

Teaching, reinvented: How unconventional educator roles pave the way for a more fulfilling and sustainable profession

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Introduction

Being a teacher has never been easy, but right now the profession is in crisis. The teaching workforce is increasingly beleaguered as educators confront escalating demands from all sides and enjoy fewer of the rewards that drew them into the profession in the first place. For years, issues like [dwindling enrollment in teacher preparation programs](#), [dissatisfaction with the job](#), and [the pay gap between teachers and other similarly educated professionals](#) have worsened. The impacts have been far-reaching as school districts nationwide struggle to recruit and retain effective educators and diversify their teaching staff.

An increasing number of educational leaders and policymakers are trying to address these challenges. However, the most common solutions [being tried at scale are also the most traditional](#): intentional recruitment strategies, better compensation, targeted professional development, and more accessible pathways into leadership roles. While these efforts may help repair the existing pipeline, they are ill-suited to address the critical issues of teacher [burnout](#) and [demoralization](#).

Yet some traditional public, charter, private and microschoools are trying to reimagine and reconfigure the essence of the teaching role. Educators in these settings are well-positioned to explain whether and how they make teaching more fulfilling, joyful, and sustainable. To better understand these unconventional roles, we identified nine school systems with unusual approaches and interviewed 32 teachers from those organizations about their jobs, their motivations, the benefits and drawbacks of their novel positions, and their long-term goals.

Many experiments over the years have tried to reconceptualize teaching roles (see next page). Though small in number, the educational systems currently supporting reimagined teacher roles may be able to answer some questions: What is it like to teach in new ways? What are the advantages and drawbacks? What brought educators to these unconventional roles and what might help them stay?

The momentum to reinvent the teacher role is building

Well before the pandemic provided an immediate and widespread need to **devise new ways** to teach students, a movement to reimagine the teaching profession was already underway. The efforts go under many different names, such as “strategic staffing,” “unbundled teaching,” and “workforce innovation,” but they all challenge long-standing assumptions about the ways that teachers work and the structures that reinforce them.

We at CRPE have taken note of organizations like **Opportunity Culture, Empower Schools, Teacher-Powered Schools,** and the **Next Education Workforce**, who have made significant strides in implementing new educator models in hundreds of US public and charter schools. When the pandemic struck, innovation began happening outside the public school system as **learning pods emerged** in homes, churches, libraries, and community centers across the country. Notably, we found evidence of **educators’ high levels of satisfaction** working in these environments in comparison to traditional schools. While most pods have since disbanded, their legacy persists largely through the continued growth of **microschools**.

As school systems struggle to recover from years of disruption, we believe that new programs, policies, and nontraditional organizations that support innovation in the teaching role will need to grow to support all students’ learning.

To answer these questions, we interviewed educators from a variety of professional backgrounds and varying degrees of experience in the traditional education system.

Key Findings:

- Across different contexts and instructional approaches, educators liked these unconventional roles.
- The appeal came from increased autonomy and deeper personal connections, which cultivated a sense of ownership and investment.
- There were downsides: autonomy could be isolating, collaboration could be tricky to get right, and innovation often meant more responsibility and less guidance from leadership.
- Educators expressed uncertainty about the sustainability of their unconventional roles, and many didn’t see themselves staying in the role for more than a few years.

The experiences of these educators by no means provide a fully realized vision for the future. In addition to the challenges we heard about directly from the educators, our findings raise a host of other questions: Can these roles be sustained at scale? Do they improve student learning experiences and outcomes? Are there hidden costs or unforeseen consequences to giving teachers increased autonomy or more opportunities to connect with students, families, and their peers? We hope that this study can prompt further research into these questions and encourage education leaders to engage in a radical, but responsible reimagining of what it means to be a teacher.

Research design and methods

For this study, a purposive sampling strategy was employed, with the goal of hearing from a wide range of educators working in organizations that were systemically supporting unconventional teaching roles. When looking for educator roles to include in this study, we focused on the following:

- The innovation had to change the way educators worked on a regular, if not daily, basis. There had to be substantive shifts to their teaching practices, responsibilities, and/or use of time.
- The changes had to be systemic, supported either by a school or other organization; we were not looking for “rogue” educators who were innovating alone in their classrooms.
- New roles had to include significant instructional time with students. Many so-called teaching innovations are actually retention strategies that move educators out of the classroom and into administration. We found roles in which educators were able to take on some leadership responsibilities while also continuing to teach students.
- The educators had to be responsible for students’ core learning experiences (i.e. not part of a tutoring or supplementary afterschool program).

In order to find educators who fit these criteria, we conducted a national landscape scan of both in-system (public district and charter schools) and out-of-system (private schools and microschools) organizations, leveraging both publicly available information and experts within CRPE’s professional network. We identified nine different educational systems with well-established programs aimed at reimagining the teacher role. After reaching out to their leaders, we connected with 32 educators.

Educators took part in semi-structured qualitative interviews approximately 45 minutes in length. We asked about the experiences of educators in their roles, their motivations for taking them on, personal assessments of the role’s strengths and weaknesses, and thoughts about their future professional trajectories. Interviews were analyzed using a combination of both inductive and deductive thematic analysis with particular theoretical sensitivity towards the opportunities and challenges to sustaining and scaling these roles (Boyatzis, 1998; Glaser, 1978).

Classifying unconventional educator roles

Through a landscape scan and using the criteria described above, we identified the following types of educator roles as being substantively different from that of a traditional teacher¹:

Lead teacher—acts as a mentor, curriculum developer, and co-teacher for a small team of teachers who are often in the same content area or grade level. Works in charter and public schools.

Empowered teacher—along with a team of teachers and administrators, determines school-level structures and policies, such as the academic calendar, daily schedule, and dress code, sets student learning targets, and contributes to the school’s annual priority plans. Implemented in public schools.

Team teacher—teaches as part of an integrated team with two to four other educators and approximately 50 to 80 students in a public district school. The other educators in the team may be pre-service student teachers, paraprofessionals, or licensed teachers.

Community learning guide—creates community-connected learning experiences, often related to students’ cultural backgrounds, their natural environment, or in partnership with local businesses. Works alongside two to four other educators and 20 to 40 students in small private schools or microschools.

Solo learning guide—teaches independently, leveraging curricular resources and materials from a third-party provider. Works with five to 15 students, often as a standalone microschool based out of their home.

Technical guide—leverages educators’ expertise in technical subjects like architecture, product design, or robotics to design curriculum and provide guidance and feedback on student work. Works with cohorts of 10 to 20 students, often co-teaching with another guide, in a private school with approximately 50 students.

The role names are inspired by the actual titles these educators held, while modifying them enough to preserve participant confidentiality and also highlight each role’s most salient feature.² In distilling the roles this way, we necessarily obscured some of their complexity. Educators in every role engaged in a variety of novel activities and, in fact, many of the characteristics observed in one role were present in others. For example, we saw examples of collaboration, not only from team teachers, but also community learning guides and technical guides. While system-level decision making defined the empowered teacher role, it was a de facto part of solo learning guides’ work, since they effectively ran their own small schools.

¹ We did not interview a comparison group of “traditional” teachers, but instead inductively built up a framework to characterize their roles, leveraging prior research and definitions. Drawing from Cuban (2013), Sawyer (2014) and Papert (1993), we defined the traditional teacher role as follows: an adult with formal education training and certification is responsible for delivering discipline-specific content knowledge to classes of approximately 30 students and assessing their learning of this content. Instruction happens at the same time every day in the same classroom within a school building. Other activities, such as designing curricula or determining school policy, fall outside of this role’s scope.

² The unconventional roles based within traditional public schools always employed the term “teacher,” while those in microschools or private schools opted for titles like “coach” “educator,” or “guide.” Likewise, roles situated in these out-of-system environments generally diverged more significantly from that of a traditional teacher. This suggests that many out-of-system roles were designed to literally shift the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) away from past conceptions of the traditional teacher.

This study’s findings should be considered as fundamentally descriptive in nature, limited to a small sample of educators working in unconventional ways. While not generalizable to a larger population, we believe they should prompt serious reconsideration of fundamental tenets and long-held assumptions about the responsibilities, activities, structures, and goals that define the traditional teacher role.

Findings

1. Regardless of the context or their professional background, nearly all educators liked working in unconventional roles.

With only one or two exceptions, the educators we interviewed were happy with their decision to take on an unconventional teaching role. Whether based in a microschool, private school, or public school, educators expressed positive impressions of their work, using words like “rewarding,” “satisfying,” “exciting,” and “love” to describe the experience. Educators in these roles came from a variety of different backgrounds, though approximately three-quarters were either currently teaching in a public school or had prior experience working in one.

Some fit the mold of an “early adopter” of innovation (Rogers, 2003), while others came to their roles less intentionally or only out of necessity. The pandemic and its negative impact on their children’s learning was the primary impetus for many parents—all mothers that we spoke to—to start their own microschools. Prior to that, many of them worked in public schools as teachers or support staff, such as counselors, or did not have full-time jobs.

Unsatisfied with the traditional school system, some traditional teachers intentionally left their schools to help build a different learning environment from scratch. Others found opportunities to be part of innovative programs or initiatives that their public schools were piloting. For a few educators, the role was an unexpected shift in their career trajectories. While these individuals generally had previous informal work experience in education, none had worked as a traditional teacher. Most were not specifically seeking out a teaching role, but rather a role found them.

Those who previously worked as a traditional teacher almost always described the new role as an improvement, noting that it reduced feelings of burnout. One early-career teacher at a public elementary school described how moving into a team teaching position prevented her from leaving the profession altogether. “My first year of teaching was super, super hard. ... I just did not see how it was sustainable. ... I was so drained. I was putting everything I have in and getting nothing back,” she said. Nearly a year into working with her team of two other full-time teachers as well as with a pre-service teacher, her feelings towards teaching had dramatically improved. “Now I love my job, I love to go to school, and I love the support I get from my team,” she said.

A former public elementary school teacher described a similarly positive shift after starting a microschool at her home. “I was very burned out when I was working in the public school, so by the end of the day, I’d get home and ...I had nothing left to give my family. And with this, I don’t feel like that. I feel like my work and family are kind of intertwined now,” she said. “It doesn’t feel like this separate thing. It doesn’t feel like work.”

Those who had no previous teaching experience were also happy in their roles—even those who did not see education as part of their professional trajectory. One technical guide had recently graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and a minor in design. After struggling to find a job that felt like a good fit for her interests, a professor suggested that she look into a private high school that employs technical experts, like architects, scientists, and engineers, to design and

lead interdisciplinary projects. She was hired and, to her surprise, found her first year of teaching to be a very positive experience. “If you had asked me a year ago, ‘What are you gonna be doing after college?’ I wouldn’t have necessarily been like, ‘Yeah, I’m gonna be an educator.’ So it’s definitely unexpected. But it’s also been really exciting,” she said.

Not every educator we spoke with expressed high levels of satisfaction with their unconventional roles. One team teacher was not convinced that teaming improved either their own working conditions or student learning outcomes. A lead teacher suggested that, were it not for additional financial compensation, she would consider returning to a traditional teaching position. These, however, were the exceptions.

2. Educators liked their roles due to increased autonomy and greater connections to peers, students, and families.

When asked to describe what elements of their new roles worked best or made them an improvement over prior teaching jobs, educators generally said they appreciated the additional autonomy and additional opportunities for interpersonal connections. Educators reported having more control over not only “in-the-classroom” choices, such as the content of their courses or how to assess student learning, but also personal choices, like the physical location of their work or their daily and weekly schedules.

There were also multiple ways to connect with others. Teacher teams and leadership committees made peer collaboration a non-negotiable part of some educator roles, while educators working with fewer students felt like they were able to foster deeper relationships with them and their families. While some of the instructional roles emphasized autonomy over deeper personal connections, or vice versa, the ideal for most of the people we interviewed was to have both elements. In all cases, these characteristics provided educators with a greater sense of ownership over their work and a stronger connection to their school communities (see Chart 1 below).

Chart 1: Levels of autonomy and personal connection in unconventional educator roles*

Educator role and their setting	Personal autonomy (control over hours, schedule, etc.)	Professional autonomy (control over content, assessment, etc.)	Voice in school policy and culture	Peer collaboration	Deeper student and family relationships
Lead teacher in a public setting	Average	Above average	Average	High	Average
Team teacher in a public school	Above average	Average	Average	High	Above average
Empowered teacher in a public school	Average	Average	High	Above average	Average
Community learning guide in a private or microschool	Above average	Above average	Above average	Above average	High
Solo learning guide in a microschool	High	High	N/A**	Below average	High
Technical guide in a private school	Above average	High	Above average	High	Above average

*This table was derived from the qualitative coding of educator interview transcripts and describes levels of autonomy and social connection compared to a traditional teaching role. For example, an empowered teacher has approximately the same amount of personal autonomy, professional autonomy, and connection to students and families as that of a traditional teacher, but experiences above-average peer collaboration and has a high level of voice in school policy.

**For solo learning guides, “Voice in school policy and culture” and “Professional autonomy” were synonymous; educators were operators of their own microschools.

In general, new educator roles we found outside of traditional public schools tended to provide more autonomy, while ones in traditional systems were able to provide more opportunities for collaboration and connection. Educators could more easily connect with students, personalize learning, and shift schedules or lesson plans in settings with fewer students, such as microschoools and private schools. Those working in small private schools or community microschoools seemed to have the best blend of autonomy and connection.

The majority of educators enjoyed more freedom to decide when, where, and what they taught.

Few, if any, traditional teachers have much say in their daily schedules, the location of their classrooms, their curricula, or how they measure student success. In contrast, upwards of two-thirds of the educators we spoke with had increased autonomy in at least one of these areas.

With no larger school to coordinate with, solo learning guides—who run microschoools of five to ten students, generally out of their home—undoubtedly have the most autonomy. Being the sole operator of their own microschoools meant that educators could set the start and end times of their day, the number of days each week they met, and the structure of the daily schedule. Despite this capacity for variation, many solo learning guides ran their microschoools on similar schedules, starting the day between eight and nine in the morning and ending between two and three. It was also common to run on a four-day school week schedule.³ A former traditional teacher turned solo guide said that having reduced teaching hours had a big impact on her work-life balance. “There’s just so much less workload on my end. ... I’m not staying at school till seven o’clock ... and grading on weekends,” she said.

While solo learning guides had the most autonomy, the more collaborative educator roles, like team teachers, also provided opportunities for increased flexibility. For example, several team teachers noted that they felt more comfortable taking time off for a doctor’s appointment or staying home when sick knowing that their students would be supervised by other members of their team. Since team members are usually familiar with each other’s recent lessons and assignments, they are able to help students make progress on their core coursework better than substitutes, who are often only able to administer supplementary “busy work.”

We also heard from educators who had flexibility with not only when they worked, but where. One solo learning guide worked with a group of 16 high school-aged students from all over the world as part of a fully virtual microschoool. While her students were located as far west as Colorado and

as far east as Kenya, the guide was based in Chicago and served no students in her own time zone. Students only met as a full class on Zoom, a video conferencing app, for two hours every day; outside of that, the learning guide would schedule one-on-one video check-ins based on mutual availability throughout the week and would use email and Slack, a messaging app, to communicate asynchronously. She said that, as a new mother, having the ability to shift her schedule or work location based on the needs of her newborn was a significant benefit of the role.

Educators also appreciated the ability to create or customize curricula in ways that speak to the needs and interests of their students as well as their own passions and skills. For example, technical guides at one private high school are encouraged to leverage their own technical expertise to craft three-to-six-week project-based “studios.” These unique units help students learn skills related to

³ Despite the growing popularity of the four-day school week, research into its impact on student learning outcomes is scant and contradictory. While some studies show no or even some minor positive effects, others suggest certain age groups make less progress in specific academic subjects over long periods of time than their peers who attend five-day school weeks (Heyward, 2018; Kilburn et al., 2021; Morton, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021).

computer programming, fashion design, architecture, and robotics, while also exploring social-emotional topics like political activism or empathy-building. One technical guide highlighted “the breadth and freedom that I’m afforded by this ever-changing curriculum” as a big perk of the role and suggests that for some educators creative freedom leads to deep professional satisfaction. “The newness, the freshness is interesting and fun,” he said. “I think that is a really amazing part of the job.”

Another educator said that the lack of curricular autonomy was what compelled her to leave her role as a public social studies teacher in a public school. “I was dissatisfied by my role as a cog in a system in which I felt like I had no control,” she said. As part of a community-embedded microschool, she gained the freedom to craft learning experiences that are relevant both to her students and to the local businesses that the school is partnered with.

New roles enabled more and better ways for educators to connect with peers, leaders, students, and families.

A large majority of unconventional roles we studied provided novel ways for educators to collaborate with peers, build deeper relationships with students and families, and work with administrators to shape school policy. Thanks to these opportunities, educators in these roles developed a strong sense of camaraderie and an investment in their school’s collective success.

One of the most highly cited benefits of peer collaboration was the ability for educators to learn from and with each other. One team teacher described “the opportunity to see other people teach all day long” as a huge benefit. “I was really becoming a better teacher because I was seeing other people teach, learning things that worked, and seeing things that I wanted to apply. But also, as I was teaching, they were watching me teach, so they got to ... give me support in ways that I needed,” she said.

Interestingly, two veteran teachers—a lead teacher and a team teacher—noted that, although they often mentored novice teachers, they also learned about new teaching tools and techniques from their less experienced colleagues. After teaching for 15 years, one team teacher found herself picking up techniques from a first-year teacher. “I feel like everyone has to be flexible. ... As educators, we have to grow. If we expect our students to grow and learn, we have to be able to do the same thing,” she said.

This kind of “near-peer” mentoring was foregrounded in the lead teacher role. Lead teachers act as coach, co-teacher, and content area resource to other teachers. In contrast to an external evaluator, lead teachers are supposed to be invited in by teachers who are actively seeking to improve. As one lead teacher put it, “Coaching is not putting people down and making them do what you’re doing. It’s [about] getting them inspired.” Since they do not usually teach a full course load, lead teachers also have time built into their schedules to find and curate materials for the teachers they are mentoring and also help address the challenges of particular students. At times, they may step in and teach all or part of a lesson.

In contrast to lead and team teachers, other teacher roles in some public schools share leadership responsibilities with their administration and work together to determine school policy, strategy and operations. Generally, these teachers—which we’re calling “empowered teachers” for the purposes of this study—are either nominated by their peers or appointed by school leadership to be part of their school’s leadership committee, which meets periodically to make decisions about a variety of topics, such as the yearly calendar, daily schedules, and curriculum choices. Most teams are composed of one empowered teacher from each grade level at the school, a teacher’s union

representative, as well as the school principal; everyone’s vote has the same weight.

Empowered teachers said their structure encourages more democratic decision-making that is responsive to on-the-ground realities. “I’m not somebody who is [just] sitting in an office ... so, when we make policies or priorities through the school planning process, I know what it’s going to be like to do that with a class of 30 students,” one empowered teacher said. “I have the voice of a teacher ... so I feel like I can bring realism to decision-making processes.”

Another empowered teacher said that contributing to school-level decisions fostered a greater understanding of his colleagues’ perspectives. When gathering feedback about the school’s master schedule, he found that every teacher proposed a different schedule. “And they all had really good reasons for what they wanted! An [advanced placement] science teacher wanted much longer blocks so that they could do a full lab period, and a language teacher wanted to see them every day because that’s what helps with fluency,” he said. Along with other leadership committee members, he helped design a new schedule that attempted to meet as many requests as possible. He described the process as a powerful mechanism for building cohesion among the staff. “Well-meaning educators can have completely different opinions and ... can still come together and come up with a general consensus about where the school should be going next year. I think that’s amazing,” he said.

About half of the educators we interviewed also reported having closer relationships with students and families. That was not always explicitly designed; in many cases, the educator-student ratio in their school was the key factor. All of the educators we spoke with outside of public schools worked with fewer than 20 students at a time, and several with far fewer. One community learning guide said, “We have five students to a teacher, so ... you can develop those closer relationships ... and the family is more comfortable with you because you have built that personal relationship with their student.” Similarly, most solo learning guides worked with 10 students or less, including their own children.⁴ Both solo and community learning guides reported having frequent communication with parents, in many cases on a daily basis.

That said, class and school size were not the only factors dictating the strength of these relationships. Learning guides working with students virtually reported having a hard time making deeper connections, even when with class sizes under 15 students. Conversely, one high school team teacher said that she felt like she knew her students much better than she did when working on her own, even though her team of three teachers, collectively, worked with 70 students. She suggested that the teachers were more able to connect with the students as a team because they could confer with each other. “It’s nice to have somebody else just as invested in all the exact same kids,” she said.

3. There were downsides to these roles—and they often related to the same factors that made them appealing.

Even while educators were generally quite satisfied with their roles, they reported downsides to their work, often stemming from the same qualities of autonomy and personal connection which are the ’ primary benefits. We also found that the relative newness of these roles also led to specific challenges around training and support.

⁴ All of the solo learning guides we spoke with were mothers who were motivated to start their microschools for their own children, often during the pandemic-induced school closures.

Being autonomous can be isolating, personally and professionally.

The same educators who described having significant freedoms in their unconventional roles were also likely to describe feeling alone and isolated. Solo learning guides were particularly susceptible, with one commenting that running her own microschool felt like “being on a lonely island” and another saying that she “missed having coworkers.” This was despite the fact that the microschool model provider, as one guide said, “really tries to make connections between guides and encourages us ... to do field trips with other schools and get on their [online] community board. But ... I don’t feel like a lot of people take advantage of it.”

Without any other staff on site, solo learning guides face the very concrete challenges of being the only person overseeing a group of students for many hours each day. One guide said “if I didn’t have such a great group of kids, I probably wouldn’t be able to sneak away for a minute or two to use the bathroom.” Another noted that being sick or having other emergencies was stressful since it meant that their microschools effectively closed and parents had to make last-minute plans for childcare. To address these logistical issues, we heard two solo learning guides talk about either bringing on an assistant or pairing up with other solo learning guides in their area.

Working independently also made it more difficult to access high-quality curricular resources and professional development opportunities. One solo learning guide noted that if it weren’t for her background as a Montessori teacher, she would have felt far less capable of doing her job well. “If I didn’t have my background, and I wasn’t able to problem-solve and supplement ... there were some areas of [the curriculum] that would’ve been lacking. But I was able to fill them in because I’ve been a teacher for so long,” she said.

Even in larger schools, isolation could be an issue. One team teacher at a school where the teaming model was still in the piloting stage felt alienated from the rest of the school staff. “The other teachers at the school think it’s a joke. They think that it’s ... indulgent. We get an extra prep period that nobody else gets because we have to prep together. They don’t understand how our group prep works,” she said.

Effective collaboration is hard to explain, train, and maintain.

While many team teachers and empowered teachers were happy to extol the virtues of peer collaboration, they also struggled to explain why their teams were particularly functional. Several high school team teachers repeatedly described their connection as “magic.” Likewise, empowered teachers offered vague statements about the importance of mutual trust and psychological safety as key to their success.

These descriptions underscored the fact that most of the educators engaging in collaboration did not see their efforts as rooted in specific skills or systematic practices that can be taught or learned. Instead, there was an implicit belief that collaboration was highly dependent on the particular individuals and their chemistry. Even high-functioning teaching teams expressed a binary view of team success: you either had it or you didn’t.

This lack of explicit training and support leads even high-functioning teams to seem fragile. Several team teachers worried that their team would dissolve if even one of their members left. Another was so attached to their current teammates that they said that they might not team teach again without them. Two empowered teachers noted that the success of their teacher leadership committees were highly dependent on their school leadership’s commitment to the structure. One said, “Part of our effectiveness is that we have a good principal who is open to that feedback and communication from us,” while another one said, “I’m not sure if my principal personally supports the idea of having

[a teacher leadership committee]. I don't know if that comes down to a control issue, but ... there is no unity in that team."

Unconventional roles often came with more responsibilities and less guidance.

Some educators suggested that the effort required to learn new teaching practices, take on more responsibilities, or create curricula from scratch made their roles more exhausting. For example, technical guides valued their freedom to craft unique interdisciplinary curricula grounded in their expertise; however, one guide said that such freedom "is a double-edged sword" and that they "have to put in a lot more work to be able to develop [new material] every year." An empowered teacher said that "sometimes you just want someone to tell you what to do. ... Like, we are empowered to choose our own curriculum and to develop our own intervention program. I don't necessarily have the capacity to go through the best research and to talk to the right people about curriculum. I need someone to say, 'Here are three good options, now look at these three—which one works for you?'"

Because her school engaged educators in school-level decision making and external outreach, one community learning guide said that she does not get a traditional summer break. "I'm a full year-round employee, so I do development of structures, policies, and then proposal writing. ... I'm presenting at two different conferences this summer and one in the fall. So ... all that work isn't stuff I used to do." Another guide put a positive spin on this kind of extra work and focused on the opportunity to develop a recently opened microschool. "I know that some teachers have to work long hours because they're grading or the curriculum's already staked out, but ... none of that exists here," he said. "It's kind of exciting."

Many educators described getting little guidance on how to be successful in their role from their supporting organizations. Even some that enjoyed their autonomy said that they wished they had access to more robust support structures. One team teacher said "We have not gotten a lot of support this year [compared to] what we were told." As part of a naturally high-functioning team, she said lack of assistance was not a major obstacle, but its absence was felt. "It's frustrating because when we ... ask for support, we [really] want it and need it and we don't get it." She suggested that other teams were not so lucky and could have benefited even more from additional guidance and resources on teaming practices.

One likely factor: almost all of the roles we studied were relatively new. Most were piloted during the last five years, with only one—the technical guide —having existed in a fairly stable form for more than a decade. Yet even a newly hired technical guide said, "There are times where I would [have wanted] a more rigid structure around training and around the onboarding process."

This lack of support was particularly hard for new educators in roles that came with additional responsibilities. One empowered teacher said, "Empowerment ... can be a little bit overwhelming. I work with the founding team of this school, so we are veterans ... but we have a sixth grade team that's all novice teachers. And so they need more structure. They need more guidance."

4. Educators expressed uncertainty about their long-term futures in these roles.

The educators we spoke with painted a complex picture of their unconventional roles' long-term sustainability. While most considered themselves well-compensated, several did not. Independent of their financial situations, many educators indicated that they would likely not be in their current role after the next five to seven years. We theorize that educators' positive attitudes towards personal growth and change—the very reason that many got into their role—may also compel them to leave. Other key factors may be shifts in their personal lives as well as their school's inability to maintain innovative programs.

Financial compensation varied by role, though was largely satisfactory.

In general, most educators we spoke with were satisfied with their pay. Technical guides and some community learning guides reported their salaries as better than what local traditional teachers were getting paid. Lead and empowered teachers appreciated the stipends they received and, for the most part, felt that they were commensurate with the additional responsibilities they took on.

The major outlier to this pattern were the solo learning guides, who reported their pay as significantly less than that of a traditional teacher. One solo learning guide said, “I don’t think I’d be able to [run the microschoo] if it wasn’t for my husband’s job because we don’t really get paid a whole lot. It’s supplemental income. ... It pays for my car ...and a few other things.” Another said that other teachers see in the guide role that “the pay is not great and there’s no benefits.”

Many did not see themselves staying in their current roles after five to seven years.

The reasons educators did not see themselves in their current roles over the long term tended to fall into two categories: learning guides working in microschoo]s or private schools had personal or professional motivations for leaving, while public school teachers were not confident that their schools would maintain support for their redesigned role.

The educators we spoke with often displayed personal characteristics of pioneers and innovators. They like change, enjoy building systems, and learning new things. These qualities, which attracted many to their current roles, may also lead to their leaving them. This was particularly true of technical and community learning guides. “Working with kids doing really interesting projects gives me a lot of creative energy,” one technical guide said. “Whenever I decide to move on, it will be because I have gained so much inspiration that I have to go out into the world and do something with it. ... I’ve shown kids how to do so much stuff. Now I want to leave and go do stuff.”

One community learning guide said that her frustration in working with existing school systems inspired her to join a small private school that was still in its formative stages. “I wanted to be part of defining what structures were put in place to facilitate learning, what learning actually meant, and what the goal of a school was,” she said. Though she had no plans to leave in the near future, she also mentioned an interest in helping spread the model to other schools.

Some educators gave other reasons to leave. Parents who started microschoo]s during the pandemic said that they are not likely to run them after their children move into their middle-school years. As one solo learning guide said, “I’m not doing this to make money, but I’m doing this so I can homeschool my kids.”

Some educators working in public schools were not confident that their roles in their current form would last, citing budgetary challenges and leadership changes. One lead teacher said that she was not even able to fulfill the role during the past school year, since teacher staff shortages necessitated that she take on a full course load. As noted earlier, a few empowered teachers felt that their Empowered Teacher Committees were not being run democratically and that, while their “empowered teacher” title may persist, they would not have a real voice in school decision-making without system-level policies to ensure a balance of power between school leaders and teachers.

Conclusion and recommendations

What do these findings suggest about improving the teaching profession? To bring more innovative educator roles into the mainstream, system leaders and researchers should consider the following:

Give educators more reasons to love their work.

Educators found much to like about working in a variety of nontraditional roles. The increased autonomy and deeper personal connections gave educators a powerful sense of ownership over their work and investment in their schools. While new freedoms honored educators' personal needs and interests, stronger relationships meant that they had greater insight into the needs and interests of others. They did not feel like cogs in a machine, but rather members of an authentic community.

Currently, most systems addressing teacher workforce issues [are focused on recruiting teachers in traditional roles](#). We don't see a lot of systems figuring out how to remake teachers' roles—which is unfortunate, because there are concrete actions many leaders could take to increase teacher autonomy and connection. As a starting point, leaders could consider ways to align course schedules so teachers within the same grade level have time to collaborate, create opt-in committees that involve teachers in leadership decisions, or give teachers more explicit freedoms to customize their curricula. These efforts may not be easy to implement, but many administrators are not exercising their authority to experiment with such changes.

While competitive compensation and benefits are critical, educators also want to be more intrinsically motivated by their jobs. Not only did autonomy and personal connection help foster ownership of their work and investment in their community, but it also helped them find meaning and fulfillment in jobs that oftentimes were more demanding than a regular teaching role.

Provide innovative educators with customized supports.

Unconventional educator roles call for unconventional supports. Leaders need to strike a balance between providing freedom and space to experiment while also offering resources for those who struggle with particular skills or who need more structure when working in new roles. Leaders should be careful not to impose unnecessary constraints or accountability systems that will stifle and potentially undermine innovation.

Leaders should also consider the long-term trajectory of these roles. The pioneering individuals who are reimagining the teaching profession and building new systems may be quite different from those who one day take on these roles. How do we prepare the wave of educators who inherit these roles?

Leverage the work of organizations who have been creating new teacher roles.

To reinvent teaching, leaders don't have to reinvent the wheel. Organizations like Next Education Workforce, Opportunity Culture, and Empower Schools have been engaged in the hard work of building new frameworks for establishing new teacher roles in public school systems. Many of the educators we spoke with were working within systems that had adopted models from organizations such as these and adapted them to their local needs and contexts. Model providers like [EL Education](#) and [Big Picture Learning](#) have also been creating resources for reimagining teaching for decades. Transcend's [Innovative Models Exchange](#) is starting to catalog the growing landscape of new approaches.

Examine how new roles can impact student learning.

Just because teachers are more satisfied in their jobs doesn't mean that they're effectively driving student learning. There is much that we do not know about the student learning outcomes⁵ that might result from new educator roles and the settings that support them, such as four-day school weeks or curricular autonomy (both of which teachers in our sample said they liked). Some of the things that teachers appreciate may have risks or consequences that new models need to mitigate in order to ensure students are well served. Thus, more research is needed to explore the impact of these roles and if they can serve all students equitably. How much do changes in teacher satisfaction lead to changes in student learning? Do different educator roles meet different students' needs? It will be critical to answer these questions before embarking on larger and more costly efforts to scale these roles.

⁵ While we could not find direct evidence of improved student outcomes for most new educator models, a few studies of Opportunity Culture programs show encouraging results.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at [Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.