

PURSUING TRADITION AND INNOVATION

*How a district manages the ambiguity of
honoring tradition and innovating within it—
while always seeking excellence*

Owensboro Public Schools
Owensboro, Kentucky

ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K–12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

INTRODUCTION

The first school in the Owensboro Public Schools district in Kentucky opened its doors in 1871. In the 147 years since, the district has grown to serve over 5,000 students across 11 schools. To say that the district has a strong tradition is an understatement. The district's long roots are a source of great pride and inspiration to those who work for and attend its schools.

Yet, by the same token, as a district with a large student body diverse in all senses, they cannot abide only by tradition. They must also adapt with changing times, particularly when they matriculate students with such a broad range of needs.

THE CHALLENGE

Owensboro Public Schools (OPS) in Owensboro, Kentucky, sits in a county that had for decades slowly and steadily suffered economic decline. As manufacturing plants and jobs moved out of the area, the county faced numerous challenges. Many of these challenges showed up in the OPS system. The student poverty rate skyrocketed, equity issues widened and deepened, and funding challenges became even more challenging.

As a district that first opened its doors in 1871, it is steeped in a proud tradition. Yet in a period of rapid technological change and harsh economic circumstances, they had no choice: they had to innovate, including iterating on certain traditions, to meet their students' changing needs with excellence. In fact, it is these three ideals—tradition, innovation, and excellence—that shape the OPS' ethos and drive all decisions.

The district hired a superintendent who had worked as the President/CEO of the greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation (OEDC) for over seven years. Prior to that position, he'd held various leadership and teaching roles in schools. His vantage point was unique, in that his knowledge of school systems was extensive, and he had also been a critical force in the county's economic rejuvenation. Under his leadership, the county created incentives to attract diversified businesses to its economy. They did not want to repeat the mistake of relying too heavily on just one industry, as the county had historically done with manufacturing. Through various programs and incentives, multiple technology-based businesses established offices in Owensboro, creating jobs and opportunities for its citizens—even its students.

Through decades of economic challenge and fluctuations, OPS' students' needs grew more diverse. OPS would also have to diversify its offering and evolve its system to build capacity to meet changing student needs. To do this, every person in the district, from leaders to administrators to teachers, began by refusing to accept it was their jobs to prepare students for the test. They refused to work within the limits of the testing and accountability culture. Instead, they decided to innovate within their long tradition and strive for excellence in all they do—in the name of their students.

THE INNOVATION

In 2014, the Kentucky Department of Education awarded OPS District of Innovation distinction. The district applied out of a desire to benefit from exemptions from some administrative regulations and statutory provisions, particularly those that forced an overemphasis on testing and accountability. OPS believes that what's best for students is often impinged by the confines of the test. Winning District of Innovation status was a key step in allowing them to build from their tradition of excellence to do what's

best for students' futures—not their test scores. From there, OPS' leadership holds four core beliefs that guide their innovation process.

Tolerate Ambiguity, Stumble, and Trust Yourself

Pursuing tradition and innovation simultaneously is inherently at odds. How does an organization maintain a sense of tradition while also modernizing how things are done? To pursue OPS' ideals of tradition, innovation, and excellence every day takes a certain type of person—one who can tolerate a degree of ambiguity and still function. Specifically, the OPS educator can work within the tension of honoring the district's past while keeping an eye on its students' futures. An example of working within this ambiguity is taking the spirit of their excellent arts program—which is a commitment to providing students with confidence-building opportunities likely otherwise unavailable to them—and innovating with that spirit serving as a guidepost.

Working within ambiguity demands three things if the environment is to remain productive: 1) the right people, 2) the room to fail, and 3) trust—of self and team. OPS takes great care to recruit and hire people who demonstrate the capacity to tolerate ambiguity. Telltale signs of those who can thrive under more gray than black and white are those who take initiative, are proactive, and can work well both in structure and a lack thereof.

Yet hiring proactive self-starters is not enough. OPS leadership knows that if they are to extract the very value they hired people to bring, they have to give them room to experiment and even fail. They have to trust them to take calculated risks and continue to trust them even if the risks don't yield the expected returns.

In 2015, OPS opened the Owensboro Innovation Academy (OIA) to serve high school students who would benefit from a smaller setting and STEM and project-based learning. Juniors and seniors have the option of taking classes at a nearby college and can earn an associate's degree simultaneous to their high school degree. OIA struggles with acceptance. As a young venture still proving itself, the district has had to contend with a perception among some that it's not a serious high school, but more an opportunity for kids to tinker. Yet the OIA team and the district leadership know they are building something special, something rigorous and relevant, and something that is encouraging students to meet their potential in an environment best suited exactly for that. OPS leadership trusts the OIA team. And the OIA team continues to innovate and tolerate these ambiguous early years. They persevere even amid misconceptions and trust themselves to fulfill their mission to help each student thrive and achieve.

Do Not Force Innovation; Align Incentives to Encourage It

An early lesson OPS' leadership confronted is that innovation cannot be forced. Innovation is, at core, ideation. And in their experience, ideas are not generated under pressure and overly specific expectations. In his post at the OEDC, the superintendent and his team constructed incentives to entice a broad range of companies and industries to consider establishing a business in Owensboro. Transferring this experience to the district, he and his team decided to create incentives to encourage innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.

The district worked with their board to establish what they call iGrants, or innovation grants. The board set aside \$1 million for the initiative. Selected proposals that put forth innovations at the classroom level and that could be replicated would win grant money. Anyone within the district was invited to submit proposals. In three years, the board awarded all the money to worthy ideas. One of which was the Estes Early Learning Academy, a program for students with no kindergarten readiness. Zero percent of its students enter kindergarten ready; after two years in Estes, 86% of students are ready to move into the traditional classroom.

As OPS leadership set out to hire the first OIA team of administrators and teachers, they knew it would be challenging to find highly qualified people to take a job at a new school. In most cases, teachers would be walking away from a secure tenure track to join an entrepreneurial environment where they'd be asked to help build a program from the ground up. To offset inherent risks, the district decided to pay teachers more in their first years. They have continued to use financial incentives to both break away from traditional payment structures and encourage risk-taking and innovation. One such incentive is a stipend awarded to teachers who complete professional learning modules relevant to initiative implementation.

The district also considers non-financial incentives to encourage aspiring leaders to develop their leadership skills, study systems and structures, and grow more comfortable thinking strategically and suggesting improvements. To achieve this, the district uses empowerment. As a specific example, the district is piloting a program to nurture aspiring leaders. Leadership selected a group of 30 to 40 aspiring leaders, whether teachers or administrators, to meet regularly to examine processes and systems and ways to improve them. An academic officer attends the meetings, but they are otherwise a self-led and self-directed team. Their focus is wholly on the system so that they can grow into leaders with a strong capacity for change at the systemic level.

Diversify: Everyone Deserves to Benefit from Innovation

Leadership wanted to avoid a common pitfall: in proactively addressing equity, they didn't want attention to high performing students to get lost. Equity means equity at OPS. As the district has conceived and established innovative programs to provide alternative learning experiences to meet a broader range of needs, their top students have remained included in efforts as well.

OPS has a long tradition of finding ways to engage all students. Since the 1920s, they've had a world-class arts, music, and theater department. Leadership noticed that disadvantaged students were deriving newfound confidence through artistic programs. They have since steadily expanded their offering to engage kids often left too easily disengaged by traditional academics. Such students are supported as they explore their artistic talents, discover untapped creativity, and benefit from the ability to take more arts-related classes than typical at most schools. As an example of the emphasis on the arts, fifth graders take a rotational arts class where, throughout the year, they take violin, another instrument of their choosing, choir, dance, and theater. The hope is that during their sixth-grade year, they will choose not one, but two arts classes.

The program has given thousands of disadvantaged kids the chance to play musical instruments—an opportunity otherwise likely not possible for many. OPS has found that music is a powerful way for English Language Learners to learn English. Students with physical disabilities have thrived in dance classes, which can adapt and transform to meet their needs.

OPS' arts department draws teachers from all over the world. Their program has repeatedly been recognized by the state and the Kennedy Center. In its nearly hundred-year history, the program has received dozens of awards for enrichment and excellence for all students, including best theater program in the state (2008) and best in the Southeast (2014).

The arts program at OPS is steeped in tradition, including organizing the first high school theater troupe in Kentucky. They have honored this tradition by growing and evolving it to maintain its excellence. And they honored its tradition by innovating its premise to reach even more students.

Estes Early Learning Academy and Owensboro Innovation Academy are examples of innovations to reach students with instructional delivery targeted to their needs and learning styles. The Bluegrass Global Scholars Program is an example of an innovation to continue to challenge juniors and seniors who've passed all college-ready benchmarks. Students given admittance into this program design their own curriculum—which can draw from traditional classes, online classes, internships, and project-based learning—for up to their last three semesters in high school. While this program naturally appeals to high-achieving students, it was not built solely for the top in the class. Students who join the program have to have met certain baseline college benchmarks; but from there, they are evaluated on their level of passion and if they show the responsibility needed to handle a high degree of self-direction.

When in Doubt, Look for Help

The leadership in OPS leads with humility. This can be seen in the trust they extend to everyone in the district. It can be seen in their encouragement to experiment and fail. It can be seen in the desire to empower everyone in the district. And it can be seen in their willingness to recognize there's always more to learn and that it's ok to ask for help.

The superintendent and his team routinely study high performing education systems around the world, from Scandinavia to Shanghai. They have even traveled to exemplar districts in Canada to study their successes. They are open to the idea that others might have found more efficient and effective ways of doing things, and they see no shame in parting with certain practices if it means adopting those that hold more promise. Just as leadership values the perspectives and ideas of all its administrators and educators, they value the perspectives of benchmark schools and systems. By learning from excellent districts, OPS continues to discover ways to stay true to their core traditions while innovating from within them.

THE IMPACT

Today, Owensboro Innovation Academy, Estes Early Learning Academy, and the Bluegrass Scholars Program are OPS' most significant and sizable recent innovations. Each is born from the beliefs that guide and inspire their decision-making process. Each embodies the OPS' tradition of making every last child in the system feel seen, heard, and cared for. Each strives to achieve excellence, even if that means being patient while these big undertakings take time to bear out. And each puts students' futures, not testing and accountability, first.

Owensboro Innovation Academy

A goal in winning the District of Innovation distinction was to continue to create more options for student learning. OPS saw a need to engage a segment of high school students who demonstrated the proclivity for smaller, more hands-on learning environments with an opportunity for deeper relationships. They saw an iteration on the early college high school experience as the most ideal means to this end. In partnership with a neighboring district, OPS opened the OIA not only to meet student learning needs more specifically, but also to expand the range of high school options to students in both districts.

OIA certainly achieves just that. In its campus alone, the school is offering something truly unique and different to those who enter the stratified lottery and win admission. The campus is housed in an old tobacco factory that functions as a city-backed incubator to companies loosely in the science space. As a STEM based school, leadership recognized the potential to partner with these companies for real-world learning experiences for students. The environment is relaxed, lending itself to moments of collaboration whenever possible. The classrooms have flexible seating, which can be easily rearranged to foster collaborations big and small. The cafeteria looks more like a Starbucks, which removes the social anxiety so often built into the typical layout, with rows of lunch tables and limited seating at each.

All students are dual enrolled in both their home high school and OIA and are welcome to return to their home high school 25% of the day. This flexibility was conscious—a way for OPS leadership to honor tradition and innovate within it; while OPS seeks to engage students through OIA's STEM and project based learning (PBL) environment, they also want all students to maintain a traditional high school experience to the extent they want to, be that by attending pep rallies, participating in sports, or taking advantage of the traditional high school's breadth of extracurricular activities.

A driving objective of OIA is to empower students to learn on their own. They do this by steadily giving students more agency in how they learn. As a PBL curriculum, students are regularly empowered to decide what kinds of projects to pursue. Similarly, the staff is always looking for ways to bring more interesting opportunities to students. One approach is through business and community partnerships. For three years, Habit for Humanity has been a partner, providing students the chance to roll up their sleeves and design sheds and blueprints for a range of construction projects. Students hold internships with the businesses in their building. Through so many experiential learning opportunities, students not only gain career-relevant skills, but they are also learning to work within the ambiguity of an entrepreneurial environment.

In their junior and senior years, OIA students have the option to take courses at Brescia, a nearby college, and work towards their associate's degree. OIA's students at Brescia benefit from the close care of an OIA counselor who works with Brescia staff to make sure they are thriving. If any issues arise, students are welcome to return to OIA with no penalty or shame. Rather, they are lauded for challenging themselves, pushing beyond their comfort zones, and recognizing what is best to meet their present needs.

OIA's small and growing staff of 15 loves being part of such a devoted and impassioned team. They regard each other not as colleagues, but as family. They appreciate the freedom to make decisions based on what each student needs to achieve. Parents appreciate this, too. Families of students frequently remark on how the OIA environment is bringing their kids out of their shells, or prompting a meaningful

jump in maturity, or allowing them to finally make friends and feel safe collaborating with students who share their passions and learning styles. And leadership is thrilled with the results as well—in trusting the OIA team, in giving them room to experiment, OIA is beginning to yield incredible student achievement results, convincing more and more in the community that OIA is in fact a special *and* serious high school option.

Estes Early Learning Academy

Equity means equity at OPS. Estes Early Learning Academy, the brainchild of an iGrant winner, is an innovation designed specifically for preschool and kindergarten students. It was born from a concern that too many kindergartners were entering the grade with little to no benchmark skills. Additionally, preschool teachers were finding that struggling students were slowing the pace of achievement for their classmates. Estes seeks to provide for struggling early learners the most personalized and patient environment possible.

The program, currently in pilot, experiments with grouping preschool and kindergarten students selected for the academy—a best practice the superintendent learned when visiting an Ontario school district. By grouping students, there's more room for all Estes kids to progress at the best pace for them. Should a student advance rapidly, she can work with her older classmates. Should a student need more time with foundational skills, there are already classmates in his class receiving that instruction, as well. Students do not feel singled out for needing more help; instead, their teachers are simply adjusting the peers with which they share in learning in the comfort of the same and familiar classroom.

About 20% of OPS' preschool and kindergarten students, or approximately 40 students, enroll in Estes each year. The youngest kids are three years old. Estes students can stay in the academy for up to three years or leave after a year or two if they're meeting benchmarks and demonstrating readiness for the traditional classroom.

Estes' teachers are empowered to meet each student's needs throughout each day. If a child needs a nap, the child naps. If a student needs some quiet time away from the group, the student is allowed to take that time. The teachers have shifted their culture from tending to the test to tending to the student and make decisions from this mindset.

The curriculum includes materials from LiterScie, ZooPhonics, Engage New York, and Phonemic Awareness curricula authored by Michael Heggerty, Ed.D. Teachers strive to give students as many experience-based lessons as possible, even taking them on frequent community field trips. All students are encouraged to “show grit, don't quit” when struggling through any work. And teachers practice “conscious discipline,” which seeks to cultivate in students healthy social emotional skills; rather than reprimanding kids for discipline issues, teachers talk with them to help students understand their behaviors and develop new thought patterns to behave more respectfully to themselves and their classmates.

Estes' teachers describe a highly rewarding environment. Where once all students entered without kindergarten readiness, 86% leave each year ready for the traditional classroom. Teachers engage with families through a learning management system called Bloomz where they happily share with parents

their kids' victories, big and small. They post videos showing recent achievements and also post all homework assignments. All Estes' students get a home visit, and families are encouraged to communicate with teachers as needed.

Bluegrass Global Scholars Program

OPS' high school juniors and seniors are invited to apply to the Bluegrass Scholars Program. To be considered, applicants must have met all college-ready requirements. Students selected show a high degree of maturity and responsibility, as well as a passion for a certain topic.

Starting as early as the second semester of their junior years, Bluegrass Scholars build their own curriculum. Students select from options such as enrolling in college-level classes, be they AP classes or MOOCs; completing a self-directed and teacher-supervised project; working at an internship; or taking some traditional high school classes. What OPS cares about is that Bluegrass Scholars meet all their high school requirements. Yet they will waive the traditional path to all if they are replaced with something equally rigorous and relevant. Meaning, if a student wants to forgo the traditional high school sociology class, she can replace it with a project or internship that achieves learning of the same topic. A Bluegrass Scholar might waive a traditional elective for a philosophy class taken online from Harvard. She might forgo the senior year history class and instead complete a "passion project" about how to increase voter engagement and intern at the chamber of commerce.

For each year they are part of the program, all students are required to complete one internship and a component of experiential learning that focuses on citizen engagement or service and action learning. Once weekly, all students meet in a seminar lead by the superintendent and two high school teachers to discuss what they're working on, what they're struggling with, and where they're excelling and growing. Students are encouraged to vocalize their needs, and teachers are given the flexibility to work with students to adapt curricula to best serve student growth.

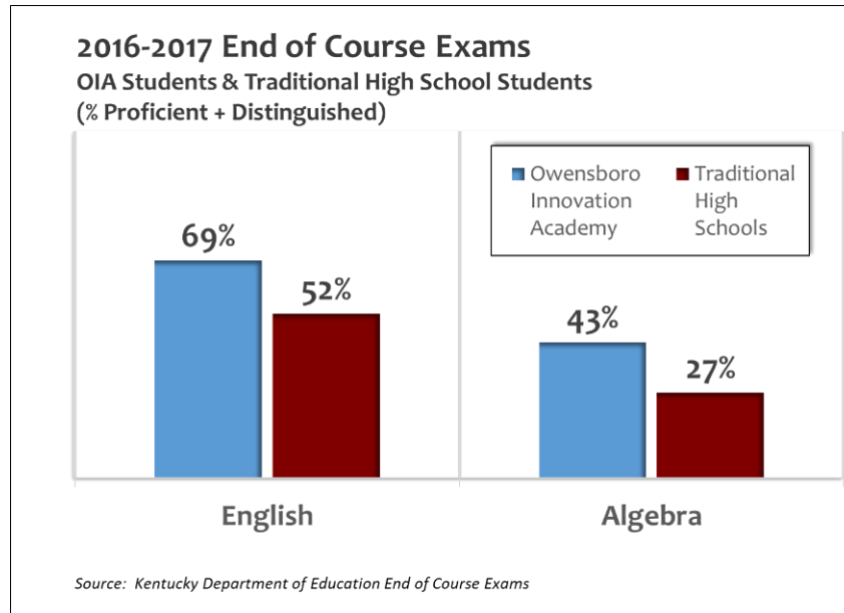
Bluegrass Scholars are given the freedom and trust to get their work done as they prefer, so long as they get it done. This might mean spending part of the school day studying at a Starbucks or taking an online class in the library. Not only are Bluegrass Scholars obtaining real-world-ready skills, they are also obtaining the college skills of self-direction, time management, and strategic pacing.

Currently, OPS is working to find the best path to grow the Bluegrass program. At any given time, there are 15 to 20 Bluegrass Scholars. They are given an incredible amount of free time to get their work done. Given that they are still high school students, frequent communication between student and teacher is needed to ensure students are managing their time responsibly and effectively. Scaling the program remains a challenge, but one that stands to pose great reward.

STUDENT LEARNING RESULTS

Owensboro Innovation Academy

Preliminary data demonstrate that OIA students are outperforming students at the local high schools from which OIA draws on End of Course Exams and the ACT. (Full class ACT data will be presented next year for a total comparison.)



Overall High School Improvement

Since launching the Bluegrass Scholars Program and Owensboro Innovation Academy, OPS is seeing improvement in high school metrics overall. College level reading benchmarks jumped from 42% to 49%, and college readiness is up overall.

The high school graduation rate has also improved.

Percent OPS High School Graduates Career and College Ready	OPS			Kentucky		
	2015	2016	Δ	2015	2016	Δ
All Graduates	52.5%	59.8%	7.3%	66.9%	68.5%	1.6%
Male	51.6%	60.9%	9.3%	64.6%	66.1%	1.5%
Female	48.6%	58.5%	9.9%	69.1%	70.8%	1.7%
African American	28.1%	41.5%	13.4%	43.0%	43.2%	0.2%
Free and Reduced Lunch	39.7%	50.8%	11.1%	55.0%	57.7%	2.7%
College Benchmarks (Reading, English, Math)	48.1%	53.6%	5.5%	58.5%	60.0%	1.5%
Career Ready Graduates	50.0%	59.7%	9.7%	66.8%	68.4%	1.6%

Source: Kentucky Department of Education, District Report Card

Graduation Rate (5-Year Cohort)	OPS			Kentucky		
	2014-15	2015-16	Δ	2014-15	2015-16	Δ
All Graduates	85.7%	88.9%	3.2%	89.0%	89.7%	0.7%
Male	82.2%	87.8%	5.6%	87.0%	87.7%	0.7%
Female	90.2%	89.9%	-0.3%	91.1%	91.9%	0.8%
African American	84.0%	94.8%	10.8%	82.5%	83.2%	0.7%
Free and Reduced Lunch	85.1%	87.1%	11.1%	86.7%	88.1%	2.7%

Source: Kentucky Department of Education, District Report Card

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are your educators incentivized to put students first and innovate as needed to do so? Or are they incentivized to maintain the status quo, even if it's at the expense of what's best for students?
2. How could you and your team align incentives to student achievement goals that extend beyond tests and accountability?
3. Is equity a priority in your district? If not, what can change and what needs to change to better meet the needs of all students? Are high achievers included in equity efforts?
4. Does leadership do research to learn from other districts of excellence? To whom can you turn for help, insights, and guidance?

