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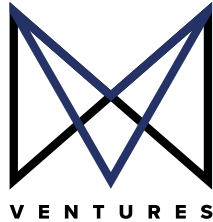
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# IMAGINE THEN, ***ACT NOW***

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Futures Literacy for  
Learning Organizations



Mount Vernon Ventures is a Transformation R&D Company, an integral part of The Mount Vernon School Organization, based in Atlanta, Georgia. Ventures has a team of industry-recognized experts and practitioners partnering with educators and leaders worldwide to strengthen brand identity, deepen organizational innovation, scale community impact, and build a transformative curriculum.

Mount Vernon Ventures publishes a quarterly Transformation R&D Report, analyzing impactful topics in education for leaders and professionals navigating a complex world. Exploring the drivers, signals, and trends affecting the education sector, we serve schools by conducting extensive research, synthesizing ideas, identifying their implications, amplifying their potential, and providing recommendations for any school to consider.

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# INTRODUCTION

We live in unprecedented times with increasingly complex trends driving change, transformation, and even decline in our societies and schools and/or collapse of our environment. It is no surprise that three out of the five top challenges identified by current Heads of Schools are (1) *Responding to conflict in and about independent schools*, (2) *Caring for students and staff during stressful times*, and (3) *Ensuring the school's sustainability*.<sup>1</sup> What school leaders need right now is a robust form of "futures literacy" or "a universally accessible skill that builds on the innate human capacity to imagine the future' in order to help people better understand the role of the future in what they see and do."<sup>2</sup>

Futures studies expert, James Dator, envisions four general ways we can make sense of future trajectories as we take on top challenges like those mentioned in NAIS's recent study:

1. A Continuation Future where business as usual and the status quo for the most part stays the same.
2. A Limits and Discipline Future where behaviors must adapt to internal and environmental limits.
3. A Decline and Collapse Future where system degradation or failure emerges and is resolved and/or exacerbated
4. A Transformation Future where new technologies, businesses, or behaviors change the game<sup>3</sup>

In reality, school leaders face challenges and opportunities that could involve any of these four paths.

It is our goal to provide insights, tools, and frameworks that can help organizational leaders seize the opportunities for transformation while avoiding the risks of collapse or getting stuck in the same old status quo. We know how challenging that can be because, "In reality, the speed with which businesses and organizations are forced to confront future questions requires an agility more akin to rapid software development or minimum product design. There's seldom time for a six-month exploration of any topic, with multiple stakeholder meetings and expert soundings. A multi-day sprint is the more likely use case for the approaches defined here."<sup>4</sup>

To gain the agility necessary to respond successfully to the top challenges facing schools we need a new approach, beyond the traditional forecasting practices, that helps us optimize the best strategic position. We need an approach that understands that there are multiple probable, plausible, and possible futures. The way we strategically position ourselves in the face of these futures can ensure that we influence matters toward a more preferable future, one of regenerative transformation.

Two recent stories illustrate why it's necessary to think of futures in terms of multiple probable and plausible scenarios. The first story takes place in June of 2020 when all of us were blindsided by a plausible future that very few of us saw coming: the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. Leaders from The

Mount Vernon School were asked not to design one virtual plan and one in-person plan for reuniting our school community for the 2020-2021 school year. Instead, the Head of School smartly demanded that leaders design eight to ten plausible scenarios, each requiring a different schedule and return to campus plan, ranging from virtual to hybrid scenarios to full in-person schedule prototypes. Leaders knew that some of these scenarios would never happen. Some may see this as a waste of time. However, the investment in dreaming up so many probable and plausible scenarios, allowed Mount Vernon to successfully reunite the community in August 2020, and in an agile way which kept the preferable future at the forefront – namely to keep the doors open for the 2020-2021 school year. This looked different as circumstances rapidly evolved and shifted, thereby necessitating the deployment of more than one scenario strategy.

The second story that comes to mind took place around January of 2023. OpenAI recently released its latest Large Language Model, ChatGPT-3, and

teachers were rightfully anxious, even panicked in some instances. Teachers all over the world asked “What is our *policy* when it comes to AI in the classroom?” Teachers were demanding for their leaders to forecast the future of AI developments to select the most optimal policy which could mitigate any and all challenges presented by this quickly developing, new technology. That would have been a losing strategy. Instead, The Mount Vernon School asked teachers to imagine probable and plausible scenarios, which were simplified into three situations:

1. The excited, early adopter of artificial intelligence who wants to put AI to use right away with their students.
2. The worried skeptic of artificial intelligence who is inclined to ban the technology altogether.
3. The suspicious teacher who suspects that AI has been used in a way that compromises academic integrity.

**TO GAIN THE AGILITY NECESSARY TO RESPOND SUCCESSFULLY TO THE TOP CHALLENGES FACING SCHOOLS WE NEED A NEW APPROACH, BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL FORECASTING PRACTICES, THAT HELPS US OPTIMIZE THE BEST STRATEGIC POSITION.**

What we discovered at Mount Vernon was that we didn't need a policy as much as a strategic position that was ready to address any of these scenarios. "Futuring," writes Scott Smith, "is about understanding the landscape of potential futures in such a way as to guide better decision making in the present."<sup>5</sup>

To address some of the top challenges Heads of Schools are facing we need what Jay Ogilvy calls a *scenaric stance*: "a state of constructively maintaining multiple states of possibility in mind at the same time – considering, processing, evaluating, and being ready"<sup>6</sup> This is an integral part of the kind of needed "futures literacy" mentioned earlier. Futures Foresight expert, Nikolas Badminton, speaks about leaders adopting a *systems perception*, which "helps to see the interconnectedness between human and natural systems as well as complex consequences of decisions."<sup>7</sup> Scenarios-based planning specifically serves as a framework for adopting this kind of heightened perception, an approach this report seeks to define, explore, and identify both implications and next steps for schools and other organizations.

Too many managers, when faced with overwhelming complexity, "aren't goal-seeking, but 'ills-avoiding' – aiming constantly at strategies for avoiding pain, harm, or constraint..."<sup>8</sup> A scenarios-based planning approach to futures foresight practice empowers managers and leaders to move from maintaining the status quo when faced with probable and plausible challenges to being able to see the opportunities for transformation as well. "We do have the capability to effect dramatic change," writes Badminton, "but we're failing because we've largely allowed our most critical tool to languish – human imagination."<sup>9</sup> Yet, to bring it back to one of

the opportunities before us, AI researcher Melanie Mitchell makes plain that one thing that separates us from robots is "being able to use your mental models to imagine different possible futures."<sup>10</sup>

This research is meant to do just that: to evolve and grow our mental models such that we see not dystopian or utopian futures but *protopian* opportunities, which are preferable "state[s] that [are] better today than yesterday, although it may be only a little better..." Protopias are "a continuous dialog," writes Badminton, "more a verb than a noun, a process rather than a destination, never finite, always iterative, meant to be questioned, adjusted, and expanded..."<sup>11</sup>

And a scenarios-based approach to futures foresight work provides just the right mental model for that kind of agile, iterative work that our complex futures will continue to demand of us as organizational leaders and visionaries.

The definitions, identified trends and implications, and the next steps we provide are intended to equip and empower, not just leaders, but diverse teams of engaged educators to develop together a "futures literacy" that prepares all of us for the inevitable uncertainties that define our times. That way we can work collectively to ensure that our unknown futures prove to be preferable ones, all because we are strategically positioned to make the most out of any and all of the inevitable challenges and opportunities that lie before us.

How might we as schools equip all learners to use this work to design a better planetary existence in our complex, *more-than-human* world?<sup>12</sup>



# FOUR LEVELS OF FUTURING<sup>13</sup>

As leaders and stewards of schools during complex times, we need to prepare to engage in all levels of futuring work.

