

Worlds Re-Imagined

01 Chronic Absenteeism and the
Importance of Place in Education.

Held at The Annex in
Minneapolis, MN.



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**People from diverse
disciplines + perspectives
using critical conversation
to explore new possibilities.**



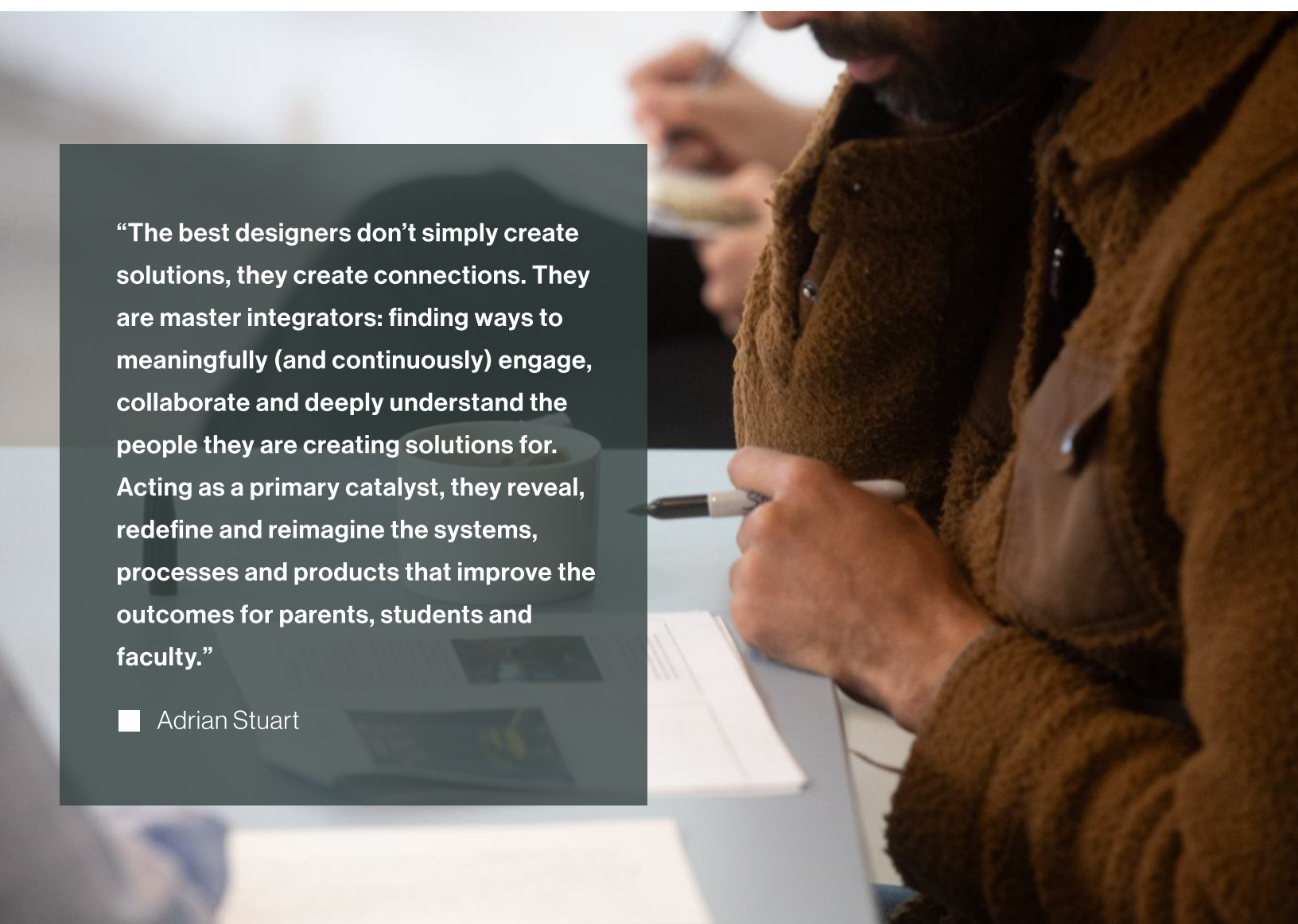
Introduction

This white paper compiles the insights and discussions from a dynamic workshop where professionals from diverse disciplines, including: design, art, philosophy, architecture, education, and community organizing, convened. A key component of this workshop was a critical reading and discussion of the New York Times article, Why School Absences Have ‘Exploded’ Almost Everywhere. This article served as a springboard for challenging established educational paradigms and integrating psychoanalytic principles with other disciplinary insights, thereby enhancing our understanding of the complexities of education and the importance of inquiry.

The Role of Place in Education

Reacting to the New York Times article, “Why School Absences Have ‘Exploded’ Almost Everywhere,” a common idea emerged: a focus on creating an environment conducive to learning would be far more effective than the traditional approaches based on enforcing predetermined learning outcomes. Participants discussed the various ways this emphasis on environment, or “place,” could shift educational paradigms and potentially address the issues underlying chronic absenteeism by engaging the whole student and not just the student’s education.

Adrian Stuart (Product Design and Innovation) advocated for the integration of User Experience (UX) principles in educational tool design to ensure that digital products were engaging and supportive of educational outcomes.

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person wearing a brown, textured jacket. They are holding a white marker and writing on a light blue notepad. The background is out of focus, showing other people and what appears to be a meeting or workshop setting.

“The best designers don’t simply create solutions, they create connections. They are master integrators: finding ways to meaningfully (and continuously) engage, collaborate and deeply understand the people they are creating solutions for. Acting as a primary catalyst, they reveal, redefine and reimagine the systems, processes and products that improve the outcomes for parents, students and faculty.”

■ Adrian Stuart

Designing Inclusive, Engaging Spaces

Jenna Myrland (Interior Designer, co-facilitator) emphasized the role of thoughtful interior design in promoting a sense of belonging. By creating environments that cater to various learning styles and levels of stimulation, schools become places where students feel comfortable and engaged.

“With students experiencing the full spectrum of neurodiversity, I wonder how we might reimagine the design, scale and flow of space to meet children where their energy and attention is best served. Designing for varied levels of privacy or stimulation, as well as a holistic approach to creating environments for multiple learning styles would help to promote an overall sense of security and belonging.

Authentic, human-centered community engagement in the design process, as well as thoughtful use of textures, patterns, imagery, light, sound, and interactive elements that are culturally responsive have the capacity to foster agency and belonging by making kids, as well as their families feel seen and valued.”

■ Jenna Myrland

Holistic Considerations in School Construction

Heidi Neumueller (Architect) pointed out that the sense of place extended beyond the classroom. Community integration and attention to health and wellness were crucial for creating supportive educational environments.

“Community must be considered and engaged when building schools. This means the students, staff, administrators, neighbors, caregivers, and families. Health and wellness, if ignored, can be detrimental to a student's sense of belonging. This means caring for the whole student, not simply academics. It's equally important to take care of staff so that they can take care of the students.”

■ Heidi Neumueller



Emotional and Physical Environment Optimization

Stephen Lewis (Environment Design / Fabrication) discussed the importance of classroom layout and environmental factors in fostering a conducive learning atmosphere.



“There are a few things in the physical environment of a classroom that contribute to a sense of belonging. How your body and senses are treated by the space is very important (texture, lighting, acoustics, ergonomics). But, I think one area that needs to be explored much more is how to layout classrooms to foster a meaningful exchange of energy and recognition between the humans in the room, as opposed to creating a captive audience.”

■ Stephen Lewis

Enhancing School Identity through Media and Content

In discussing the transformative impact of media in shaping perceptions and enhancing the sense of belonging within educational settings, **Joe Horton (photographer / filmmaker)** emphasizes the critical role that tailored and engaging content plays in defining a school's identity. He questions the standard approach to school media and suggests a more thoughtful and engaging method.

"I'd love to see more schools using artful imagery as a community-building tool. When schools use stock photography or generic video they're saying to students, 'There's nothing much special about this place. It might as well be any other place.' On the flip side, inspiring media can help create a strong and signature sense of place, and a sense of place is essential to community."

■ Joe Horton

■ Peter Pisano, co-facilitator





Enhancing Family and Community Engagement

Sidney Stuart (Community Organizer / Program Director) underscored the importance of schools as community hubs that extended beyond traditional education to involve families and local organizations.

“School communities can create that sense of belonging with parents, families, and community by intentionally developing relationships. Connecting with local partner organizations, whether non-profits with resources or the park board with after-school programming, schools should strategically develop relationships to increase capacity and support from within the community.

There's so much community wisdom that can be brought into educational spaces; how can kids learn about the history of their communities? Are any of their grandparents' long-time residents/elders who would come and talk to the class, thinking about the ways the wisdom of the families and those existing relationships with the kids can inform what they learn in school?”

■ Sidney Stuart



Educational Programming as a Pathway to Belonging

Julio Vargas (Student Affairs and Enrollment) spoke to the transformative potential of programs like Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and the Pathway model. These programs not only catered to academic needs but also built a community around shared interests, which was crucial for student engagement and retention.



“Take PSEO (Post-Secondary Enrollment Options), for instance. It's not just about college-level courses but a stepping stone towards personal growth. By connecting with peers who share similar academic interests, students can find a sense of belonging that may be missing in the traditional high school setting. Earning college credit validates students' abilities and provides a sense of accomplishment. In Minnesota, PSEO programs cover tuition and textbooks, creating an inclusive space for academic growth.

The Pathway model, on the other hand, offers students a structured pathway through their education, guiding them from entry to completion. Pathway programs can help students navigate their educational journey more confidently by providing clear direction and support, leading to a greater sense of belonging and connection to their school community. For example, a health sciences pathway might include courses, internships, and mentorship opportunities, fostering a sense of belonging among aspiring healthcare professionals.”

■ Julio Vargas

Conclusion

A man with a beard, wearing a black beanie and a brown jacket, is shown in profile, looking down at a document. The background is a bright, out-of-focus white space. A dark, semi-transparent rectangular box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing white text.

The workshop showcased the collective commitment of professionals from various fields to enhancing student belonging as a means to combat absenteeism. Discussions centered on several key areas: integrating community-based projects with educational programs to deepen students' local engagements, redesigning learning environments to accommodate diverse needs and preferences, promoting holistic wellness and robust community partnerships, reimagining classroom layouts to foster greater interaction and inclusivity, and strengthening familial and community involvement in educational processes. These topics reflect a significant focus on creating educational spaces that not only address academic learning but also cultivate a supportive, engaging, and inclusive community atmosphere, essential for ensuring that students feel valued and connected.