Our super school will be called:
The Wayfinder School, named after ancient Polynesian navigators that traversed oceans under extreme uncertainty. Wayfinding reflects our values: purpose-based, personalized learning; connection; innovation; and innumerable pathways to a meaningful life.

A bold and compelling idea will be at the center of our school:
Since the first charter law was passed in 1991, charter schools have introduced a disruptive force to the traditional public school system that has shown us what is possible when we are able to innovate and re-think school. However, only 4.6% of public school students nationally have been able to benefit from the more nimble and innovative approach of charters. The remaining more than 95% of children who need to benefit from these innovations remain in our seemingly impervious traditional public education system. Our goal is to start a radically innovative school within a high-performing district and develop a blueprint for how we might bring innovation to Palo Alto Unified’s more than 12,000 students and beyond.

Our opportunity and challenge is to bring a purpose-based, personalized high school experience to a conventionally “high achieving” district, and to do it as part of the district (not a charter) to benefit both marginalized students in the district as well as so called “high achievers.” Due to Palo Alto’s reputation for innovation combined with the harsh spotlight of recent trauma, we anticipate that such an effort will have high visibility, and that resulting innovations will offer a guide for how others might also start a truly innovative school within a traditional district.
Why is it important to make this work in Palo Alto? Aren't these kids already “doing well”? By conventional metrics, many are, but many more are disillusioned. Under-represented minority students and under-resourced students once relegated to lower academic tracks, get stuck, and by high school disconnect accordingly. Many affluent students cannot find meaning in the ever more grueling “arms race” of AP tests, “box-checking” extracurriculars, and siloed courses designed for the Industrial Revolution. Even the kids who sacrifice so much to excel within the system to reach elite colleges often struggle to adapt to the demands of today’s ambiguous tasks. As a faculty member of the Stanford d.school put it, “Today kids are coming to us from the most structured environments in history and leaving us to the least structured environment in history. The roles of today look nothing like the roles of even fifteen years ago. And we have just four years to try and change them.”

The challenges for both groups look different but the solution is similar: bring purpose and connectedness back to education. If students understand the importance of what they are learning through tailored experiences, community mentors, and innovation, they are far more likely to engage deeply and with rigor. As Bill Damon says, “College counselors chalk the problem up to stress caused by the heavy burdens of schoolwork and competition... but hard work and competition have never broken the spirits of young people, as long as they believe in what they are doing.”

A core component of our mission is to create a community of learners from all backgrounds, working together to support each other. Our students in Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) come from Palo Alto and East Palo Alto. As such, The Wayfinder School will start with the same initial conditions that exist in today’s PAUSD schools – a large achievement gap between students of different backgrounds. Wayfinder will offer PAUSD a new opportunity to focus on closing this achievement gap in new and innovative ways. With the focus, intent, and leadership of the PAUSD administration that places Minority Achievement & Talent Development as its top priority, we hope to break new ground and meaningfully close this gap in our district. In building a school of innovation and equity within a highly traditional school district, we hope to provide a case of what is possible for other traditional school districts across the US.

We embrace as opportunities what others view as obstacles for district innovation: 1) Working with the teachers’ union and district administration. 2) Serving district students of all abilities and backgrounds. 3) Bringing progressive and unfamiliar innovation to a community and school board political process where inertia and conservatism are trusted defaults. 4) Closing the wide achievement gap that exists between white and Asian students and historically marginalized students in our community, and 5) Actively being an innovation hub for public education in the Bay Area, nationwide, and across the globe.

At The Wayfinder School, we believe students and educators need significant freedom to experiment, learn, and advance. We will break open the walls between school and community to facilitate learning from many people, by applying knowledge to real world problems. Our learners will develop persistence, resourcefulness, and wayfinding skills required for an era that rewards creative and team-based problem solving of ambiguous challenges. They will engage in a cycle of learning, trying, and teaching others. They will learn that failing is okay—in fact, it is the way you truly learn. With strong mentoring relationships, our students will feel deeply known and seen by adults. This will be especially important to our historically underserved students, who do not typically share the same access to and opportunities for mentorship with Silicon Valley’s leaders as other students may. They will craft their own learning journeys, oriented around their unique sense of passion and purpose so they can find their own path to success.
The net effect of this approach is that Wayfinder will illuminate powerful ideas, ignite and inspire profound inquiry, and nurture a compassionate, collaborative community. Our students will develop the deep conceptual understanding that is necessary to ask and answer essential questions, to identify and solve the most challenging problems, and to make an enduring difference to their community, country, and beyond.

With the unbelievable collection of resources in Palo Alto and Silicon Valley, we see founding this school as more than a "the next cool thing" in Silicon Valley, but as a moral obligation. Palo Alto must be at the forefront of creating a new school experience that inspires a new generation of students and educators to successfully take on the challenges of the 21st century.

Please note that we plan to rely heavily on stakeholder input (especially student voices) for all aspects of the school design, including the school name. While many of us like referring to the school as The Wayfinder School, it is our informal working title for now. The overriding criteria is that the eventual final name reflect a broader student-led voice during the formal design phase.

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To ensure that our school truly serves the needs of our community, we plan to get input from young people by:

Many Palo Alto teens are not afraid to speak out or speak up—it's our obligation to be sure we're listening to all of their voices. We're working and will continue to work to understand the needs of our diverse student population, including historically underrepresented students and East Palo Alto students who attend PAUSD schools through the Voluntary Transfer Program. Palo Alto Unified currently has a student population that is 43% White, 43% Asian, 11% Latino, and 3% African American, and includes approximately 12% of the overall population that have been identified with learning differences and are being served with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or other forms of special education. Our partners at the Stanford d.school have created momentum for our work, having conducted over a dozen in-depth Empathy Interviews with current Palo Alto high school students to understand their experiences and needs. In addition, PAUSD has sent out a citizens’ committee that will survey its 40,000 current high school students to hear their thoughts about the Wayfinder School.

To ensure we're reaching kids whose voices aren't typically heard, we are making special outreach efforts to historically underserved populations. We will use the findings and recommendations of Palo Alto Unified's Minority Achievement and Talent Development Task Force as a starting point. We will uncover additional needs and creative insights through: (a) One-on-one interviews and focus groups with teens in our community, including at both of our current high schools, (b) One-on-one interviews and focus groups with recent high school graduates from our community, (c) Information gathering sessions with the Palo Alto Teen Advisory Board, Palo Alto Youth Council, and Palo Alto Teen Arts Council, (d) Pop-up school activities and sessions for experiential feedback on concepts and prototypes through the d.school at Stanford, (e) Media and materials that exist in our community, including student-made videos, the Palo Alto High School newspaper The Campanile, and the Gunn High School newspaper The Oracle.
It is imperative that our core design team include high school students, particularly to help figure out how our school can address the serious mental health issues that plague Palo Alto students. Despite its affluence, or in part because of it, many students suffer from serious mental health issues. In our most recently available California Healthy Kids Survey, 32% of our high school juniors at one school reported that in a 30-day period, they missed school because they didn’t get enough sleep while 26% reported they missed school because they were behind in their schoolwork or weren’t prepared for a test or class assignment. Approximately one in four of our high school juniors reported that in a 12-month period they felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities. And approximately one in ten contemplated suicide in that same 12-month period. Tragically, at least 10 Palo Alto teens have taken their lives in the last decade, including four during the 2014-2015 school year. We must do something to create a school (and community) culture that values the mental health of our students—not just pay lip service to it—and this starts from truly understanding the needs of our students and including them every step of the way.

In our work to design a new school, the student is central. We follow the guidance of David Kelley, founder of IDEO and the Stanford d.school, as read to the PAUSD school board on Tuesday, November 10th: “A student-centered design process marked by prototyping, iterating rapidly, and learning by doing is the best way to achieve transformative and innovative outcomes.” Nothing is more important than student input throughout the design and implementation process.

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To get insights into how we can prepare our students for postsecondary education and the future of work, we plan to:

PAUSD sits in the heart of Silicon Valley and across the street from Stanford University and as such, has access to leading thinkers in K-12 education, industry, and higher education. It is imperative that we draw on the vast array of resources that are available to us to design a new approach to secondary education.

Educators. It is well known that effective educators are the #1 factor that contributes to student performance in our schools. More importantly, the relationships between educators and their students are core to our vision for a purpose-based education. We’ve conducted focus groups with teachers and administrators at both of our high schools - and their support for a new, more innovative school is high. Our current teachers and administrators will also be involved in all pop-up school activities and sessions for experiential feedback.

In addition, several leading, innovative teachers from our current schools have already expressed interest in contributing to the design of Wayfinder, including Esther Woliczk, Eric Bloom, and Erin Angell. These teachers have developed programs that are bright spots of innovation in our current schools. We want to leverage their knowledge and lessons learned to help design Wayfinder so that even more PAUSD students can demonstrate their skills and talents. Outside of the district we have consulted leading school designers including Larry Rosenstock, CEO of High Tech High, Devin Voellick, winner of the Innovative Superintendent Award, and Sal Khan. We are assembling a list of “model schools” and top thinking educators to talk to as we go through the design process.
Employers, Silicon Valley leaders have expressed strong interest in supporting new models of education. Most have noted that they do not have access to the workforce of the future that is needed. Plus, our local industry leaders observe that students coming out of today’s colleges and universities do not possess the 4 C’s (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication) required to thrive in today’s evolving workplace. We will engage experts from major Silicon Valley corporations, such as Lazlo Bock at Google, who are leading the dialogue on the need for a diverse, agile and rapid learning workforce in the future.

Higher Education. PAUSD has strong connections with institutes of higher education. Not only is Stanford University literally in our backyard, but most Stanford faculty and staff’s children attend PAUSD schools, giving Stanford a vested interest in the continuing evolution of PAUSD’s approach to education. Several Stanford faculty are helping to shape the design of Wayfinder, including Dr. Jo Boaler, Dr. Carol Dweck, Dr. Bill Damon, and others.

Beyond Stanford, PAUSD has a strong history of placing graduates at leading colleges and universities across the country. We’re closely following the work of the 80+ schools who have already signed on to the Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success; their bold moves to change measures of success in the admissions process mirror our goals. We’ll also work in conjunction with leading admissions officers to build a movement to appreciate innovation and drive change in the admissions process. While providing cutting edge experiences for students, Wayfinder’s innovative classes will still be rigorous (experience-based, project-based, cross-disciplinary, team-based) and designed to conform within the University of California A-G requirements (there are precedents for approval of project-based and innovative classes at other institutions), and a novel transcript approach would be designed in conjunction with leading universities.

Other Constituents. Wayfinder aims to broaden students’ and their families’ definitions of what success means. While many students prepare for more traditional careers, our school will help to launch students who desire a more creative path, whether that be in the arts, as a writer, an inventor, or a career we haven’t yet imagined. Yes, Palo Alto is at the nexus of leading edge technologies - but we have a vast array of leaders in the creative pursuits. We will work with these leaders as part of the design process through one-on-one interviews and design sessions to gain their valuable insights into what it takes to successfully pursue nontraditional career goals.

Our school will also build on the inspiring examples, research, and ideas of others:

“Most Likely to Succeed” film produced by Ted Dintersmith.

The film illustrates how our schools, which were designed for the Industrial Era, no longer work and why they need to be redesigned for a new era of innovation. Education leaders like Linda Darling-Hammond, Sir Ken Robinson, Tony Wagner, and Andrew McAfee, a scientist studying the impact of technology on society, explain the changes that are upon us and how schools need to be improved to meet the needs of 21st century citizens. The film also highlights high schools, focusing largely on High Tech High, that are attempting to make radical changes, how they’re approaching the problem, and the challenges they’ve faced along the way. For an overview of the philosophy that drives the film, please see Ted’s recent contribution to the Washington Post.

“Mathematical Mindsets: Unleashing Students’ Potential through Creative Math, Inspiring Messages and Innovative Teaching” by Jo Boaler (forward by Carol Dweck).
Boaler sheds light on new research about brain growth, describing how and why we need to alter the way math is taught, to bring all learners up to higher levels. This type of teaching is particularly effective in cross-disciplinary, project-based learning environments. While written specifically for math, many of these recommendations are applicable across subjects. 

“*No such thing as smart people, anyone can work to high levels.*” 
“*When you believe in yourself, your brain works differently.*” 
“*Mistakes grow your brain, struggle and challenge are really good for you.*” 
“*Speed and time pressure block working memory. It’s not important to be fast in math, it is important to think deeply and creatively.*” 
“*Math is a broad, creative, visual subject.*” (Her website You Cubed contains more of this type of information, and her new “Boosting Math” video talks directly to students.)


Much of this book is about preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist. One example is that crowdsourcing was not even a word until 2006 and now, “think about how many ‘jobs of the future’ already exist, on every level, related to crowdsourcing: the full array of programming jobs, manufacturing jobs building the hardware by which information is transmitted, assessment jobs, creating and designing and implementing relevant testing systems so that anyone’s contribution to a crowdsourced system can be ‘graded’; intellectual property industry. We want to prepare our students for 21st century jobs that do not exist yet.

**All the elements of our school will come together in powerful learning experiences for students:**

Design for (and by) Each Student: Eschewing the traditional model, each student would develop a Personalized Learning Plan in order to build a sense of purpose in their education. Moreover, students will have meaningful involvement in the evolving design, operations, and perhaps even instruction of the school.

Moving Beyond the Classroom Model: Students would work with community mentors on sponsored, authentic, applied projects that would be a credit-based portion of the school-day curriculum. Outside of school experiences help tie purpose to education and inform the student about college, major, and career choices. In fact a new program launched this past year at existing PAUSD high schools – the Advanced Authentic Research (AAR) program – has paired high school students with 80 mentors throughout Silicon Valley as well as a few e-mentors across the country, and even one in Singapore. This includes many students from historically underserved communities working at Palantir, gaining crucial work experience and social capital. To complement this experience, accomplished community members would be leveraged as co-teachers for individual lessons, portions of the curriculum, mentors, or “office hours” to deepen engagement or teach about careers. Imagine a Tesla engineer demonstrating electromagnetism or a Pixar screenwriter teaching creative writing or film.

Emphasize a Rigorous, Experienced-Based, Team, and Cross-Disciplinary Curriculum: Young people are hungry for purpose and meaning in their life. Student work would be rigorous, but learning would be placed in the context of relevant, real-world experiences whenever possible. Siloed disciplines (e.g., science and history) would often be integrated to bring the subject matter alive. Group work would be important for many students. We envision that Advanced Placement classes, designed for a particular standardized test, would not be offered, though many of the school’s offerings might have equal or greater intellectual rigor.
Embrace Constant Change in the Curriculum, Programs, and Space: In the current model of schools, there is little room for change and making change is often incredibly time consuming and difficult. At our school, teachers, administrators, parents, and students would be expected to continually adapt and refresh the curriculum every year utilizing the design thinking method, while maintaining a deep commitment to the school’s progressive principles. In order to support this effort, the school will provide ongoing professional development in project-based learning, culturally responsive teaching, unconscious bias training, and other critical learning consistent with the school’s philosophy and district values. Experiments will be given time to blossom. Learning spaces would be designed for adaptability, and contracts written for maximum flexibility. Multi-way feedback between students and teachers, mentors, and family members would be encouraged, frequent, and risk-free.

Build Healthy “Habits of Mind, Heart, and Health”: We will empower students to find success through their own unique journey (that can take many wandering paths) rather than exhaust them by the continual race towards a single, narrowly defined version of success. We aim to build resilient students who have a sense of purpose in life and a strong sense of connection to their fellow students, community, and the larger world. This will happen through classes in mindfulness, social-emotional learning, and mindset thinking, much of which is being pioneered right here in Palo Alto. We will also use the latest neuroscience research on teens to change the school day, learning schedule, and homework amount based on how the teenage brain learns.

Develop Assessments that Encourage Risk-Taking and “Failure”: Original work portfolios and skills assessments would be designed to be multi-dimensional and reward exploration of unfamiliar material, learned resilience through failure, teamwork, and initiative. Assessments would also recognize that different types of work (team, individual, etc.) suit different personality types, and the world needs many types of contributions. While we believe that assessments are important to understand where all students are in their learning journeys, we will endeavor to use assessments that provide direct and actionable information to the students themselves.

**Our school will serve:** General Population of Students

**We are** Designing a New School which will be organized as a District School

**When our school is fully enrolled, we expect to serve approximately 700-1000 students in** Palo Alto, CA
We need a team to make our school real. Our current team is:

The additional expertise and/or people we need are:

Two organizations are critical to the success of Wayfinder:

Palo Alto Educators Association. PAUSD has a longstanding history of working successfully with its teachers union, the Palo Alto Educators Association. Wayfinder will build on this history, bringing the Association in from the earliest design stages, so that expertise, experiences, and needs for the future can all be built in from the beginning.

City of Palo Alto. The most likely proposed site for Wayfinder is the Cubberley Community Center, formerly the Cubberley High School. This site is jointly owned by PAUSD and the City of Palo Alto. The City has expressed initial interest in the possibility of using the site for a new school. PAUSD would collaborate with the City of Palo Alto to develop the site to the overall community benefit, as community/student integration is a major design goal. Space, parking, traffic management, and athletic facilities are mostly in place. While significant design and rebuilding will be required, the Cubberley site offers great potential to design something different from the typical “institutional” feel, incorporating sustainability, light, mindfulness, and nature. Although the goal is for the experience to be world-class, and for the facility to play a flexible supporting role, Cubberley offers Wayfinder the opportunity for thoughtful, purpose-based design within reasonable budget constraints.

In addition, because of our close proximity to Stanford University and Silicon Valley, our dream team wish list includes leading thinkers, researchers, innovators, and doers. We hope to draw on the input, expertise, and enthusiasm of the following throughout the design and implementation of Wayfinder: (a) Sal Khan, (b) Challenge Success, (c) Geoff Cohen, (d) Bryan Brown, (e) Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE), (f) Jennifer Carolan.

Finally, we will be collaborating with a non-profit organization called The Future Project (TFP) that works with public high schools across the country. TFP is helping us investigate what assessment should look like at Wayfinder. TFP is organizing a conference of global educators that will take place in Palo Alto in early 2016, and they hope to use the learning from Wayfinder to spread innovation throughout the schools they work in nationwide.