XQ focuses on transformational high schools. Where does the focus on high school come from, and why is it important?

Everything we do is driven by our belief that transforming high schools makes everything else stronger. High schools are the fulcrum for driving improvement and closing gaps across the education system, from the lower grades to higher ed, and eventually that benefits our workforce, our communities, and our entire country. But are we doing right by all of our high school students? Are we doing everything possible to put them in a position to succeed? High schools aren’t making the grade—despite the best efforts of so many educators, parents, advocates, and others. That’s for a few reasons.

One, high schools are stuck in the past. We’ve gone from the Model T to Tesla, from typewriters to touchscreens. But high schools operate the way they did for our grandparents. Desks in rows. Students in seats. Seven bells and single-subject courses. The world today demands graduates who are highly competent in math, science, and history, who can thrive as both collaborative and independent learners. Yet most schools are still relying on a century-old system that hasn’t kept up with a changing world.

Two, high schools are inequitable. To be clear, they aren’t working well enough for any student in preparing them for success. But if you are a student of color or from a low-income family, the odds are particularly stacked against you. Just look at the data. Achievement gaps among students of different races and family incomes not only persist but continue to widen. It’s a national shame this is still happening in the year 2021.

Three, high schools are overlooked. People have paid a lot of attention to preK, K-6, and college. But, come on, we all know high schools are being ignored. Isn’t it time we invest in the potential of teens instead of being cynical about them? The human brain continues to develop significantly during the adolescent years. It’s also a time when people experience big changes in how they think for themselves, interact with others, and figure out their place in the world. We can’t keep looking away at a time when we can be most impactful. The longer we fail to act, the longer we hurt our young people and our own collective future.

In your work on Super Schools, what state or local conditions do you see as improving or hindering chances for success?

I’m a student of history. One thing that’s been proven time and again is that community agency is how you make progress stick. True, sustained change starts when everyone comes together to create a shared vision for the future and works together to achieve it.
We empower communities to dream big and smart, which is what Super Schools are all about. We decided to launch a competition in 2015 that invited communities to rethink and reimagine a new approach to high school. The response was overwhelming. More than 10,000 people in 50 states formed teams. What started as a small group of school winners has grown into a thriving collection of innovative public high schools.

The XQ cohort currently includes 18 schools—16 from the original competition and 2 from our partnership with Rhode Island. We partner with them to bring their different visions to life. In doing so, we have seen some common themes about what needs to happen for these schools to succeed.

First, there needs to be authentic engagement from a diverse group of stakeholders. That’s how you fuel movements that last. A lot of efforts get stuck because parents, teachers, and school officials are on different pages. Instead, there needs to be alignment toward a common goal. For example, the idea for Crosstown High School in Memphis, Tennessee, began when a local parent saw an XQ billboard. She sent an email to everyone she thought might be interested, from other parents, teachers, and students to local architects, business owners, and community leaders. All told, around 70 people came together to dream big about what they wanted for their community. And now that vision has been brought to life with a school that focuses on real-world learning in a former Sears distribution center alongside more than 40 businesses, nonprofits, and civic groups.

All our schools align with what we call Learner Goals and Design Principles. Our Learner Goals are the educational outcomes we believe students need to thrive in today’s world—like being original thinkers and generous collaborators. And our Design Principles outline what schools need to achieve these outcomes—from having a strong mission and culture, to community partnerships, to lifting up the voice of local youth. Alignment around XQ Learner Goals and Design Principles is so important because change is never linear. Common principles and a shared vision ensure that our efforts stay on course. I want to emphasize the importance of rigorous learning and superb, well-trained, diverse teachers, especially for those students who need great teaching and learning most.

Second, communities need a proven ability to leverage and connect community assets. For example, Grand Rapids Public Museum School is located in a historic downtown building that connects to the Grand Rapids Public Museum archives. Students use and explore more than 250,000 cultural and historic artifacts and also help museum staff collect, process, and curate new materials in a design lab and help design and update existing exhibits. How amazing is that?

Partnerships like this are just so critical. Schools don’t operate in silos. They are impacted by everything around them: the transportation options, the housing, the strength of the local economy, and the civic institutions. All of these assets need to be brought together, and work together, to deliver meaningful progress.

Lastly, there needs to be a strong appetite for change. Transforming a century-old school system can’t be done with half measures. Every single day, there needs to be urgency. There has to be ambition, to not just change one school, but to change all the high schools in a state or district within five years. Communities need to be 100% all-in.

What questions can state board members ask to spur action on reinventing schools?

Before anything else, I want to express my deepest gratitude to state board members across the country. It’s been such a hard year—I know that all of you have gone above and beyond to help your students and their parents through this unprecedented time.

The last year underscores how important state board members are in addressing needs and driving change. All of us at XQ know how necessary it is to learn from you, and work with you, if we are going to transform our nation’s high schools. And that means every community needs to answer some fundamental questions. First, it’s important to explore the data. How are we doing on big issues like access to challenging coursework, high school
noticed that very few public school students from underrepresented backgrounds were going to Purdue University. So partners from the university and across the state came together to create this school to prepare first-generation college students for a STEM career. Because the model is so strong and demand is so great, that high school has already been replicated twice elsewhere in Indiana.

The first thing that any state effort should recognize is that transforming high schools isn’t just an education issue. Don’t get me wrong: Students, parents, and educators should be central to any team. But everyone has a stake. What we do in these schools impacts young people, families, communities, the economy, the entire country. This means multiple students representing the diversity of that state’s high school experience should be there. Parents, representatives from community-based organizations, and the business community should also be there. And, of course, educators, a cross-functional group of SEA staff, and representatives from local and state institutions of higher education. You’re going to need a pretty big table because reimagining schools is a big effort.

But what’s just as important as who is at the table is how these efforts are managed. Ultimately, you’ll need one owner to drive the project. In Rhode Island, the state commissioner created a position to coordinate the cross-functional work and oversee the transformation of all high schools.

In addition, there has to be urgency at every level. In Rhode Island, the governor and other state officials made clear that this was a priority and not just another initiative, which is helping make sure these conversations ultimately lead to action and results.

How has student voice changed the trajectory of XQ’s work?

All our work is anchored in student voice. In fact, as we were developing XQ, Board Chair and Co-Founder Laurene Powell and I had dozens of deep, candid conversations with young people across the country so we could hear directly what they wanted and needed. Our engagement
Our students meet with us weekly to share insights on their high school experience. They help inform our design ideas.

with them has remained central to XQ ever since and in a number of ways.

One, we learn from students by listening all the time. We have a student advisory committee. Our students meet with us weekly to share insights on their high school experience. They help inform our design ideas. In fact, the XQ Super School in Elizabethton, Tennessee, was designed by the students themselves as a project assigned by their teachers.

Two, we empower students. We've created an online community called Rethink Together where high school students, and others, can engage and learn—everything from how to find internships, to bringing art and activism into the classroom, to how to write a letter to their local school board. Students have been part of every school design team, both in the original competition and in our subsequent partnerships with New York City and Rhode Island. In 2020, when we invited students from across New York City to join a citywide advisory group, more than 3,600 responded. It’s truly amazing to see how engaged these young people are and what they can do.

Finally, we celebrate students, we applaud their achievements. Last year, we brought the nation together for a multinetwok simulcast called Graduate Together that reached 60 million homes, along with a massive virtual yearbook. More than 23,500 students submitted speeches, poems, videos, ideas, testimonials, and photos. Leaders like President Obama, LeBron James, and many others joined us that evening to let the Class of 2020 know we were proud of them, and to keep going, because our futures depend on them.

Pilots sometimes falter during the scale-up phase. What was an unexpected challenge you did not anticipate when moving to scale in Rhode Island?

Rhode Island was our first state partnership. Together, we’re engaging communities to transform every one of their 64 high schools into student-centered institutions. We are partnering on a number of efforts. For example, we did an Educational Opportunity Audit, which gathered data from thousands of student transcripts, surveys of students, parents and teachers, and focus groups. We looked for hidden patterns and obstacles that were blocking students from being prepared for college or a career. And we delivered our findings back to the schools. In May 2020, we rolled up our school-level findings into our first-ever state-level report and shared it with Rhode Island officials—including state board members—showing them evidence of serious, but addressable, inequities in college eligibility and preparedness. They took it very seriously and began taking action.

One thing that’s been reinforced for us throughout this process is the importance of leaders who share our deep conviction that high school transformation is necessary and possible. Even in the thick of the COVID crisis, Chancellor Infante-Green remained steadfast in her determination to bring needed change to the state’s high schools. Our partnership remained strong, in part because we had built a framework that proved durable.

We’ve also started a new initiative to tackle one of the toughest challenges: Algebra 1. We’re creating a truly engaging, project-based curriculum alongside best-in-class experts and educators that’s designed to reach every student, even those who are disaffected from math. This is essential, of course, because only 50 percent of students who leave high school unprepared in math finish their remedial math requirements in college—which means they cannot graduate.

So we mean it when we say that we are really trying to be a learning organization. Because when you’re doing things that have never been done before, you’re always going to need to find new allies, new challenges, new insights, and new learnings. This work isn’t easy. But it’s necessary. And we look forward to partnering with more and more local leaders across the country to reinvent high schools, give all students the education they deserve, and build a better future for all of us.