Are we designing the future of education?

Or is emerging technology designing it for us?

Insights from the recent design call with the iF AI Education Collaborative

Education is at a defining moment. AI and emerging technologies present an urgent choice: design to simply accelerate efficiency and scale within existing systems, or design to catalyze a fundamentally different future for learning. **In December 2025, Intentional Futures (iF) brought together an intentional group of 40+ top cross-sector leaders**—superintendents, AI researchers, philanthropic leaders, early childhood innovators, EdTech builders, and policy architects. Across the conversation, a clear throughline emerged: this moment is not just about whether AI will shape education, but how, by whom, and in service of what. There was a shared urgency around the need to collectively define the future and purpose of education, and a unified desire to shift the momentum of market forces, tech hype, or the familiar cycles of educational reform. This moment holds both deep risk and unprecedented opportunity: ***Are we using this moment to truly revolutionize education, or just digitize what we've always done?***

We've captured insights, trends in AI innovation, and emerging principles for action here in this report.

Designing with Intentional Urgency

> *"AI is a wild seed. We get to determine how we plant it, how we nurture it, how we grow it, so it actually serves us. We're not ceding our future to it."*
>
> **— LaShawn Routé Chatmon,**
> Founder & CEO National Equity Project
> (referencing a concept shared by Professor Malika Saada Saar)

Currently, the future of education is being built faster than it is being imagined. We're creating efficiency where we could be deepening innovation, designing impact metrics that are limited by our ability to measure meaningfully at scale, and chasing how we might apply the newest AI advancements in education rather than using a clearly defined future of education to map what's newly possible. In order to interrupt, rather than perpetuate, these cycles, there is an urgent need to collectively design and define what we're building before AI builds it for us.

In December, we brought together an intentionally-selected group of leaders with three goals:

- Convene cross-sector experts. Too often, leaders who are top experts in their corners of the field don't have time to co-design for collective impact.
- Create space to pause and dream. Our engagement in future design is constrained by our roles, our internal bureaucracy, and the urgency of our work. We created this hour to serve as the container for something different.
- Shift the momentum upstream. The pace of our innovation and development is currently set by the pace of emerging technology, market pressures, or AI hype. What if we created momentum so these forces enabled our vision for education's future rather than defined it?

Field Mapping ‘Big Bets’ in AI

We opened the call with a participant field map to reflect the landscape of innovation across the field and what it might enable when viewed collectively. The field is incredibly diverse, and the potential of collective action if these bets or advancements were intersected will be central for transformation.

Developing automatic speech recognition *to deepen student and teacher conversations*	*Training LLMs with long-tail languages, non-traditional texts, and speech patterns of* ***intergenerational learners for more equitable infrastructure***	*Using AI to create a student career pathway tool that* ***merges student voice & aspirations with outcome & enrollment data***
Shifting from credentialing to ***demonstrable skills***	***Education R&D of the future in which we can accelerate research in representation models of the system & synthetic environments***	*Helping students create DAOs to learn consensus building &* ***collectively own infrastructure***
Investigating behavior change that can happen through ***natural language WhatsApp conversations*** *and nudges*	*Defining human skills and modernized knowledge… not just using AI to* ***teach old subjects in old ways more efficiently***	***Using ambient AI*** *to make it far easier to capture process outcomes while centering the human*

Design Tensions: Possibility Over Mitigation

During the call, we broke into intentionally diverse small groups to design against our deepest concerns about AI in education. Five core tensions emerged:

The Goals of Education Remain Unnamed

> *"We can't come up with the vision of that future yet…without co-creation and actual work with folks on the ground. I keep thinking of it in a product development framework—we're at the very beginning and trying to come up with the end conclusion."*
>
> **— Abby Feuer,** Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer, DonorsChoose

We keep talking about AI as "the thing itself" when it's actually just an input. The real question—what do we want education to help us do with and for young people and their communities?—remains unanswered, so we default to the existing goals: workforce preparation, content mastery, remediation.

The tension: Without articulating a shared vision of education's purpose in an AI-saturated world, we're at the mercy of whoever moves fastest. **We're layering technology onto a system whose purpose we haven't articulated.**

What's possible: Imagine a future in which education removes the walls between school and life. Where students aren't just prepared for jobs that might not exist, but are equipped with a third or fourth generation of skillsets. Where learning is about agency, creativity, and innovation, enabled by, rather than replaced by, AI tools.

We're Building for Scale at the Cost of Context

We grappled with the reality that creating universally scalable AI solutions is erasing the very thing that makes education transformative: context. Students aren't generic learners, and curriculum development isn't "one-size-fits-all." Students are part of diverse contexts with rich, vibrant histories, languages, and futures.

The tension: Our current metrics for measuring scale require flattening the cultural, linguistic, and geographic specificity that make learning relevant. **We're personalizing learning progressions while depersonalizing learners.**

What's possible: Imagine education that is both locally rooted and globally connected. A student in rural Oklahoma and a student in Brooklyn shouldn't be moving through the same adaptive pathway—they should be bringing their own histories, languages, and contexts *into* the learning. Imagine AI that makes that possible, rather than averaging it away.

Incentive Structures Are Misaligned

> *"What if that value was being credited to the learner who's producing all that data... almost like a learner-owned educational experience... like a co-op. The more you learn, the more you own."*
> **— Rahim Rajan,** CEO, AQL Labs

Students don't directly benefit from the capital being generated through AI in education. Teachers don't own the data their own practice generates. Communities don't shape the tools being deployed in their schools. Meanwhile, the leaders building AI infrastructure are often optimizing for acquisition metrics, not societal benefit or equitable outcomes.

The tension: **The current system rewards speed to market, user adoption, and engagement metrics that can look more like gamification than deep learning.** The humans doing the learning and teaching have little-to-no stake in what gets built.

What's possible: Imagine member-owned educational cooperatives where learners accrue value as they learn. The more you contribute—through learning, mentorship, peer support—the more you own.

We Aren't Measuring What Matters

AI has unlocked the ability to measure things that were previously too complex: quality of collaboration, learning trajectories over years, or knowledge mapping. Yet overwhelmingly we're still defaulting to the metrics aligned with the old system: test scores, completion rates, college acceptance.

The tension: Much assessment remains centered in a snapshot of what a student *knows*, rather than a journey of student learning and development over time. **We're using 21st-century technology to reinforce 20th-century goals,** evaluating teachers and students instead of illuminating strengths and possibilities.

What's possible: Imagine formative assessment systems that capture learning in authentic moments in and outside of school. AI that surfaces areas we've never measured because they were too complex based on current tools–pushing us to identify measurement paradigms that reveal assets, not deficits.

Big Tech Owns the Infrastructure

> *"There is nothing stopping schools from having their own data centers, from training their own AIs, from creating their own technology and determining how they want it to move."*
> **— Eric Ferrer-Vaughn,** Partner, Head of Program Management & AI, Union Studio

We've accepted as inevitable that only tech companies can create technology and only they can decide how things work.

The tension: Students and communities are positioned as *subjects* of AI development, not architects.

What's possible: Distributed training of AI that empowers small communities and embodies radical transparency, student ownership from the bottom up, and democratic technology that shifts the offense/defense balance toward communities rather than consolidating power in centralized authorities.

This feels different from previous reform cycles—but only if we make it different.

Emerging Principles

> *"...there is deep interest across all the groups [in the design call] to dig into a vision for what we want the output of our system to be before we accelerate or alter the system with technology/AI."*
> — **Erica Key,** Learning Seeds

It's clear that without a reimagined, collectively designed future of education, we're on pace to replicate (and exacerbate) a system that isn't working. In December's call, design principles began to emerge that can serve as an initial framework for transformative AI development. As the collaborative continues to pressure-test and refine these principles,

we invite practitioners to explore how we might integrate them collectively–and urgently–across the field.

Emerging Principles: Intentional Design

Start with purpose, not with technology.

Anchor in a transformed future vision, and lead with what education is for before asking what AI can do.

Assume excellent teaching and curious students.

Transformative teaching models have historically existed, and continue to exist. This moment is an opportunity to scale what works—not replace what doesn't.

Learn from what's already been done.

Rather than reinventing, examine historically innovative models, practices, or experiences that work, even if they haven't yet worked at scale.

Collaborate immersively.

Build *with* students and communities, not on their behalf.

Personalize learning experiences without depersonalizing learners.

Design for cultural, linguistic, and geographic specificity—and build for students to surprise you.

If it extracts value, redesign until it regenerates.

If the value flows only upwards—towards platforms, markets, or institutions—the design is wrong.

Claim the infrastructure.

Hyperscaler ownership of tech infrastructure isn't inevitable. Communities, schools, and learners can build, influence, and own the tools that shape their futures.

> *"This feels like a Nas 'If I Ruled the World' moment—'if communities lead this work.' I'm excited!"*
> **— Meacie Fairfax,** AI Council Lead, Complete College America

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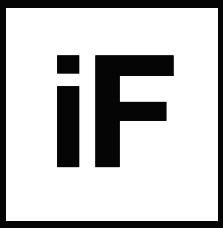
What's Next

Intentional Futures is committed to continuing this work. **We're exploring:**

- Ongoing calls to sustain cross-sector dialogue and co-creation
- A publication of a design framework to articulate shared principles for AI in education
- Partnerships to pilot community-owned, learner-centered AI infrastructure
- Collaborative research to measure what actually matters for students and communities

We need partners. This work requires funders willing to invest in friction points, not just finished products. Practitioners willing to co-design, not just implement. Technologists willing to co-collaborate. Communities willing to lead.

Contact & Partnership Inquiries



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Learn more about the iF AI Education Collaborative

The AI Education Collaborative is an ongoing initiative by Intentional Futures to convene cross-sector leaders in designing the future of education. This report synthesizes insights from our December 2025 convening of 40+ technologists, funders, practitioners, policymakers, and system leaders.