target school stated, "I really feel like we need to do more across the board to have what happens in schools model what happens in the real world. You know, more independent time outside the classroom for students to explore, to learn on their own."

The theme of literacy referred to students' need to develop strong reading, writing, and analyzing skills. Respondents pointed out that the basic ability to read and write needs to be built upon to help students apply those skills into comprehending, synthesizing, and making inferences. One teacher at a target school stated, "they need to learn a lot more than how to identify the plot and point of view in a book. They really need to be able to [...] make decisions based on their own thought process instead of what's fed to them."

The theme of socioemotional/mental health needs refer to the need to improve students' emotional intelligence and general mental health. Respondents also spoke to the high levels of traumas students face and the need for the education system to take a trauma-informed approach to education.



**With the world changing the way it is, they need to be able to think and to analyze to make critical decisions.**



## What should schools be doing right now to help kids gain the skills needed for this future?

### Themes

n=	31	Goal-focused learning
	11	Recruitment and staff
	10	Applying skills/critical thinking
	10	Collaboration
	9	Empowerment
	8	Structural changes
	7	Social and emotional needs
	2	Student self-accountability

### What should schools be doing right now to help kids gain the skills needed for this future?

The majority of responses were in regard to goal-focused learning, which referred to implementing changes and improvements to the curriculum schools are using. Examples given are classes in specific topics, increasing the range of disciplines, and introducing more technology into the coursework. An Executive Director at a charter school stated, "information technology, actually right now, is widening the gap and it's not because of accessibility, it's because of use. [...] if I had a parent describe how they use their telephone, many are very limited to social media and entertainment and it is alarming to them. And so that worries me. [...] they're very focused on access and access is not the problem. The kids have access on their phone."

Many respondents believed schools should improve the recruitment, retainment, training, and preparation of teachers in the schools in order to prepare students for the world in 2065. A teacher at a target school stated, "it needs to be the teachers and educators. [They] need to have a better understanding of those standards and

how to use assessments. [...] I don't think teachers have the time to really understand the content that they should be teaching."

**"They're very focused on access and access is not the problem. The kids have access on their phones"**

Other respondents believed schools should help students apply the necessary skills, such as critical thinking, into completing their assignments. A manager at a target program stated, "teaching the arts and teaching through the arts. Emphasizing

project-based learning. Creating opportunities for dialogue and meaningful experiences with students/adults who are different from them. Providing (or directing teachers toward) high-quality professional development for educators and administrators."

Some respondents believed schools should improve collaborations by connecting with other districts and professionals/resources in students' field of interests, so students can gain insight and knowledge about those fields in an applied setting.

The theme of empowerment referred to schools providing students the spaces to engage in their interests and the flexibility to express themselves freely. The theme of structural changes referred to schools providing better resources, challenging the state and federal government, and changing the school environment for students.

Addressing socioemotional needs referred to schools providing better training on mental health for teachers, better mental health resources, and trauma-informed learning. Student self-accountability referred to providing students independence in the classroom setting.

## Question 5

### Who is responsible for implementing these changes to prepare students for the future?

#### Themes

n=

- 23 Everyone
- 19 Educators - *working directly with students*
- 9 Community members
- 9 Students and families
- 6 The school district
- 5 The government
- 3 Structural changes
- 2 Educational professionals - *not working directly with students*

### Who is responsible for implementing these changes to prepare students for the future?

The majority of respondents believed that “everyone” was responsible. This group of responses were from interviewees who stated multiple persons as responsible or simply stated “everyone”. It includes teachers, parents, administrators, the community, students, policy makers, and the local community.

A school-board member at a target school, stated “Everyone. Haha, I know that is a really high bar. Community, parents, teachers, administration, the students, we all gotta come together. I think it creates buy-in too. I think administrators, teachers, those who’re working in the profession have the obligation to be knowledgeable, to be innovative, to be risk-takers. I think parents and community need to be forward thinking, they need to be open to change. They need to be willing to learn what they do not know and

be willing to support efforts. And then students need to be not afraid to give their feedback, to have a voice in their future, to have a voice in their education, and to be open-minded.”

Many respondents specifically stated educators as responsible, and this included the “school,” teachers, and administrators. Another teacher at a target school, stated “I think teachers are going to have to build a network and [pause] I think teachers are going to have to somehow get together and share ideas with each other and say, ‘Hey, how did this work for you? I tried this?’ or ‘that did not work for me, this is what worked.’”

Students and families referred specifically to students and families as those responsible to demand and request changes. One parent stated, “Parents; [...] for the first set of foundational years of the kids’ life, they were with you most of the time. So parents need to have that stake in their kid’s education and life. And exposing them to as many things as they can. And if they’re not being exposed at the school you have to figure out ways to; either, through the church, through whatever.”

Some respondents stated the community as a whole is responsible for the changes. The theme of the district was also mentioned as responsible, grouping all district level staff and the board of education as responsible. Some respondents believed the government was responsible, and this included the President, Congress, legislators, and the Federal and State government. A few responses believed the responsibility falls on changing the curriculum and educational degree guidelines. Educational professionals who don’t work directly with students were also identified, specifically educational researchers.



**Students need to be not afraid to give their feedback, to have a voice in their future, to have a voice in their education, and to be open-minded.”**



## Where and how do you see yourself in building this future?

### Themes

- 27 Professional development
- 14 Maintaining current duties
- 12 Working to implement structural changes
- 6 Career change
- 4 Community involvement
- 1 Career choice
- 1 General wellness
- 3 Unsure
- 3 Other

n=

### Where and how do you see yourself in building this future?

The majority of responses said their involvement in building the future of education was some form of professional development, as either a mentor or leader; or to coach, develop, train, and prepare educators; or connect students and families to appropriate resources. An administrators at a target school stated, "if you're really an instructional leader, that means that you're always learning because we know the most effective teachers are always learning with their kids as well as sharing new ideas with their kids."

Many respondents stated they would maintain their current role and duties by either continuing what they are doing or improving how they are doing it. A teacher at a target school stated she would continue what she is doing by "fostering creative and critical thinking through visual and performance art."

Other respondents reported being involved in structural changes as either being an advocate, creating new models, or working to get a position at the district, state, or federal level to begin making changes.

**"The most effective teachers are always learning with their kids as well as sharing new ideas with their kids."**

An Executive Director at a charter school stated, "I would like to be a model for an innovative school; I would also like to, at some point, be

able to help push out this paradigm, in terms of using very limited metrics to determine school quality, but first I have to achieve on the current metric for (laughs) anybody to take me seriously."

Less common responses mentioned career changes, and this included interviewees completely changing their positions to either going into mental health or leaving the classroom in order to help students. The theme of community involvement included helping parents and the community understand what resources are available to them. Career choice was mentioned by a student interviewee and this included being a lawyer, president, teacher, or social worker. General wellness was mentioned as improving eating habits of children, so they are energized and aware in the classroom.

# Conclusion

We need to find ways to accelerate the outcomes of our most vulnerable students that are in our classrooms right now because the projected, twenty-year time-line<sup>1</sup> to get students in Kansas City on track with the Missouri state average is too long. Our listening tour is a way to better understand the immediate challenges our schools are facing and the challenges they will face in the decades to come. In order to guide our innovation efforts, we focused on question three: *what do you think students need to be learning now to be ready for that future?*

This question gave us the clearest idea of how we could build the future of education and, consequently, we recruited ventures from across the country specializing in social and emotional learning/mental health, literacy, and critical thinking. We accepted six ventures into our fellowship program this year to begin the important work of co-designing their innovations in Kansas City schools.

Our goal is to achieve educational equity in Kansas City schools through innovation and ultimately seek out and provide support to innovative ventures that can scale their impact on a national level. We believe that the best way to do this is through community-informed innovations; innovations that are, firstly, needed by the community and then developed with feedback from the community members that are actually using them. Our 2018 listening tour gave us a much richer understanding of the needs of our community, building upon the insights of last year's listening tour. We look forward to the continued iteration of this process and discovering how our community's needs have evolved in 2019.

**// Education is a safe space. It is growth. It is justice. //**

-Kansas City Public School Teacher

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1. Missouri Comprehensive Data System: *District Report Card*, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.