Meet the people building a better world through education

Introducing the Yidan Council of Luminaries
The Council of Luminaries: our platform for change

We created the Yidan Prize Foundation to help more people around the world get a quality education. We’ve also built a community along the way – and we want to harness its power to help us meet our goal: building a better world through education.

Our Council of Luminaries brings together some of our brightest and most determined minds to do just that.

Our luminaries are not only changing how people learn, they’re changing how people think about learning

They’ve shown the power of tackling the issues from multiple perspectives. Large scale change calls for researchers, educators, neuroscientists, psychologists, economists, statisticians and innovators – all working together. So that’s who we’ve asked to form our inaugural council.

The luminaries know that progress will come from studying problems from many different angles, empowering learners and communities, and working in teams that have different skills.

You play a part in helping us succeed

When you come to our events, nominate great candidates – or yourself – for a Yidan Prize, and spread the word about our council’s work, it makes our collective voice clearer, and louder. And every step we take together brings that better world closer.

Dr Charles CHEN Yidan
Founder, Yidan Prize Foundation

Tackling real world challenges, speaking up for change and engaging new audiences

Our luminaries will share their work with each other and the wider education community. And they will identify common themes and priorities where they can speak as one to influence change that goes further, faster.
Our luminaries see education from every angle

Our luminaries work across both thinking and practice

Each year, we award the Yidan Prize to individuals and teams in two areas: education research and education development. Similarly, our council works across disciplines.

We see our community – and the events, workshops and networks surrounding it – as a way to bring bright minds together to exchange ideas. Just as our prizes help us build a network who are as strong in research as they are in practical application, we built our council from education experts in fields as diverse as economics, statistics, neuroscience and psychology.

“The luminaries represent a unique range of talent and perspectives. They have the potential to shape the field of education.”

Mr Salman Khan
Founder and CEO, Khan Academy
Getting to know our inaugural members of the council of luminaries

The people involved make this council what it is, so we’re keen to introduce you to our inaugural members. You’ll also get the chance to hear from them directly at our annual Yidan Prize Summit and conferences.
We warmly welcome Dr Muhammad Musa, Executive Director, BRAC International and Dr Erum Mariam, Executive Director, BRAC Institute of Educational Development to represent Sir Fazle’s pioneering work in our council.

The late Sir Fazle championed education (particularly play-based learning) as a force for change. He founded BRAC in 1972 – and today, they’ve helped 13 million children across 12 countries in Africa and Asia.

Early on, Sir Fazle spotted that women can be forces for change in Bangladesh, so he focused his educational vision on their empowerment. BRAC started as a relief and rehabilitation agency after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. While other organizations focused on immediate needs of reconstruction – infrastructure, jobs, food – BRAC set its sights on the next generation and took a holistic approach to poverty eradication and development.

They focused on non-formal education, explored early childhood development and rolled out a nationwide oral rehydration program. From day one, the team was thinking systematically: every BRAC initiative was tested, refined, then spread to more people in collaboration with the government. Partnerships with academic researchers informed their plans, and generated evidence for what worked well. Perhaps most importantly, investing in girls and women nurtured a generation of engaged, caring changemakers in homes and in communities throughout the country.

Sir Fazle’s vision is still very much at the heart of BRAC: he is remembered with great fondness and respect.
Anant’s starting point is that “everybody in the world should have access to education, no matter who they are, where they live or what they can afford.” For him, the right education is still available to too few people: “in certain countries, you get free education, but the quality isn’t very good. In other countries like the US, you get quality education but it’s unaffordable for most people.”

Founded with Harvard and MIT, edX gives learners free access to over 3,000 courses from 160 institutions worldwide. And it’s being used by 3,000 organizations around the world to launch their own sites, including in China, France, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and Jordan. Through edX, people can now earn a credential or degree online, anywhere, anytime, at a low cost.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” says Anant. “Online learning is improving by leaps and bounds. As we bring in AI and VR, gamification, new stackable modular education, machine learning... in five to ten years from now, online learning will be a whole quantum leap better than where we are today.”

Students aren’t the only ones to benefit. In learning to teach online, teachers are also adopting new lessons from the science of learning. They’re beginning to think of education as an engineering product to continually iterate and improve. They’re making a huge effort to learn how to teach online, understanding how active learning works, and applying the latest research to teaching.

With 35 million learners on board, Anant’s showing how technology can offer education to everyone – overcoming hurdles like geography, finance and qualifications. The long-term goal? To spread this online education to one billion learners.
Early in his life, Kamal recognized the importance of access to education in achieving a more just society. As a teenager growing up in Bangladesh, he wrestled with inequities that kept children from disadvantaged families out of school. He carefully studied the challenges, conducted surveys in the community and published a report that attracted the attention of a Canadian development agency. They then financed a series of “afternoon schools” he designed and administered for out-of-school working adolescents. It was that experience of being a teenager creating schools for other teenagers that sparked Kamal’s life-long preoccupation with creating opportunities for education for people who are bypassed by the system.

Kamal observed that it can be quite difficult to change the average quality of education, especially when your system is constrained by human and material resources. But by creating new models of educational institutions focusing on both equity and excellence, a larger systemic change might be triggered from within.

With this notion in mind, he’s devoted the last decade and more to building the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Chittagong, Bangladesh. It’s a residential international university that focuses on educating women, particularly first-generation university entrants, from across Asia and the Middle East. AUW was established on the belief that no one community has a monopoly on talent; it’s in the public interest for our institutions to cultivate the talents of all. Kamal says that he tries to convey to young women in remote parts of Afghanistan or Cambodia or Laos or Timor Leste that it does not matter whether “you have shoes or no shoes, so long as you have the courage and the intellectual wherewithal”, AUW will welcome you as a student.

For Kamal, courage, outrage at injustice, and empathy are the three indicators of leadership potential, and this informs AUW’s search for talent among its incoming students. As of 2020, AUW has 900 students from 18 countries and a rising network of over a thousand emerging leaders from across the region as its alumnae. Almost all students attend on a full scholarship.

Kamal also initiated and co-directed the World Bank-UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education and Society (www.tfhe.net). Its 2000 report, Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril & Promise, talked about public interest in higher education, and the need to develop diversified, well-governed university systems. AUW’s landmark charter was adopted by the Parliament of Bangladesh in 2006 because it exhibits many best practices: institutional autonomy, academic freedom, preferential treatment for students from lower income backgrounds, and non-discrimination.
Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) was built on Vicky’s twin beliefs: all children have a right to quality education, and quality education is the best way to reduce inequality. Her work has demonstrated – first in Colombia, now around the globe – that with proper innovation, rural, remote schools can develop active, cooperative and personalized learning environments where children learn to learn.

Successful education, she believes, isn’t just about language and math, but social and emotional skills: self-esteem, cooperative learning and peaceful behavior. “We need to balance the heart and the mind.”

It all starts with the people in the schools. For years, she says, policy makers have focused on improving education through administration and management. But the real way to strengthen education systems, Vicky believes, is developing teachers and students as the “agents of change”, and the schools as the unit of change.

Vicky focuses on the ideas of great education thinkers like John Dewy, Maria Montessori and Lev Vygotsky, among others – but in a practical, cost effective and replicable way. These thinkers highlighted the relationship between learning processes, citizenship and democracy.

FEN trains teachers using the same methodology they’ll use with their students. They visit demonstration schools to see Escuela Nueva in action – and to see that real change is within reach. And then there’s ongoing support for them through teachers’ learning circles and other strategies.

That’s how they’ve helped “shift the focus on learning from a teacher-centered to child-centered learning,” – and become one of the longest sustained educational innovations in the developing world.

Ms Vicky Colbert
Founder and Director, Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN)
There’s a long-standing cultural narrative that says human intellectual potential is fixed. Carol’s work shows how untrue this is: in the right environment, any student can build a growth mindset – and improve their intellectual abilities.

The research shows that students with a fixed mindset often worry about being judged, as Carol did during her own primary years. They worry that having to work hard at something might mean that they’re not good at it, and that failures and setbacks are final judgements. “It puts a limit on what you do with your life; what you try for; how open you are to new, uncharted, risky ideas and how you close yourself off to the huge joy of pursuing them.”

By contrast, students with growth mindsets are more likely to take learning as a challenge. They see setbacks as a natural (and even helpful) part of learning – which they learn to love, along with the challenges it brings. The research further shows that this mindset can improve learning achievements; it can bring down stress and anxiety; it can even help people with life transitions, like adolescence.

For Carol, creating these growth mindsets calls for a united effort between school settings and family life – peers and parents play a part, and teachers perhaps have the biggest role. Research on the teacher’s role is now in high gear.

We can take this thinking beyond education, too. Organizations can have a growth mindset: they can value inclusion and diversity and believe that everyone can develop their talents, supported by policies and programs.

Professor Carol S. Dweck
Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, Stanford University
Usha is deepening our understanding how we process language – and where dyslexia and oral developmental language disorders might begin. Children with dyslexia often struggle in school. They know they’re able, but they see their friends learning more quickly. Teachers may assume they’re not trying hard enough. “That starts making them feel very different and they can become quite emotionally affected. Reading becomes a real negative that they avoid,” with long-term impacts on well-being and earnings.

Usha’s neuroscience research suggests that rhythm is the hidden factor in how children learn and process speech – and how they relate speech sounds to written words. For example, the exaggerated rhythms of baby talk and nursery rhymes are essential to language development in infants and young children.

She recommends building links between education and psychology departments, and stresses the value of play-based learning and human interaction for a child’s development. For Usha, parents, siblings and peers play a role that technology alone can’t.

Once we understand the brain uses rhythm to build language, it becomes obvious you should start rhythmic activities with young children as early as possible. “If we can really show this is something fundamentally important for language disorders, it would totally change the way you remediate a child with a specific language impairment.”
In graduate school, Eric attended a seminar on the landmark Coleman Report “Equality of Education Opportunity”, mandated as part of the US 1964 Civil Right Act. He asked himself: how could economics shape our understanding of learning inequality? How could it inform policymaking in that area? Ever since, his research has inspired the growth and development of a new disciplinary subfield: the economics of education.

Eric and his colleagues’ work shows that cross-country differences in economic growth are almost completely determined by the skills of the population. It’s a remarkable finding, and it’s reshaping the conversation on education policy all over the world.

After all, technology is replacing many routine jobs. Artificial intelligence is threatening others. For Eric, quality education can help people to adapt to all this. And he believes that improving education systems starts with measuring student learning. “There’s no way that any country in the world can improve if it doesn’t know already where it’s at.” Global performance scales will help bring more attention to the institutions of schooling – and from there, action. But it is also increasingly apparent that specific attention must be given to how systematic research is turned into effective educational policies.

A high-skilled, high-performing teaching force is critical. Eric points out that it’s not only important to focus on good teachers, but also to deal with poor performers. His research estimated that replacing the bottom 8% of teachers in the USA would raise performance from below the developed country average to near the top. If we combined that with retaining those at the top, the gains to students – and the economy – would be enormous.
With so many education studies around (often coming to contradictory conclusions), it can be difficult for policymakers to act on the evidence in front of them. Larry’s methods give these policymakers tools to sort through the studies and understand what works.

More generally, Larry’s goal is to help transform the loose-knit study of education into a more rigorous science – one that accumulates, interprets and applies knowledge through testing. Using that approach, he’s known for shedding new light on subjects like class size and school funding.

Larry sees three ways to strengthen educational research: creating rigorous methods for research; training researchers; and improving how research findings are shared.

He compares this the movement for evidence-based medicine – when double-blind, randomized control trials and systematic reviews were established. Could similar methodological standards help educational researchers improve the reliability and generalizability of their work – and fuel change in the classroom, too?

Larry supports Donald Campbell’s vision of an “experimenting society”. Rather than rolling out the thing that’s going to change the world at once, test programs in a few places, see if they work and under what conditions, make improvements, and learn “how to do these things that you’ve never done before.”

He also notes that wealthy countries have the resources to help deal with the challenges of education in poorer countries, but they need the political will. They need to understand that it’s not about altruism, but fixing (instead of exacerbating) inequality. After all, the biggest challenges we face today are global: just look at climate change.
The instructional choices teachers make – rather than curriculum or class size – are the primary driver of student learning. For at least four decades, researchers have documented large differences in student achievement gains in different teachers’ classrooms. And, yet, teaching has been viewed as an “art”, beyond the realm of science. As a result, we know surprisingly little about the relationship between specific teaching practices and student learning gains.

With the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Thomas led the Measures of Effective Teaching Project (MET) to lay the foundation for a science of teaching. The MET project collected videos of 3,000 teachers at work in the classroom. From this, they identified the teachers and teaching practices associated with the largest gains in student achievement. After measuring differences in teaching practice, they randomly assigned teachers to different groups of students to see if the relationships were causal. Sure enough, the most effective teachers in the first year also had students performing better than average in the second year.

“We showed that it’s possible to describe and measure general principles underlying effective teaching practice. That’s essential, because in order to improve student achievement on a broad scale, we need to incorporate those principles into teacher training and teacher feedback. The MET project was just a start: we need to keep pushing our understanding of what makes for effective teaching.”

For Thomas, the greatest challenge in education is that we don’t systematically evaluate reform proposals on a small scale before rolling them out broadly. Just as we can’t always predict how pharmaceuticals will affect the human body, the ways students learn – and the ways teachers change their teaching – are too complicated to anticipate. The key is creating a research infrastructure to support widespread, continuous trials of reform ideas: “the first education system that can test many ideas at once and scale up the ones that work – that system will outpace all the others.” They’ll also more quickly shed those ineffective practices that linger because of tradition or conventional wisdom.

Thomas supports the idea of a three-way partnership between education authorities like school districts, researchers, and non-profits – getting together to share evidence, training and materials. And his research group, the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, has trained data analysts to work inside education agencies: helping them understand and use the data they already have in order to make systematic piloting and evaluation a natural part of their decision-making.
“A free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere” is Khan Academy’s mission.

For Salman (better known to his colleagues as Sal) that means three things: making learning materials available in every major language and core subject; engaging learners and showing results; and turning learning into opportunity.

The Academy helps schools to leapfrog to a new way of learning. Tutorials let students learn at their own pace, then fill any gaps with interactive exercises, quizzes, videos and articles. In some places, Sal thinks this can work hand-in-hand with the teaching that’s there. In other places – where there’s little or no teaching – Khan Academy can raise the floor.

It’s also a great place to apply a growth mindset. The resources work well for motivated learners, but also for children who need more support – who might be insecure, disengaged or lacking self-esteem. Those students risk being left behind in a fast-moving classroom, but with the Khan Academy, they can learn at their own pace, and repeat tutorials as much as they need. Teachers themselves are also important: “we invest so much on the teacher side because at the end of the day, it’s going to be the teacher – or the parent or the sibling or the peer – that really pulls those kids out of their shell and gets them back on track.”

Sal also believes the non-profit sector is ideally placed to deliver fair access to learning. “I believe we have a common value that we don’t want someone’s education to depend on their parent’s income or the zip code they live in. The non-profit sector is valuable because it can be nimble. It can move fast. It can take up the best practices of the private sector but do it in a kind of socially motivated way.”

Today, Khan Academy has more than 115 million registered users. During the pandemic, monthly users rose from 20 million to 30 million, and they spent 60-70% more time on the site. Sal hopes numbers will expand into the hundreds of millions in the next five to ten years, and that the model will keep showing measurable results.
Wendy knows that children’s futures are shaped by early experiences with poverty, hunger, discrimination, trauma – and that school systems don’t always give them the support they need. The problems they face are systemic and complex, but solvable; the key, Wendy believes, is developing collective leadership.

She founded Teach For America in 1989 and co-founded Teach For All, a global network, in 2007. The network is now comprised of about 60 independent, locally led organizations around the world—organizations that believe meaningful, sustainable change calls for leaders rooted in local culture. To that end, these network partners recruit promising graduates and professionals for teaching positions in high-need schools, invest in their development, and building their ongoing leadership skills.

Network teachers start with two years in the classroom. The experience shapes their beliefs and priorities, and, for many, leads to a lifetime of leadership towards systemic change. More than 70% go on to careers within the field of education. Others pursue careers in sectors like policy and health, with a drive to build a supportive environment for learning in their communities. “Teach For All is developing leadership to improve education and expand opportunity for all children, so they can shape a better future for themselves and all of us.”

Network partners recruit leaders, first and foremost. Only about 5% of applicants get through. They’re the ones who demonstrate markers of leadership: a deep belief in the potential of every child, a strong record of achievement, perseverance in the face of challenges, and a commitment to building relationships with students, families and wider communities.

Wendy is skeptical that individual interventions will be enough; meaningful change will only come from many people exerting leadership across the whole education ecosystem – from the classroom to school to system administration, higher education institutions to NGOs, policy to elected office.

“And when those people have relationships and shared vision and are able to row in the same direction...not just exerting individual leadership, but exerting collective leadership for a system that works better for marginalized kids: that’s when we’ve seen real change happen.”
Patricia’s research reveals that, in her own words, “the early brain is born to learn, ready to learn – with certain conditions, kids can soar.”

Early learning experiences shape children’s thinking skills, school performance, health and behavior. Even at six months of age, certain brain measures can predict how well a child will read at age five.

Most of all, Patricia talks about learning as an interactive experience. Look at language: infants “crack the speech code” by gleaning statistical patterns from experience. They compute frequency distributions of sounds, use transitional probabilities between syllables, and infer cause-effect relationships to the physical world.

Social interaction is essential to this process: children learn through imitation, shared attention, empathy and shared emotions. “Language needs to come from a human for young children to learn...the computational piece is constrained by the social piece.” But she also sees a world where technology will let schools connect across cultures and countries. A bigger, more diverse pool of people to engage with – using smaller, more intimate platforms.

Infants learn effortlessly and without limits, but education results in networks in the brain that promote expertise – making us less open to new ideas as we age. If we could better understand the social and contextual ways children learn, we could uncover what motivates us to learn and stay open to ideas at all ages.

The brain isn’t fixed: you can mold it. Some educators believe children have a certain brain circuitry determining what a child can or can’t achieve in math, language or reading; Patricia disagrees. “There’s too much emphasis on innate, fixed skills...the brain is an organ that responds to experience, and thrives on motivation. Like a muscle, you build it.”
People often talk about girls’ education in terms of secondary benefits: lower birth rates, better family health. But as leaders of CAMFED – the Campaign for Female Education – Lucy and fellow luminary Angeline Murimirwa know it’s about much more than that. Girls’ education is the foundation of social justice.

CAMFED evolved from a scholarship program started by Ann Cotton in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s, which challenged the received wisdom of the time: that families didn’t want their girls in school. “We set out to prove that if you took poverty out of the equation, girls would be in school alongside boys,” says Lucy.

Since proving just that, they’ve since launched the CAMFED Association – now 157,000-members strong – supporting girls on their educational journey post-graduation, and mentoring young women to address big challenges in their societies. And they’ve expanded their work into Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia.

CAMFED brings data, evidence, and research findings directly from communities where they work. When they meet with policymakers, they use that data to enfranchise communities and reinforce government accountability to every marginalized girl. “Enfranchisement within communities in relation to the school system ultimately creates the context for girls to succeed,” says Lucy. CAMFED’s model means solutions are local, cost effective, and supported from many angles – winning champions among ministries of education at every level.

Lucy sees the council’s potential for challenging more outmoded beliefs and practices in education systems around the world that perpetuate inequality. As she puts it: “everyone in the group has demonstrated how they think differently, and that there’s an opportunity to move away from some of the more traditional models of education and embrace a fresh perspective.”
Together with Lucy Lake, Angeline is part of the first team to become Yidan Prize laureates. She’s also a beneficiary of the organization she now helps lead, having been among the first Zimbabwean girls to get a CAMFED scholarship.

Her experience was bittersweet. When she came top in her primary school class, she cried – not out of happiness, but overwhelm: her family couldn’t afford to support her through secondary school. CAMFED helped shoulder that financial burden, and Angeline bonded with 20 other girls with a similar experience. Next, the organization started bringing scholars together at national events to build a stronger network in what would eventually become the CAMFED Association.

“If one girl drops out, we raise hell and turn every stone until we understand everything that is happening,” says Angeline, adding that “putting the child at the center was a rude shock for most government systems we work with.” With more than 157,000 members in the Association, CAMFED has helped women exercise their agency at all levels of society, from village communities to inter-ministerial committees, bringing the perspective of the most marginalized to the table. “It’s the sense of purpose that makes it what it is,” says Angeline.

Angeline also knows the impact of being a decision-maker who has experienced marginalization. “I dream of a time when more women are occupying leadership positions...when there are more decision makers who understand intimately and personally what it means to be marginalized... they are not co-opted. They are equal participants in decision making, meaning there is inherent understanding from the top.”

In this world, women will be champions from within the system, putting governments to task about critical investments in education, and making sure they’re sensitive to the realities of those left behind.
As a Nobel Prize laureate, Carl doesn’t just think about physics; he thinks about how people learn to think like physicists. He’s noticed problems in the career path: academic performance isn’t a good indicator of how a student will fare as a practicing physicist. And what’s often misidentified as science talent actually is just a reflection of the quality of someone’s education. Carl believes we should teach students how to make good decisions – like experts do.

“Learning to use certain knowledge and reasoning processes to make decisions, that’s what good education is fundamentally about – learning to make better decisions in your life.”

Carl believes we can improve teaching by taking a scientific approach. And he’s demonstrating that in his research. In one study, he found that students retained only 10% of information from physics lectures after 15 minutes. Then he applied the learning principles he’d uncovered in his research: working collaboratively, making decisions, solving problems and taking feedback. Afterwards, students retained 90% of the information after two days – as well as more than doubling their conceptual understanding and improving their outlook on physics and problem solving.

He also thinks that we should challenge the belief systems of university professors. Professors tend to sort students into those they believe have more talent and less talent, even in the most select universities. But what if they believed every student could be successful when given the right kinds of educational opportunities?

“Effective teaching is a science, just like medicine. Students are all human beings. They all have the same basic biology and so learn fundamentally the same way. A doctor can’t just say: I’m not going to try and cure that person because I don’t think they have the right biological talent to get well. Teachers should not do this either.”

For Carl, we need to focus on how students learn, and which practices most effectively support the success of all.
Professor Zhu founded the New Education Initiative – China’s largest education reform experiment – in 2000, and has led it ever since. Its systemic concepts and methods have helped to create a structure for school ecosystems: empowering teachers and students to achieve well-being through a growth mindset for learning at very low cost.

Professor Zhu believes a good education brings the heart, soul and mind into harmony. Learning increases wellbeing, and helps people discover their better selves – developing their full potential as students, teachers or parents. But exam-driven education systems encourage teachers to focus on correcting children’s shortcomings: achieving a one-size fits all standard rather than building on individual strengths.

His New Education Initiative advocates a new approach to teacher development through continuous learning. He wants teaching to be seen as aspirational, and to emphasize professional development through professional reading, writing, journaling and speaking. “We want teachers to stand on giants’ shoulders, learn to stand on their own, and share what they are learning.”

Over past two decades, 5,600 schools in 31 municipalities, provinces and autonomous regions of China – half of which are located in rural and poverty-stricken areas – have participated in the Initiative. It’s created some of the most highly recognized teachers and learners in the country, and participating students have significantly higher academic grades than those who don’t participate.

Professor Zhu is also a leading figure in academia, education research and innovation, holding roles at the China Institute of Education Policy and Peking University. He also founded the 21st Century Education Research Institute and the China Education 30 Forum. His work has also led to senior appointments in governments, including the China Association for Promoting Democracy and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference – roles that let him further translate his ideas on education into policies.
“If this group of people could put their heads together, you can imagine many good things emerging.”

Ms Wendy Kopp
CEO and Co-founder of Teach For All
Start by visiting yidanprize.org. You'll find more information about the process, the judges, and the award criteria – as well as a step-by-step guide to making a nomination. You can email us at inquiry@yidanprize.org with any questions.