

# Scenarios offer Lifelines to an uncertain future



By Laura Lefkowitz

Let's say you're a finalist for the superintendent job of your dreams. You're sailing through the community meeting portion of the hiring process when an expectant (and expecting) young mom approaches the microphone. "My daughter Kayla started kindergarten this fall," she says. "She will graduate from high school in 2020. What will you do as superintendent to make sure that she will be prepared to survive and thrive when she does?"

How do you respond? If you could ask for a "lifeline," you might call a clairvoyant to find out what the world will be like in 2020. And if you could do that, what questions would you ask? What would you most like to know about the future in order to prepare for it today?

At McREL, we've been asking such questions since 2003, when we began to explore the future and build our knowledge of the scenario-planning process. Today, as we prepare for 2020, we have identified two critical uncertainties about the future whose outcome could dramatically shape the future for Kayla and her unborn sibling.

The first is the question, what will be the expected outcomes

of a good education in 2020? Currently, American education has planted its policies squarely in the ground of requiring standardized outcomes for all students, such as meeting state-determined content standards and being accepted into a post-secondary educational institution. Such outcomes ensure high expectations for every student and, due to 21<sup>st</sup> century global challenges, the argument goes, who can afford *not* to be "college-ready"?

At the same time, persistent low achievement and high dropout rates, especially for the most disadvantaged students, call into question these standardized outcomes. Some suggest we might better meet the demands of a complex global economy by allowing students to demonstrate variable competencies according to their own interests and aptitudes—be they academic, technical, or in some other category we have yet to imagine.

A second uncertainty relates to the future of the current system of schooling. There are those who believe that the best opportunity for Kayla will come from reforming today's system by building upon and improving

the federal, state, and local structures that fund schools, in order to guarantee equity and quality of educational outcomes, and to provide accountability mechanisms appropriate for a public good. Others believe the system must be re-invented for true progress to occur and have their sights set on the "creative destruction" of the system or on building a new one.

As we explore these uncertainties, and others, we are creating a set of plausible scenarios about the future in 2020. From these, we will develop strategic options for McREL that will help us contribute to the future success of Kayla and her peers. We don't have a clairvoyant, but our structured exploration of the future and the scenarios we will develop will provide the lifeline we need to be prepared to activate strategies for success in the future.

---

Laura Lefkowitz is McREL's vice president of policy & planning services. She is a liaison between McREL and local, state, and national policymakers. You can contact her at 303.632.5535 or [llefkwits@mcrel.org](mailto:llefkwits@mcrel.org).