Leanlab Education is a nonprofit research organization that helps schools understand and solve their biggest problems. We listen to parents, educators, and students to help them pinpoint specific problems that hinder student achievement. Then, we match those schools with education entrepreneurs. Together, they are developing the next generation classroom tools through research and direct, community feedback.
I think we missed an opportunity here in education as we came back from the pandemic to create our own narrative. However, all is not lost. It is our time, it is our season to create our own narrative. It is time for us to define ourselves, we are more than mere babysitters, we’re more than mere catalysts. We are what we are, and--we are people for the next generation.”

These are the words of Stephanie Kimbrough, an educator at Paseo Academy here in Kansas City. She said this at a recent school event we hosted, where we surveyed over fifty Kansas City area educators. Our goal was to celebrate the difficult year educators have had, identify continued “pain points” in need of innovation, and find educators willing to pilot new, innovative approaches.

This is the heart of Leanlab--uplifting educators’, students’ and parents’ voices to create meaningful change and innovation in education. However, since the Pandemic hit two years ago, we’ve been a system grappling with how we put back the pieces of a puzzle that was already warped and ill suited to adequately prepare young people for the unprecedented, and unpredictable, realities that are the 2020s.

In Stephanie’s words, I hear a painful truth and also a promising resolve. To what extent did we miss a chance to create radical, systemic change? And to what extent is there still a surge of passionate educators longing and willing to create such change? This is the work of Leanlab Education-- to find such educators, mobilize them and equip them with the resources to systematically elevate their voices to enhance future facing tools and resources that can propel the education sector forward.

In 2021 we made progress here--we ran 11 pilot studies with 178 teachers, 100 parents and 1480 students across 10 school districts soliciting their feedback through surveys, interviews, focus groups and conversations. These insights led to 155 recommendations of technology improvements. To date, all of those education technology companies have implemented at least 75% of the product recommendations--actively embedding school community insights into palpable future-oriented tools.
At Leanlab we had—and continue to have—real and honest conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion on our team. However, it had to move past vanity metrics of diverse staff and stakeholders. We needed to reconstitute our organization to align to principles of shared power. In response, we flattened our hierarchical org chart and transitioned to a new way of working where power, decision making and responsibilities are distributed. In a more radical approach, we experimented with titles, giving everyone autonomy to create their own C-level title, and we are now experimenting with a self-review and accountability structure. This work is not easy and I am far from perfect, but we are embracing the messiness in a commitment and acknowledgment aligned to Stephanie’s vision; “It is our season to create our own narrative.”

To our people for the next generation,

Katie Boody Adorno

However, at the same time, as a leader of an education organization, I’ve personally had to deal with an alarming realization: it’s not just tools and resources limiting innovation in the field, it’s also the way we lead. The leadership practices of the past—rooted in physical office locations, white supremacy culture, a certain kind of rigidity—are not the same practices that inspire innovation, curiosity, connectedness and liberation—the kind of practices we’ll need to reimagine education at scale. We need a new way of leading change. And this meant that this change needed to start at home, with me.

And yet, on this quest to find a new way of leading, for much of 2021, I found myself stuck in a liminal space—somewhere between old and new. Still writing and working from a kitchen, instead of an office.

Contending with the pain experienced by our school partners—upticks in violence, student deaths, staff shortages, limited resources—with still less physical interaction than we’ve had in years past.

I’ve heard so many of our educators say, “the pandemic was hard, but this year has been even harder.” As a leader, I have to agree. The pandemic was hard, but gave us a certain level of clarity—we had a singular aim as individuals, organizations and schools—and that was quite literally, to survive.

For the last two years, we’ve been a society ensconced by fear. And from fear, you cannot create change. With that visceral fear subsiding in 2021, I found myself finding new legs.
Building Communities. Fueling Innovation.

VISION
We envision a world where all children have access to effective and excellent educational solutions.

MISSION
Our mission is to study and grow transformational education innovations that have been codesigned with school communities.

GUIDING QUESTION
How do we bring the humanity of educators and learners into the reality of technology and learning at this critical moment in time?
Inequities in education persist. We work unapologetically to create just circumstances from which innovations are born.

**EQUITY**

Inequities in education persist. We work unapologetically to create just circumstances from which innovations are born.

**BOLDNESS**

We are fearless, unafraid to push boundaries and chart new territory to transform outcomes for learners.

**CODESIGN**

We design with (not for) the humans at the center of education.

**TRUST**

We build trust by ceding power. We challenge our preconceived notions and affirm the lived experience and expertise of the communities we serve. We strengthen our impact by going farther, together.

**ITERATION**

We take an experimental approach to problem solving. We take informed risks to test bold ideas. We isolate variables, accept outcomes, seek to understand underlying causes, and then inform our work with new insights.

**COLLABORATION**

We bring our authentic selves to the team, working collaboratively to reach our shared mission. We support one another in our journeys by providing space, trust, and opportunities to develop new ideas.
THE RADICAL IDEA THAT USERS ARE PEOPLE...

People with expertise.

WHAT IS CODESIGN?

 Codesign is a term we use a lot, and it is based on the simple idea that students, teachers, and parents in education are the people with the necessary expertise to improve research design and education products.

When we codesign, we engage in a collaborative process that unites critical insights from school communities with the expertise of researchers and product developers. The end result is better learning solutions for school communities.
We view research as an ongoing process of iteration, improvement, evaluation, and progress. We’ve designed our research offerings as a progression from a Sandbox study, suited for anyone with an idea and a basic prototype to a Correlational study designed for companies that are ready for an ESSA III study. Each study systematically elevates the feedback and data from real school communities, helping companies build a more equitable and effective edtech products.
# Research Offerings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>SANDBOX</th>
<th>USABILITY</th>
<th>FEASIBILITY</th>
<th>IMPLEMENTATION</th>
<th>CORRELATIONAL</th>
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<tr>
<td>Understand if the product is needed. Get candid feedback on a prototype from a real school community.</td>
<td>Improve the product’s ease of use and appeal with insights direct from actual end-users</td>
<td>Improve the product’s ability to be used within the day-to-day realities of public school classroom settings and scenarios.</td>
<td>Understand under what conditions the product is used best and sustains engagement throughout an academic semester.</td>
<td>Understand if there is a relationship between the product’s use and intended outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do educators and students see value in the idea or prototype?</td>
<td>Is the tool easy to use? Do educators and students enjoy it enough to keep using it?</td>
<td>How does the tool work in the day-to-day realities of the classroom?</td>
<td>How do contextual factors influence the success or failure of the tool?</td>
<td>Does the product demonstrate an impact on educational outcomes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>~2-3 weeks</td>
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<td>~4-5 months</td>
<td>~4-5+ months</td>
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<td>7-10 students, teachers, and/or administrators per school</td>
<td>7-10 full classrooms per school</td>
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<td>7-10 full classrooms per school</td>
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</table>
In 2020, we added education research to the list of things that could actually be done well remotely. Conducting research while schools were completely remote seemed unfathomable before that. But, like everyone else, we didn’t have a choice.

The fact that we were researching edtech tools during that time definitely worked in our favor. Teachers were looking for any edtech tool that could improve learning and make their lives easier, and we helped them find the right tools and assess if they actually worked.

What ultimately allowed us to continue conducting research was our relationships with schools. The schools that we had already established relationships with and were familiar with the expectations of a research study allowed us to communicate better. The pre-existing relationships gave teachers and staff more confidence to approach Leanlab and the research team when things weren’t going well, and to request more time or amendments to the study. The trust and honesty allowed iterations to the study to occur in a way that worked for the participants and still met the goals of the research plan.
When we first started doing research on edtech tools, our approach was to design one study that incorporated a full spectrum of research goals. For each study, we looked at everything from usability questions to correlational results. We quickly found that the lack of specificity wasn’t helpful for anyone involved.

That’s why in the last year we developed a suite of research offerings that better align with an edtech company’s stage of development. We have Sandbox studies that are used to validate a prototype, all the way up to Correlational studies that seek to uncover relationships between usage and outcomes.

We’ve found that there’s no, universal, best research practice and there’s no research study that can answer all questions. The research we do works best when we can identify developmentally-appropriate research questions with a company and align a research project offering that is best-suited to answer those questions.

There’s one question that every edtech founder wants to know: does my product have a positive impact on student outcomes? This is a great question and one that edtech companies should ask themselves every day. But in reality, it’s a very hard question to answer.

Before that question can be answered, dozens more have to be asked, such as:

- Do teachers and students even see value in my tool?
- Can any teacher from any school pick up my edtech tool and start using it with fidelity and with minimal training?
- Is it a hassle for teachers to integrate my edtech tool into their current Learning Management System?
- Is my edtech tool engaging enough for teachers to continue using it throughout the semester and beyond?

Companies often take these questions for granted and want to first answer questions about impact. However, these are the questions that will make most attempts to understand impact come back null because the products don’t have sustained and quality engagement. Companies will get infinitely more value from research by asking the right questions, and most of the time these questions are about understanding the perception of the tool, its usability, and how teachers actually implement it in the classroom.
The ability for an edtech tool to be easily understood and highly user-friendly is make-or-break for edtech companies. No one, especially teachers, has the time to deal with a clunky user interface, no matter the perceived value. If the usability of an edtech tool isn’t there, a teacher will put down that tool and never pick it back up.

It’s important to remember that users aren’t comparing edtech tools to other instructional materials like textbooks. Instead, they’re expecting the user experience to be on par with every other app that teachers and students use, from Apple iOS to Google Maps to TikTok.

We have found that, across school systems, usability is one of the major roadblocks that causes underutilization of edtech to that we find across school systems. Even established companies can benefit from usability and feasibility studies in order to increase quality engagement.

Have you ever received an email from a company that asks you to fill out a survey because they value your feedback? In a capitalist economy, ‘value’ is measured in monetary terms. So if your feedback is so valuable, why aren’t you getting paid for it? Even small incentives can help you get more survey responses and show that you actually value the opinions of teachers and parents.

But we’ve also learned some hard lessons about surveys and gift cards. Without captchas and other authentication methods, bots and individuals can game the system and create a lot of noise in your data. Because of this, we stopped advertising our surveys on mass communication channels and started working solely with our school networks to find survey respondents.

Most of our studies require more commitment from teachers than completing a survey, though. We provide larger stipends for teachers who do research with us because teachers have years of expertise about what works for the classroom. They’re providing real monetary value for the companies they work with through our research studies. We want to honor that by actually paying teachers and, at the same time, making sure teachers feel heard and feel valued in the process.
Since we work at the nexus between school and edtech companies, we are especially attuned to the flow of communication between these two groups. To briefly summarize the characteristics of each group, educators can be hard to get a hold of, and edtech companies value prompt, high-frequency communication. Or as the anthropologist Edward T. Hall might put it: edtech companies are high-context communicators, while schools are somewhat lower-context communicators.

Ultimately, it’s our job to serve the needs of educators, so it’s important that we cater to the communication preferences of schools in this scenario. To do this, we have to act as a bit of a buffer between the schools and companies. By now, we’ve adapted our timelines to appreciate the hectic and less flexible of schools, and we’re able to set those expectations with companies early on in the process.

Our research reports are really long; many times upward of 50 pages. We think that level of detail is necessary so that companies and the research participants are able to get a rich and full picture of the data. But if we gave companies a fifty-page report and wished them luck, nothing would be accomplished.

That’s why we developed our Action Plan this past year—a simple 2-4 page document that distills the feedback from the teachers into something akin to a product roadmap. We believe it’s our obligation in this process to make sure that teacher and student voices are heard and are acted on. And aside from including ample direct quotes from teachers and students in our full report, the Action Plan assures that there’s no ambiguity about the changes teachers and students want for the product.

One of the most exciting things we’ve seen in the past year is companies taking some of the research methods and techniques that Leanlab used in their research studies and applying it themselves. Of course it helps greatly to have a third-party design research instruments and conduct independent, unbiased research. But there’s plenty of value in a company embracing codesign principles to create a survey and collect systematic and valid feedback from end users to help iterate a product.
The type of codesign research that we do requires openness from all parties. As researchers, we’re familiar with some level of pushback from companies after they receive feedback or impact data that they perceive as unfavorable. We always try to take the time to make room for this type of feedback from the companies and adjust where necessary. It’s also necessary that we’re open to accommodating the unique contexts and needs of participants.

On the part of the schools, it’s important that they’re open to trying new things, and even more crucially, it’s important that they’re open to sometimes failing at it. It’s those failures that often tell us the most about why a product is or isn’t successful.

The role of edtech companies is probably the most humbling, though. They need to open themselves up to hear a lot of very hard truths about their product. They also need to be open to iterating their product because teachers have an inherent expertise about those products that sometimes surpasses the company’s, even though they are the product’s developers.

“NO ONE, ESPECIALLY A TEACHER, HAS THE TIME TO DEAL WITH A CLUNKY USER INTERFACE, NO MATTER THE PERCEIVED VALUE. IF THE USABILITY OF AN EDTECH TOOL ISN’T THERE, A TEACHER WILL PUT DOWN THAT TOOL AND NEVER PICK IT BACK UP.”
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Boddle Learning partnered with Leanlab as a third-party evaluator to identify usability features or functionalities of Boddle that could be enhanced or added to make Boddle more user-friendly and valuable to teachers. The study also set out to collect preliminary data on how teachers implement Boddle in the classroom with greatest success.

Boddle is a game-based learning platform that helps K-12 teachers assess and differentiate their students’ learning to improve academic outcomes in STEM.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What features and/or functionalities of Boddle need to be enhanced or added to make Boddle more user-friendly?
- What aspects of Boddle add value for teachers, and what features and/or functionalities should be added to provide additional utility to teachers and students?
- How do teachers use Boddle in the classroom with greatest success?

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Implementation Survey (1)
- Interviews with Teachers (18)

**SUMMARY**

Boddle Learning

**LOCATION** Tulsa, OK

**GRADE LEVEL** K - 6

**FOUNDERS** Edna Martinson & Clarence Tan

**COMPANY DESCRIPTION**

Boddle is a game-based learning platform that helps K-12 teachers assess and differentiate their students’ learning to improve academic outcomes in STEM.

**SCHOOL PARTNERS**

- Citizens of the World KC
  Kansas City, MO
  Public Charter Elementary School

- Guadalupe Centers
  Kansas City, MO
  Public Charter Elementary School
Classcraft

<table>
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<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>GRADE LEVEL</th>
<th>CEO &amp; CO-FOUNDER</th>
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<td>Montreal, QC</td>
<td>K - 6</td>
<td>Shawn Young</td>
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**SUMMARY**

Classcraft partnered with Leanlab in the spring of 2021 to conduct a study to identify and verify conditions of implementation that would yield sustained engagement from teachers and students in an urban, under-resourced school context. Classcraft used the findings to improve their platform and then conducted a follow-up study in the fall of 2021.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What conditions of use and ways of product implementation yield greater teacher and student engagement with the solution?
- What are the barriers to classroom implementation?
- What features and/or functionalities should be added to provide additional utility to teachers and students?

**SCHOOL PARTNERS**

- Longfellow Elementary School
  Kansas City Public Schools
  Kansas City, MO
- George Melcher Elementary School
  Kansas City Public Schools
  Kansas City, MO

**COMPANY DESCRIPTION**

Classcraft is a student behavior and motivation solution that allows students and teachers to identify, reward, and monitor behaviors of interest.

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Implementation Survey (1)
- Focus Groups with Teachers (12)
- Focus Groups with Students (2)
Levered Learning engaged in a three-part study, measuring *usability*, *implementation*, and *correlational* findings. The study yielded a data-informed guide for implementation best practices along with statistically significant results showing that Levered Learning saves teachers time when preparing for class.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What are the barriers to classroom implementation?
- What conditions of use and ways of product implementation yield greater teacher and student engagement with the solution?
- Do teachers feel Levered Learning provides added value to the classroom and meets the unique needs of their school setting?
- What is the relationship between use of Levered Learning and
  - Student outcomes related to math scores, confidence in math, and engagement with math?
  - Teacher outcomes related to confidence to teach math and planning time?

**SCHOOL PARTNER**

Lee A. Tolbert Community Academy
Public Charter School
Kansas City, MO

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Implementation Survey
- Focus Groups with Teachers
- Focus Groups with Students
- Pre- and Post-Surveys
- Pre- and Post-NWEA Assessment

Levered Learning is a competency-based math curriculum founded by former teacher Mitch Slater after using a competency-based method for 20 years in his own classroom.
Sown to Grow partnered with Leanlab to identify and verify conditions of implementation that would yield sustained engagement from teachers and students across different contexts. The study also collected quantitative and qualitative data to assess the correlation between usage and student and teacher outcomes. Sown to Grow did a follow-up study in the fall.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What conditions of use and ways of product implementation yield greater teacher and student engagement with the solution?
- What are the barriers to classroom implementation?
- What aspects of Sown to Grow add value for teachers, and what features and/or functionalities should be added to provide additional utility to teachers and students?
- What is the relationship between use of Sown to Grow and
  - Student outcomes related to self-awareness, self-management quality of reflection
  - Teacher Outcomes related to Self-Efficacy Quality of Feedback

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Implementation Survey
- Interviews with Teachers
- Focus Groups with Students
- Pre- and Post-Survey
- Change in Reflection Quality

**COMPANY DESCRIPTION**

Sown To Grow empowers schools to improve student social, emotional, and academic health through an easy reflection and feedback process.
Leanlab partnered with two dual-language immersion schools to study the usability and feasibility of BeeReaders. Each school was matched with BeeReaders because teachers there had expressed a need and desire for a tool that would help elevate Spanish reading comprehension while simultaneously offering access to a wider variety of Spanish texts for all levels of learners.

**COMPANY DESCRIPTION**

BeeReaders is a Spanish reading and comprehension platform that “engages students in reading experiences and activities to develop their comprehension and love of reading.”

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- How do teachers use BeeReaders in the classroom? What instructional mode do teachers choose? What went well and what barriers remain?
- How well can teachers use the teacher dashboard - the report section and corresponding data - to plan instructional activities and meet their instructional goals?
- How well can students navigate the student dashboard?
- What value does BeeReaders bring teachers and students?

**SCHOOL PARTNERS**

- **George Washington Carver Dual Language School**
  Kansas City Public Schools
  Kansas City, MO
- **Schafer Park Elementary**
  Hayward Unified School District
  Hayward, CA

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Implementation survey
- User diaries
- Student focus groups
- 1:1 teacher interviews
Leanlab partnered with Pango to explore the usability and feasibility of Pango for lesson planning. The schools were matched with Pango because teachers had expressed a need and desire for streamlining and standardizing lesson planning across their school systems, especially during a time of constant uncertainty and inconsistency in teaching and learning environments.

Pango is a K-12 tool designed for faster lesson planning where teachers can find resources, create lesson plans, teach, and share with colleagues.

- **Surveys**
- **User diaries**
- **1:1 teacher interviews**

**Research Questions**

- The purpose of this study was to assess the feasibility and utility of Pango for lesson-planning. The central research question was: are teachers able to use Pango for lesson planning or for other ways they want to?

**School Partners**

- Kansas City Virtual Academy
- Kansas City Public Schools
  
- University Academy
  
- Public Charter School
  
- Kansas City, MO

**Company Description**

Pango is a K-12 tool designed for faster lesson planning where teachers can find resources, create lesson plans, teach, and share with colleagues.
Leanlab partnered with Schoolytics to conduct a usability study that focused on parents’ use of the application. The goals of the study were to test assumptions made by the Schoolytics team and to assess usability of the parent dashboard.

Schoolytics is a parent-engagement platform that is layered onto Google Classroom. The platform draws data from Google Classroom and presents dashboards for different stakeholders.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- How well can parents access and navigate the dashboard to get data on their student’s performance?
- What are the barriers to parents using the dashboard?
- What is the perceived value of the dashboard?
- What features would encourage their use of the dashboard?
- What is the overall customer experience?

**DATA COLLECTION**

- Surveys
- 1:1 parent interviews
2021 School Partners

- **CLINTON COUNTY RIII**
  - Ellis Elementary
  - Clinton County Middle
  - Plattsburg High School

- **CITIZENS OF THE WORLD CHARTER SCHOOLS**
  - Citizens of the World Kansas City

- **GORDON PARKS ELEMENTARY**
  - Gordon Parks Elementary

- **GUADALUPE CENTERS**
  - Guadalupe Centers Elementary

- **HAYWARD UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**
  - Schafer Park Elementary

- **KANSAS CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
  - George Melcher Elementary
  - George Washington Carver Elementary School
  - Kansas City Virtual Academy
  - Longfellow Elementary
  - Northeast Middle School

- **LEE A. TOLBERT COMMUNITY ACADEMY**
  - Lee A. Tolbert Community Academy

- **OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**
  - Roosevelt Middle School

- **PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**
  - Pajaro Middle School

- **UNIVERSITY ACADEMY**
  - University Academy
Our 2021 Communications Numbers

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OUR FAVORITE ARTICLES OF 2021

2021: AN IMPERATIVE TO INNOVATE

GRIEF, PRESSURE & CONNECTION: A PRIMER ON EDUCATION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD
THE BASICS OF BUILDING AN EVIDENCE-BACKED EDTECH TOOL

8 SKILLS EVERY EDTECH ENTREPRENEUR NEEDS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

FIVE KEYS TO GETTING STARTED WITH EDTECH FUNDRAISING

HERE’S ONE THING EDTECH FOUNDERS CAN DO TO HELP FAMILIES
Our Team

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Chief Executive Officer

Karnissa Caldwell
Chief Experience Officer

Andrea Cook
Chief Relationship Officer

Laura Gowans
Chief Operating Officer

Jorge Holguin
Chief Learning Officer

Erin Huebert, Ph.D
Principal Researcher

Alexander Sheppard
Chief Creative Officer

John Walter
Chief Development Officer
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EVP and Principal
Doolin Ward Consulting, LLC

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Arizona State University

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VMLY&R

Brandi Spates
Attorney
Stueve Siegel Hanson LLP