

A Community Approach to Innovation

A Short Report on Findings from the Lean Lab Listening Tour

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About The Lean Lab

Vision

All children will have access to innovative and effective learning opportunities.

Mission

We are a Kansas City-based community that launches transformational education innovations that have national impact.

How We Work

Catalyze Community & Ideas.

The Lean Lab hosts monthly meetups with #KCedu that offer teachers, students, community leaders, and entrepreneurs development in innovation frameworks specifically geared toward education.

Develop Bold Innovators.

Through deep-dive, fast-paced weekend workshops, The Lean Lab teaches educators, students, parents, community leaders, and budding entrepreneurs about human-centered design, design thinking, lean methodologies, and entrepreneurship! These events are perfect for problem-solvers who want to build solutions that will impart transformational change in Kansas City education.

Launch Transformational Innovations.

The Lean Lab's core program is [The Incubator Fellowship](#): an application-based, competitive Incubator program that connects entrepreneurs with the Kansas City community, mentors / coaches, school partners, and seed funding in order to build a more robust, sustainable, scaling, impactful solution.

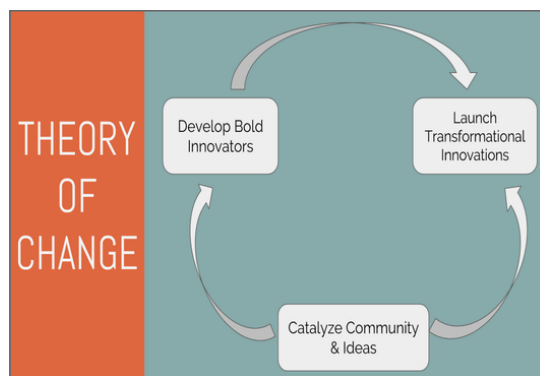


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INTRODUCTION

By Aditya Voleti, Director of Community and Partnerships

I came to Kansas City in 2012 to teach math at East High School in Kansas City Public Schools as part of the Teach for America program. I taught English Language Learners (ELL), immigrant and refugee students who had come to Kansas City from all over the world. My students represented more than 50 different countries and spoke more than 50 languages among them.

However, there was a problem. While my classrooms were representative of so many diverse cultures, they also represented an enormous range of mathematical skill sets. I had kids in advanced algebra classes that had never before been to school, and kids in remedial classes that had already taken calculus in their country of origin. It was clear that there was no systematic way of assessing and placing our new immigrant students into appropriate math courses, let alone authentically listening to our students' experiences and working with them to find the best fit schedule.

For my classes to succeed, I had to build a community through that awe-inspiring diversity. It started with listening. To know what knowledge and skills my students brought with them, I had to first listen to their experiences. This came with some practical implications. I would spend the first month of the school year shuffling around my students' schedules to get them into the right classes.

Simultaneously, Lean Lab co-founders Katie Boody and Carrie Markel were listening to the broader Kansas City education community to find out how to create transformative innovations that would solve its deepest problems. Out of that came The Lean Lab Incubator Fellowship program, a four-week program at the Sprint Accelerator to help launch solutions in Kansas City schools. I decided to apply for that inaugural cohort to figure out a way to get my immigrant and refugee students placed accurately in their classes when they first landed in the country.

I will never forget that first week, which centered on “**Problem Validation**” (a term I had never heard). The idea behind the Lean Lab Fellowship was to upend “top-down” reform measures, meaning that no solution could be launched out of the incubator without proving that it was solving a genuine “problem” felt by the community. I had never heard the terms “design thinking” or “lean startup” before either, also terms thrown around at The Lean Lab. I would soon learn they were frameworks to purposefully build products and services grounded in empathy and the constant testing of assumptions.

However, aligned to Lean Lab philosophy, I was told I could not assume that our problem was felt universally just because of my personal experience. I had to “validate” that my problem was authentically felt by other ELL students and educators. Moreover, it was incumbent on me to let the ELL community inform me of how the problem manifested before I even came up with solutions. To validate our problem, we would have to interview 25 people that were affected by this issue by the end of that week. I was shocked. As a teacher, I barely knew what was happening in the classroom next to mine. How would I connect with 25 people by the end of the week?

Looking at all of our worried faces, Katie said, “I must have spoken to at least 65 people before I decided to start The Lean Lab.” She was speaking to the grassroots nature of The Lean Lab at the time. The Fellowship was scrappy and not fully funded. All we had was the backing of a larger community who wanted to build innovative solutions in education. Those 65 people, spoken to over coffees, brunches and workshops held in classrooms, helped make the Fellowship a reality.

The Lean Lab has come a long way since that first week of the first Incubator Fellowship three years ago. We now recruit nationally for entrepreneurs and we invested \$100,000 in their ventures this past summer.

But that initial grassroots ethic has not changed. I exceeded my goal and connected with 35 members of the ELL community within that first week, and I have not stopped connecting with community members ever since my Fellowship experience in 2014. In a world where families, students and teachers – those at the heart of our education system – are cut out of the process of launching new solutions, this core principle of listening is the first step in creating a framework for entrepreneurship that empowers communities instead of simply profiting off of them.

Three years later, I am now on staff with The Lean Lab. As part of our strategic planning exercise to vision out the next five years, I spoke to 134 parents, students, teachers, community leaders, funders, investors, school system leaders and education entrepreneurs to find out two things:

- 1) First, I wanted to distill the deepest problems felt by those at the heart of education that needed innovation.
- 2) Second, I wanted feedback on The Lean Lab’s core values and programming – to get clarity on the “how” and the “what” that will define our next five years.

This paper is a brief overview of the findings from those 134 interactions. It will outline who we spoke to, what we asked them, and what we learned about the deeply felt problems in our community. I also briefly examine the shortcomings of this Listening Tour. This was our first attempt at implementing a system to understand the “State of the Community” in Kansas City education. We learned a lot, and are thoughtfully informing our future practices based on this learning.

Finally, it is my belief, after completing this Listening Tour, that Kansas City has the potential to incubate and scale equitable education innovations at a national level. Kansas City is caught between east and west, north and south, with a motley crew of diverse stakeholders from all over the country and the world rubbing elbows in a city just large enough to grow mass movements, yet too small for one to lose oneself in the crowd. This region has the potential to build a coalition and prove that innovations in education can be achieved with the expertise and agency of the families, students and teachers who make up the heart and soul of our schools.

THE KANSAS CITY LANDSCAPE

For a city with a population of only about 2.3 million people, Kansas City's education landscape is incredibly fractured. The metro area itself straddles the state line between Kansas and Missouri, and contains 33 public school districts, 140 private schools, 23 charter schools, and 19 alternative schools, all educating 1,012,063 students.¹ This fractured nature, as is described later, is deeply felt by the community, and speaks to how divided the Kansas City metro area truly is.

Segregation and opportunity gaps are not new to this region. In fact, they almost define education here. This region is the birthplace of many landmark Supreme Court cases. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* started at an elementary school, a short 45-minute drive into Kansas. The lesser known, and much more complicated, *Missouri v. Jenkins* stopped an effort to fund salary increases, remedial programs and facilities upgrades to end de facto segregation in schools.

In 2012, the Kansas City Public School District lost its state accreditation and only 35 percent of third graders were reading on grade level on the Missouri side.² Meanwhile, just across the state line in the suburban Blue Valley school district, the Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS), an innovative high school program where students are fully immersed in a professional culture solving real-world problems, was starting to scale to other local districts surrounding the metro area.³ It is in this context of disparate opportunities and cut-off communities that The Lean Lab was launched. And it is this history that informs the Lean Lab's values today.

THE LEAN LAB VISION AND MISSION

At The Lean Lab, our board and staff want to build a Kansas City-based community that launches transformational education innovations, so that **all** children have access to innovative and effective learning opportunities. We believe in **boldness**, meaning that we are unafraid to push boundaries and chart new territory to transform outcomes for kids. We believe in **human-centered design**. We design with parents, students, teachers -- the humans at the center of education. We believe in **equity**, that inequities in education persist and that we work unapologetically to create just circumstances from which innovations are born.

True to our values, the Lean Lab staff set out on this Listening Tour so that our community could advise us on how to achieve our vision. A more detailed paper on our strategic plan and theory of change will be released in late spring of this year. The purpose of this paper is to outline the learning gained from the Listening Tour that informed that strategic plan. It is the first step in our hypothesis that solutions built with and by those most impacted by our education system, at every step of the design process, will create sustainable pathways to education equity through innovation.

¹ "By The Numbers." Take Note (KCPT), n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <https://takenote.kcpt.org/by-the-numbers> ² Robertson, Joe. "Turn the Page KC succeeds in mobilizing crusade for reading, but thornier tasks remain." *The Kansas City Star*, February 20, 2017. ³ Robertson, Joe. "School districts nationwide are checking out Blue Valley's CAPS program." *The Kansas City Star*, July 19, 2015.

SPEAKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

We wanted to examine different aspirations and needs, not only across various neighborhood and school communities, but also across lines of power and wealth. We spoke to local community members, decision makers, school leaders and education entrepreneurs, as well as school leaders and education entrepreneurs nationally.

We identified the six key stakeholder groups that would be key in launching bold education innovations.

We divided them into two categories:

- 1) Community Stakeholders (parents/guardians, students, teachers) and
- 2) Decision-Makers (philanthropic funders, for-profit investors, school system leaders).

On the local level, we conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups with Kansas City-based parents, students, education innovators and decision-makers. We wanted to truly understand what problems those most impacted by our current education systems were facing in our community.

On a national level, we conducted site visits to cities with a high density of education entrepreneurs, education accelerators, innovative school models and approaches to education: namely, Denver, New York City, San Francisco/Bay Area, New Orleans and Austin. We wanted to gain a holistic perspective on key trends and best practices in education innovation that work on a national scale.

Community Stakeholders

- Students
- Parents, other primary guardians and caretakers of children
- Teachers

Decision-Maker Stakeholders

- Philanthropic funders
- Investors
- School system leaders — superintendents and their cabinet members, executive directors and CEOs of charter schools and charter networks

*In three short months, I connected with 134 people:
73 through one-on-one interviews and 61 through focus groups.*

Method

We used two methods to gain insights from people's experiences: one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Focus groups were never conducted in groups larger than six people. In each of these interactions, we asked the following questions:

1. **What is your vision for Kansas City education?**
2. **Where do you see yourself in that vision?**
3. **Who else should help build that vision?**
4. **Who do you go to when you have a problem/need in education?**

These questions got to the heart of people's deepest desires and pain points in education as well as their aspirations, social networks, and level of social capital. During most interviews and focus groups, Kayla Smalley, our VISTA Communications Coordinator, transcribed the responses of our participants for later analysis.

Who We Interviewed

For the purposes from this Listening Tour, we identified five target zip codes in Kansas City as highest need from the IFF report “Putting Performance on the Map.”⁴ These zip codes have the lowest concentration of open-enrollment schools where students meet state proficiency standards. Below is a table listing our highest need zip codes, along with a raw list of schools (of all types) within that zip code.

Table 1

Zip Code	Schools in that Zip Code
64128	Central Academy of Excellence, Hope Leadership Academy
64127	Table KIPP:KC, Whittier Elementary, Phillis Wheatley Elementary, East High School, Academia de Ninos, Kansas City Neighborhood Academy
64130	George Melcher Elementary, Carver Dual Language, Genesis Promise Academy, Brookside Charter School, Hogan Preparatory Academy Elementary School
64110	King Elementary, Paseo Academy of Fine and Performing Arts, Troost Elementary, Frontier School of Excellence
64124	Garfield Elementary, Scuola Vita Nuova Charter School, Northeast High School 64109 Lee A. Tolbert Community Academy, Academie Lafayette (K-3 Campus), Delasalle Charter High School, Faxon Elementary, Longfellow Elementary, Notre Dame de Sion elementary and middle school

While these zip codes are by no means an exhaustive list of areas where education inequity persists locally, it was a good starting point on which to build a representative group of people to engage with at The Lean Lab.

⁴ IFF. Putting Performance on the Map: Locating Quality Schools in the Kansas City, Missouri School District. Kansas City, Missouri. 2010.

OVERVIEW OF THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE LISTENING TOUR

Table 2

	Format of Interaction	From Target Zip Codes	Outside Target Zip Codes
Student	One-on-One Meetings	1	0
	Focus Group	11	4
Parent	One-on-One Meetings	6	7
	Focus Group	11	3
Educator	One-on-One Meetings	11	9
	Focus Group	7	6
Philanthropic Funder	One-on-One Meetings	0	0
	Focus Group	0	5
Investor	One-on-One Meetings	0	5
	Focus Group	0	0
School System Leader	One-on-One Meetings	1	3
	Focus Group	1	1
Education Entrepreneur	One-on-One Meetings	2	21
	Focus Group	3	6
Community Members (organizers and leaders who work with, but outside of, schools)	One-on-One Meetings	3	4
	Focus Group	1	2
	TOTALS	58	76

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE COMMUNITY

After stopping by offices, visiting schools and classrooms, sitting in people's living rooms and hopping on calls, we identified and distilled trends from all of our notes. From the answers we received to the questions we asked, we found trends in two broad categories of needs: **coordination and communication**. All of our stakeholders felt incredibly siloed, without a space to come together and share their thoughts and coordinate efforts. This was exacerbated by the communication breakdowns, especially between parent communities and schools. Hence, many community stakeholders were looking for avenues to advocate for themselves.

We decided to call these deeply felt problems “**Innovation Priorities**,” which are the problems that The Lean Lab focused on during our 2017 programming, including our core program: the Incubator Fellowship. These priorities guided our Fellowship recruitment, selection processes and programming.

Coordination:

The fact that Kansas City's education landscape is fractured and unequal is felt deeply and painfully. There is a hunger for coordination between schools, communities, service providers, and the business community.

As stated earlier, Kansas City's education landscape is incredibly fractured, with the metro area containing 33 public school districts, 140 private schools, 23 charter schools, and 19 alternative schools.⁵ Of everyone interviewed locally, 90 percent spoke to the fractured and unequal nature of this education landscape, and how their vision for Kansas City education was to have a unified community that provides equitable education to all students. One way that this problem manifests itself is lack of coordinated resources, leading to slow change, waste, inefficiencies and burnt-out teachers.

“How do we get teachers, parents, resources together and all working together? Everyone works in isolation. It's a lot of individuals draining themselves thin. If we could get the connectedness, it would be great. Just everything together.” — Teacher, Central Middle School

“We have a city that's rich in resources and people that care, but they are siloed and separated, not collaborative. My vision is that somehow we figure out how to truly collaborate. To frame up the problem, understand the problem, not just address pieces of it, not take so many fragmented approaches to solving the problem as a school, charter, corporation, etc.” — Board Member, Kansas City Public Schools

One parent spoke to this siloed nature well, stating the need for schools to partner with community organizations who can supplement teaching and learning gaps, reinforcing the desire for the connectedness described by the teacher quoted above.

“Schools need to work more with outside [organizations]. There are a lot out there, but parents don't know a lot about them. So many didn't know about the WEB Dubois Center right down the street. If you go to the internet, there are a lot of things that are for profit or in Johnson County [a wealthy suburb of Kansas City]. That won't work. KC needs to work with the community to bridge the gap.” — Parent, 64128

⁵“By The Numbers.” Take Note Inc. (KCPT), n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <https://takenote.kcpt.org/by-the-numbers> 8

Among Listening Tour participants, 50 percent specifically addressed the unequal nature of Kansas City's education landscape as well, by using the word "equity" when discussing their visions for Kansas City education.

"Social equity and racial issues was part of my question as well, in thinking about the history of the KC metro area, and seeing how (because I was a part of the district during desegregation / integration) that's all played out. People who are my age who grew up in Johnson County [a wealthy suburb] had no concept of the dynamics of race relations and why KC schools look the way they do, and Johnson County schools look the way they do. How do we continue to encourage these conversations? That's why we chose Border Star because it was a diverse mix of people - and understanding that that's not the case for schools that aren't signature schools." — Parent, 64111

"The fundamental underlying principle has got to be equity. Closing the gaps that exist, equity to bring services that are necessary to do that, you know. Good outcomes for our students where they're actually prepared to succeed at life." — Parent, 64109

"I want these high schools to have diversity. Everyone says diversity, right? [Laughs] But I really want the school my son wants to go to the same school that a lot of students want to go to, and to serve all of them in a great way. Equity." — Education entrepreneur and parent, 64113

In addition to lack of coordination of resources, and a lack of equitable access to quality education outcomes, a strong disconnect emerged between charter school educators and public school district educators. Among the charter school teachers that participated in this Listening Tour, 100 percent mentioned an animosity between them and the public school district community, along with a hope that more people would eventually reach across that divide. Conversely, not a single public school district teacher did so, highlighting even further the divide between the district and charter communities.

"I don't know if you know anything about the Denver education landscape, but the charters and the public schools work very peacefully together. The district [in Denver] sponsors a lot of these charter schools. It's such a peaceful relationship between the charters and the public schools... There's a misunderstanding of charters anyways [in Kansas City]... In the teacher's lounge, they said "we take all of the public school districts' money anyway" but that's such a negative view. Money is still taking care of kids." — Teacher, Scuola Vita Nuova Charter School

"There's a big divide right now [between charters and district schools], where we could be learning from each other. More openness." — Teacher, Quality Hill Academy

"The education ecosystem must work together for the kids as much as possible. Charters do their thing really well. Public does theirs really well. But they [must] work together and are not mutually exclusive."

— Former charter school teacher

However, while no public school district teachers mentioned charter schools in their interviews and focus groups, one public school district leader spoke to the divide:

"I am very concerned about the competitive, non-collegial atmosphere of charters vs. public. I am concerned that the end result of that will be kids losing. From a public school person, I'm excited about Crossroads. But the flip side of that is that we have legislation that expands charters. A small group might win, but a big group will lose."

— Local superintendent

Communication:

There is a breakdown of communication between the parent community and schools.

When asked about their vision for Kansas City schools, 100 percent of parents stated there was a disconnect between schools and the parent community. They spoke of their hopes for schools that would one day communicate and engage effectively with them. It was very difficult to get a consensus for how this problem manifested itself in terms of the work of schools (almost every parent went into different, specific, often tragic stories about breakdowns in communication concerning their child's education). Some telling quotes (below) point to actionable directions for innovation: first, many parents are cut out of networks of social capital to advocate for their kids in schools, and second, schools are shutting their doors to parents and making them feel unwelcome or withholding information.

Between all the stories, access to social capital was a major thread in the concerns of parents. Parents break down into two groups:

- 1) those who were connected to and held strong relationships with decision makers to the point of having their numbers saved in their phones, and
- 2) those who were cut out of those networks completely. These two groups spoke about this school communication disconnect in very different ways.

Six out of the 27 parents we spoke to were "connected" parents (who were in leadership positions as parent advocates or on PTAs or District Advisory Committees). They are categorized in that way not only because of their positions, but also because they all named personal contacts within administration and leadership (board members, superintendents, other district level admin, and principals) whom they contacted regularly to address their needs in schools.

The other 21 parents, who did not have any leadership positions in schools, named no one with whom they partnered to advocate for their child. Even more telling, when asked how they saw themselves in building a vision of more engaged Kansas City schools, 66 percent of unconnected parents simply stated, "I don't know" and did not elaborate much further.

Connected parents alluded to a common trait of being unusually fearless. One mother and parent advocate from one of our target zip codes specifically mentioned that many parents are uncomfortable approaching leaders and feel alienated from the school system, even if they care deeply about their child's education. Another also pointed out that many urban parents also lack the time or flexibility to participate in their child's education in traditionally expected ways, even if they care.

“I’m comfortable [approaching principals], but I’m different. I think parents need grooming before they are ready to speak to principals. [I hear] ‘urban parents aren’t concerned...’ [They’re] concerned. They don’t have time to sit at your meeting and join a board, but they do care.” — Parent leader, 64130

This dual problem of discomfort approaching school leadership, combined with privilege, was mentioned by another connected parent.

“So I have the luxury of (how do I say this?) being entitled. As I was raised and as I grew up, being white, I expect people to listen to me. I have always been listened to. So I’m lucky in that way in that if I have a problem with a teacher or administration, I don’t have a problem going up to them and saying ‘hey this isn’t working for me or my kid, what are you going to do about it?’ I think that’s a luxury that I have because of my privilege. Also understanding education better than most parents just because I’m in the field, I know who’s making the decisions and I can go right to [the source].” — Parent educator, 64113

Finally, “un-connected” parents spoke overwhelmingly of feeling cut out of schools, in terms of not getting information or not being physically welcome in the building.

“I feel schools are closed more than they should be. I feel that schools are very defensive. That we’re going to ‘find out’ something, good or bad. Parents should be able to call up a school and say ‘hey, I want to come to your school tomorrow.’ Parents are getting shut down.” — Parent, 64127

“I don’t understand why I have to come to school three times for meetings after months of school have passed to find out that my child can’t read!” — Parent, 64127

Coordination:

Students desire more engaging learning opportunities.

Students had a vision for Kansas City education in which everyone was interacting with each other, within each class, across classrooms and across the city. They spoke of interaction, participation, fun and real-world learning.

“All classmates interact. Not just some of them. All interact instead of some being on their phones. Some not participating, [some] just talking.” — Student

“[School should be] fun and helpful at the same time. More tutoring... More mentors.” — Student

“Sometimes the school system should think about the student more than the basic standards of rules. Everyone’s life is different. People learn at different paces, things are going on in [students’] lives. They might need more leniency; it can be stressful sometimes. And there should be two classes that every high school student should take that prepares you for life: like how to do your taxes and what you’ll need in life. [And] another class where you can share your opinion and that will teach you about real-world things. Like controversial things, or things that you might be going through. [For] a lot of things, you feel like your opinion isn’t heard or discussed. Maybe discussing it would help.” — Student

However, 45 percent of students said they did not know where they saw themselves in helping achieve their vision within their role as students, pointing to the fact they had never been asked to come to the table as decision-makers.

One student mentioned becoming a principal when she grew up, and another mentioned potentially fundraising for more extracurriculars. Otherwise, the most common answers on how students advocated for themselves included being open about their needs with adults (36 percent) or to set a good example themselves for their peers to follow (27 percent). For example, when asked how he saw himself building the future of education, one student replied, *“Contributing to a new development of the school. By showing what’s really working and what’s better than before. Showing the school, everybody.”*

The fact that so many students did not feel as though they had the agency to solve their own problems in school begged a follow-up question: who does have the power to advocate for you and who should be solving your problems? In response to this, students named many adults in their lives on whom they relied for support, with 90 percent of students going to parents or teachers to solve problems in schools. Just under 50 percent named siblings (older sisters, brothers, or cousins) as primary supporters and advocates in addition to their parents. One student said *“no one,”* and one student said *“church.”*

However, 70 percent of students specifically named school boards as having the primary responsibility to build out their vision for more connected and engaging Kansas City schools. One student asked specifically, *“Right now can’t we go to the school board to change things? I don’t know if you can do that as a student or not.”* When she was told she did, in fact, have the right to go in front of the board, she sat back and said, *“Oh, I didn’t know that.”*

But there was much skepticism that students, especially students from underserved communities, would be respected by powerful decision makers and those with purchasing power.

“I’ve never met like a wealthy, wealthy person. Sometimes I think they don’t really care. Let’s say it’s a community like ours. They say ‘We [would] invest in their school, [but] they would just trash it again.’ They wouldn’t think twice about our [schools] like [they do about] Lee’s Summit or Blue Springs, because people take care of [them] and invest in them. But I’m not saying we wouldn’t take care of our things.” — Student

This skepticism about respect and class divisions highlights further how deeply felt the fractured and unequal nature of Kansas City schools truly is.

Students felt the need for connection, as well. The majority of students interviewed (75 percent) envisioned schools where different classrooms interacted with each other, and where students were allowed to collaborate within each classroom, across 12 schools and across the community. One student summed it up when she said that she saw school as mainly a place where you “do worksheets.”

“Yeah, some teachers don’t do that [teach]. They just give you the answers. They don’t help us understand. Yeah, especially here I think.” — Student

SPEAKING WITH EDUCATION ENTREPRENEURS

In order to fully inform our entrepreneur support program, we spoke to 32 education entrepreneurs of various stages: 23 in one-on-one interviews and nine in focus groups.

We documented the stage of the entrepreneurs' companies, their location, and the demographic data of the founders. To track the stage of entrepreneurs' ventures, we used Village Capital's Venture and Investment Readiness and Action Levels (VIRAL) Framework.⁶

The VIRAL framework is a tool that describes a company's maturity in nine levels. We looked at companies that fit between VIRAL 1 and 4, which can be broadly described as:

- **VIRAL 1 – Team.** At this very basic level, a founder has emerged and put together a founding team with lived experience in relation to the problem. They are at the "idea stage," having simply an early idea of what a solution could be.
- **VIRAL 2 – Impact.** At this level, a founder has built a minimally functional prototype of their concept/idea and has begun testing out their idea in small ways in the real world to begin making an impact. Perhaps they have started trying out their program or service with kids, or have started running a technological service concierge-style using free tools like Google Drive or Remind.
- **VIRAL 3 – Value Proposition.** At this level, the founder(s) have refined their prototype and have started to run their service seriously for about a year, gaining initial traction with their user/customer base and providing real value to their user/customer. They are most likely still boot-strapping or self-financing the venture. There is evidence that it could become a sustainable innovation.
- **VIRAL 4 - Market Validation.** At this stage, the venture is able to articulate what differentiates it from similar products on the market, is able to identify its total addressable market, and has a compelling case for investment and serious fundraising.

For all of the education entrepreneurs, we followed the conversation outline below:

1. **Tell us your founding story, from the beginning to where you are today.**
2. **What supports did you have to get to where you are today?**
3. **What supports did you not have that you wish you had?**
4. **How did you "figure it out" without those supports?**
5. **Were you part of a formal incubator/accelerator/fellowship program(s)? What did you like/what feedback do you have for those programs?**

These questions got to the heart of the struggles that education entrepreneurs faced at all levels and exposed gaps in their development. We wanted entrepreneurs to tell us how to better support them.

⁶ Steig, Joseph. Village Capital. Village Capital's VIRAL Development Pathway. 2016. For more information, you can contact Village Capital at <http://vilcap.com/contact/>.

Table 3

The table below gives a cursory breakdown of the entrepreneurs who participated in this Listening Tour by maturity of solution, demographics, and location:

Entrepreneurs by Maturity of Venture	Entrepreneurs by Demographic	Entrepreneurs by Location
Idea 5	White , male 10	Kansas City — 14
Prototype 10	White, female 10	Saint Louis — 2
Full Product 7	Minority, male 6	San Francisco — 4
Full Company 10	Minority, female 5	New York City — 7
		Los Angeles — 1
		Las Vegas — 1
		Denver —1 Oakland — 2

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM EDUCATION ENTREPRENEURS

The need for “access”: We must step up and support different kinds of entrepreneurs. Women of color founders, especially, need access to an invested network of mentors and funders.

The Lean Lab was able to connect with 32 education entrepreneurs of various stages and localities (see Tables 3 and 4 for detailed breakdowns). Among these entrepreneurs, 13 were from Kansas City, 19 were from various cities across the country. While this is by no means an exhaustive study of early-stage education entrepreneurs, some trends did emerge that merit some programmatic action in the present, and further study in the future.

Among the entrepreneurs we spoke to, 93 percent brought up specifically the need for “access” to a network of funders and others that can sustain their ventures. To help facilitate this access to networks, many entrepreneurs in our Listening Tour had participated in formal incubator, accelerator or fellowship programs. Like our own Lean Lab Incubator Fellowship, many of these programs give some seed investment to entrepreneurs, as well as coaching and access to a broad array of mentors and funders to guide them in sustaining and building out their businesses.

Eight of the non-Kansas City entrepreneurs (out of 19 non-Kansas City entrepreneurs total) had been through other accelerators, including Village Capital, ATT Aspire, Learn Launch, the Edwin Gould Accelerator, Fast Forward, Breakthrough Schools DC and Techstars among others.

DETAILED BREAKDOWN OF ENTREPRENEURS INTERVIEWED

Table 4

VIRAL 1 - Just founders with ideas. (Total 5)	
Location	Demographic
Kansas City 3	White, male 3
Saint Louis 1	White, female 0
	Minority, male 2
	Minority, female 0
VIRAL 2 - Just founders with a basic prototype. (Total 10)	
Location	Demographic
Kansas City 7	White, male 3
New York City 1	White, female 3
Los Angeles 1	Minority, male 3
	Minority, female 1
VIRAL 3 - First year providing full product or service. (Total 7)	
Location	Demographic
Kansas City 3	White, male 4
New York City 1	White, female 1
Las Vegas 1	Minority, male 0
San Francisco 1	Minority, female 2
Saint Louis 1	
VIRAL 4 - Fully functional companies ready to grow and take on the world. (Total 10)	
Location	Demographic
New York City 5	White, male 1
Denver 1	White, female 6
San Francisco 2	Minority, male 1
Oakland 2	Minority, female 2

While all of these programs gave “access” to a network of mentors and funders, all entrepreneurs who had been part of an accelerator program spoke specifically about the concept of “genuine access”, especially for female and minority entrepreneurs, who spoke of feeling cut out of the funder community. **“Genuine access”** meant access to funders and decision makers who did not just “show their face” at accelerator programs, but instead actually opened doors for the entrepreneurs (to funds, to customers, or to school buildings).

“Meaningful conversations with supers [superintendents] and principals, and your targets, and helping to broker those pilots, and help you to understand where you’re firing and misfiring, that was missing for me [from many accelerators]. Anything I asked for from AT&T [Aspire], they did. If they had a relationship with someone, I had white glove service. It wasn’t “meet so and so” in an e-mail. Very different from others. AT&T’s relationships are so solid.”

— Education Entrepreneur, Denver

However, there was one group of founders who were conspicuously cut out of the networks that would help sustain their ventures: female, nonprofit founders of color.

Among women of color founders (of which we spoke to five), 100 percent of them spoke to the need for seed funding support. They said they had to prove their concept for free before getting any seed funding, while their white peers were getting “thousands of dollars off of concept papers.” In fact, five entrepreneurs from the Listening Tour had gotten seed funding through their own funder or investor connections, having only operated for less than a year with only a prototype. All five of those founders were white men.

One female founder of color (out of the five who participated in this Listening Tour) spoke of being told *“You don’t have the pedigree. You didn’t go to an Ivy League school, your parents are blue collar, so you don’t have the makings.”* All five female founders of color have worked for at least one year without a paycheck while building their organizations, many for two or three years.

The women of color founders all made up for the lack of initial funding (and having to work for free for at least one year) with either savings from a previous job (three of them) or through spousal support (two of them). All raised some form of money from friends and family.

But new founders need more than just funding: they also need to learn the skills of building and running a new business. Support programs, and their in-house networks, step in and provide entrepreneurs with access to a vast array of experts to guide new ventures. In the absence of access to these experts, all women of color founders spoke to just “doing it” or researching heavily.

However, this was mirrored by the group as a whole. A large part of building a new venture is just “figuring it out,” even with access to a robust network of experts. However, all entrepreneurs with access to a formal network (through a program or from previous professional experience) mentioned that network as critical to their success.

One entrepreneur went on to say that his network allows him to work smarter, not harder. Instead of spending “six hours reading a book”, he can get the same information “talking to experts for 30 minutes.”

MISCELLANEOUS FINDINGS

Additionally, there were two minor trends that arose in our Listening Tour. These trends are not validated by a large group of people, or even by a large percentage within any demographic/stakeholder group. However, in my experience working in school communities, I have a hunch that further study might yield data in favor of naming these trends as priorities for innovation in the future.

Free College

Among students interviewed, 25 percent mentioned that college should be free in the future.

“I really want free college for everyone, because some people are really smart but ‘cause of where they come from, they can’t afford it. I want free college.” — Student

Educators are going to social media to find resources and a community to solve their problems.

When asked “Who do you go to when you have a problem/need in education?”, a handful of people (three teachers, a parent, and school system leader) mentioned social media.

“Depends on the problem. Sometimes twitter. Sometimes professional orgs. Sometimes teachers, sometimes parents. Oftentimes kids. Anytime I can get info from kids is my favorite place to go.”

—Local superintendent

“As I’ve gotten more advanced with it, I use Twitter a lot. Now I call a board member a minute. Try to build a relationship. It also gives me advocates who are not as close to the situation.”

— Parent, 66053

“Twitter. My online edu friends. People I network with. People just a Google Plus post away.”

—Educator, Crossroads Charter Schools

While this is not a large group by any means, The Lean Lab connects with a thriving group of educators online, and our monthly #KCedu meetups also convene a largely online, connected community.

LESSONS LEARNED

This Listening Tour gave our staff at The Lean Lab an initial understanding of challenges and needs deeply felt within the Kansas City school community. However, this was the first time a large-scale approach to human-centered design was attempted in the Kansas City area and much was learned.

During this Listening Tour, communities were prioritized by zip code and asked open-ended questions about people's vision for Kansas City education. Consequently, many of the responses concerned broader community issues, making it difficult to distill priorities for innovation specifically focused on teaching and learning, which is The Lean Lab's ultimate goal. The process did not fully determine an ideal number of people to engage, and the balance of demographics. While this Listening Tour was incredibly diverse and relatively balanced (with 43 percent of participants coming from target zip codes) it was unintentionally so. Additionally, there was a gap in the number of school system leaders who were represented, with only five participating.

For future Listening Tours, The Lean Lab will look at schools and school communities based on their free and reduced lunch percentage, minority student percentage, percentage of ELL students and percentage of SPED students. First, a list of target schools and target school communities would be created based on high percentages in the four categories listed above, as well as schools that have a unique mixture of those percentages (for example, schools with high free and reduced lunch percentage but very low minority percentage, or schools with high SPED percentage regardless of race and class). Having target metrics based on school characteristics will allow for creating a Listening Tour that is much more centered around problems of teaching and learning, as opposed to other community concerns. It will facilitate identifying schools of varying success, and with different populations but still facing similar challenges.

There is a need to be more purposeful about the makeup of the participant pool. An equal representation of 75 community members (parents/families, students and teachers) from our target school communities, and an equal representation of 10 school system leaders from the target schools would have been more representative of the community served by The Lean Lab. Finally, the need was recognized for a more even distribution of education entrepreneurs based on venture maturity level (VIRAL stage), geographic location, gender and race demographics.

With regard to the findings from this current Listening Tour's entrepreneur participants, this report acknowledges that these findings are, by no means, an exhaustive study on the experiences of female, minority founders (sample size is currently five, after all). However, it was so striking to hear the same story with such regularity that the report would be remiss not to talk about it.

In 2013, Forbes reported on the growing conversation about minority, female entrepreneurs as one of the fastest growing entrepreneurial segments, but with a vital lack of social capital and seed capital, based on reports by the Center for Women's Business Research and the Center for Community Economic Development.⁷ Lean Lab staff members are reaching out to many entrepreneurs interviewed for this Listening Tour to request more formal information. Based on some initial responses to the request for follow-up information, among white founders who responded, none had worked for more than 10 months without a paycheck. Meanwhile, one woman of color founders pays herself an annual salary of only \$24,000, after living off of savings for two years. Moving forward, a major next step is to investigate this discrepancy in seed funding to see how this issue manifests on a larger scale.

⁷ Casserly, Meghan, Forbes, August 28, 2013. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/meghancasserly/2013/08/28/minoritywomen-entrepreneurs-go-getters-without-resources/#ea992747a58e> 18

CONCLUSION + NEXT STEPS

At a core level, many people feel that those who work in schools, those who go to schools, those who send their children to schools, and those who partner with schools are siloed and do not have a safe space to share, test and grow their new ideas.

In keeping with our core value of equity, The Lean Lab works to bring decision makers and community members together to have an equal seat at the table when launching new solutions. The history of education reforms and innovations launched in Kansas City has by in large been a narrative of top down initiatives “done to” the community. The desegregation of *Missouri v. Jenkins* brought millions of dollars of resources into schools, but also a controversial busing and forced integration plan, with little to no input from the community most impacted. Charter school growth and expansion, public school closures and “right sizing”—these are all measures that were drafted, approved and implemented by a select few in power, again removed from the community they sought to serve. The Lean Lab seeks to put an end to such top-down methods, working assiduously to be inclusive of parents, students and teachers throughout the entire innovation process.

To do so, The Lean Lab will launch a new method of granting resources to early-stage education innovators, that includes community voices. Beginning with our 2017 Incubator cohort, we will launch a funding process that is largely driven by parents, students and teachers. Concretely, we will be granting two \$25,000 awards to two fellows, that will be selected by a panel that includes parents, students and teachers, alongside philanthropists, investors and systems level leaders. The panel will be trained on a vetted due diligence process to evaluate the “investability” of the ventures.

What we must do now is to surface those leaders who are willing to solve these deep pain points and support them as they build enduring, sustaining institutions that address these concerns. This requires students, parents, teachers, decision-makers, investors and community leaders to come together.

- We are looking for people to become entrepreneurs and build the next solution.
- We are looking for community members to help us surface those entrepreneurs by connecting us with those hidden problem-solvers, working in school communities, getting things done but could use more support.
- We are looking for community members and decision makers to help sustain the work of entrepreneurs by opening up their schools and networks, funding them, or joining our community investment initiative, a representative panel of all stakeholders, bringing together parents, students, teachers alongside philanthropists, investors and system level leaders to determine what innovations from The Lean Lab Fellowship receive investment and additional support.

To join the movement, send an email to aditya@theleanlab.org. We look forward to learning more from each person that we talk to throughout this process.



