



TURNING AN OIL TANKER

How the pace of thoughtful change turned an entire school district, and a high school in particular, from indifference to innovation

**Excelsior Springs School District /
Excelsior Springs High School**

Excelsior Springs, Missouri



Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
The Learning Company™

SPN | **Successful
Practices
Network**

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 K12 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

When a number of new leaders joined the Excelsior Springs School District in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, they found a system stalled in compliance and complacency. Across all five of the district's schools, there was a palpable malaise. For the majority of their 2,800 students, they were not seeing the student outcomes they wanted or felt students needed—and deserved—for bright futures. The district's leadership confronted a team of educators who'd for years been discouraged to innovate to improve student achievement. They inherited broad disenchantment with leadership and a generally fatigued staff. What would it take to turn the culture and attitudes around such that all leaders and educators felt empowered and encouraged to try a different way? What did it take for the high school to begin to dramatically change how students learn and how students view themselves?

The Problem

The Excelsior Springs School District in Excelsior Springs, Missouri was facing what are arguably the typical side effects of a compliance-based culture. With a focus almost entirely on test scores and evaluations, the district staff—at its three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school—were feeling disempowered. Many believed that for too long they had been forced to focus on factors that lack a direct impact on deep student learning. Thus, they felt no room to expand their practice to include rigorous and relevant learning. And they believed taking risks would be rebuked as a distraction from hitting compliance requirements.

As a result of feeling boxed into instruction that was tired and routine, educators grew indifferent and apathetic. As evidenced by slumped achievement indicators and flat lined learning gains, students were absorbing their apathy. Attitudes across the board slipped, and teacher retention became a growing problem.

Fortunately for the district and its students, most of its educators were hungry to feel empowered and to improve instruction. So when new district and school leadership arrived, there was an openness to improvement and change, so long as change allowed educators to embrace the reason they got into education into the first place—to help students truly learn, not merely pass tests.

The new superintendent and his team got to work radically transforming the culture. His goal was to build a culture where teams at each school felt empowered to innovate however best for their students' needs. Where historically the district had been very hierarchical, he envisioned a flatter organizational design, such that everyone—from the principal to the paraprofessional to the janitor—felt emboldened to function with the autonomy necessary to serve students. He took measures to encourage and promote an entrepreneurial mindset so that staff felt comfortable and encouraged taking risks and experimenting to achieve a new focus on deep student learning, not compliance.

To begin this cultural transformation, the district conducted several surveys with all key stakeholder groups—from the community to the students and all in between. They wanted to know what people saw as the issues thwarting each school's capacity to move towards 21st-century-relevant learning. They pledged to all stakeholders that their feedback would directly shape decisions and changes made to address various district and school issues. Each time leadership made a decision or implemented a change, they explained why they were doing it and how it related to survey results. This intentional practice served to prove to educators that leadership valued their voices. It also showed that leadership, administrators, and teachers were all on the same team.

Slowly but surely, educators across the district came to believe that the new leadership team wanted and intended to involve them in changes. They began to trust that leadership would not make decisions for no reason and would always be transparent about those reasons. They also became assured that they were safe to try new things to improve instruction and learning, as it was clear there would be a safe environment for so-called failures. Instead, they would be opportunities for conversations about what can be learned from them going forward.

The Innovation

By and large, educators in all five of Excelsior's schools have embraced a more entrepreneurial mindset. As with any change management situation, there are those who remain uncomfortable with newfound freedoms to experiment and innovate. Leadership understands and appreciates this. Instead of forcing everyone to move at the pace they want, they are giving staff the space to adopt innovations on a schedule that is comfortable with them. This has allowed a kind of positive social pressure to steadily make those more resistant to change grow curious about and open to it. Leadership, in turn, focuses on maintaining momentum so that eventually all their educators will take an active role in evolving their schools.

Excelsior Springs High School (ESHS) in particular has seen profound change in a relatively short amount of time. Thanks to foundational cultural changes at the district level, the high school staff has grown more forward thinking. Their openness to change and consequent hard work has been a driving force in shaping educator and student attitudes about change across the district. And thanks to the leap of faith the high school's forty-five educators have taken with the principal, their 800 students have a new sense of agency in and enthusiasm for their learning. The school achieved this through five beliefs about change leadership and deep student learning.

Go Back to the Basics—of Change Leadership

When the current principal joined the school—first as assistant principal in the 2012-13 school year and then as principal in the 2013-14 school year—he encountered a staff both wanting change and worried about what change would mean for them. The principal also quickly recognized a fact of the circumstances he'd inherited: among teachers, there was residual mistrust of administrators. Aware of a core principle of change leadership, he knew that he could not force change or move at a rapid pace. Even though there was an appetite for change, the principal understood that if he didn't first establish trust, any change efforts would be premature and fail.

Instead, he spent the first two years in his roles getting to know everyone in the school, including students. He built relationships with the entire staff, heard their concerns, and made efforts big and small to show he valued their opinions. With teacher feedback, his team did push small improvements in these two years, but at a pace and of a scope that the staff could withstand until a culture of trust had been firmly established. In this time, he also encouraged staff to try new ideas. When ideas didn't pan out as envisioned, he used these perceived failures as opportunities to unpack learning that could be applied to future efforts—and to show that his teachers were safe experimenting and taking risks.

The principal also promoted the idea of a clean slate. In turnaround efforts, it can be easy to fall into blame and grow defensive as past errors are discussed. Instead of deconstructing the past, the principal put his attention on creating a new future—for staff and students. To do this, the team gradually built a new vision for their school, which naturally kept people's attention forward, rather than backward, looking.

The result of leading by these change management principles was the steady supplanting of a once demoralized culture with a much healthier one built on trust, openness, and support. In

moving slowly, staff trusted that the new leadership team was not going to be rash or overbearing. In working from a clean state, the staff was able to move on from past grudges, repair relationships, and fortify a new camaraderie.

Seek Expertise and the Benefit of a Third Party Where It's Needed

Together, the high school team decided that project and problem based learning (PBL) was the approach to instruction most fertile for 21st-century relevant learning. At this point, the high school had not used PBL. Shrewdly, the principal grasped and accepted the magnitude of the change from traditional, subject-based instruction to PBL, a far more complex and difficult way to teach. He also humbly accepted the limits of his knowledge and capacity to be the sole leader of this transition. He felt he owed it to his educators to set them up for the greatest success, and he recognized this was possible only in partnership with PBL experts.

Thus, in the 2016-17 school year, ESHS's leadership team researched learning organizations with PBL expertise and proven outcomes. The goal was to find a partner that could train the administrative team and the entire teacher staff to become PBL experts. Thanks to a recently received grant, the school decided to direct these funds towards collaborating with a dedicated team at the New Tech Network (NTN), which commenced in spring 2017.

The benefits of NTN were two-fold. First, their services were not sub-contracted. Instead, they offered a true partnership, where their intention was to train educators to develop, implement, and maintain a full-scale PBL program, eventually, on their own. Training included: select ESHS educators attending NTN conferences; on-the-ground training days for all educators; and ongoing access to the school's designated NTN point person for additional coaching, questions, and concerns.

Second, the NTN PBL suite of products and services is robust and research based and includes but is not limited to: academic and social emotional learning rubrics and a grade book built around assessing and reporting student outcomes; tools to simplify and coordinate the PBL planning process; exemplar projects; and learning management software. In using already-developed, vetted, and proven products and services, ESHS was able to focus on becoming experts in PBL instruction and learning.

In addition to equipping educators with the range of technical and interpersonal skills needed for PBL expertise, the principal had a second hope and motivation in soliciting NTN. He understood

that there are often situations where advice and constructive feedback are better heard from a third party—particularly with staff who, not that long ago, had mistrust for leadership. This strategy proved beneficial when ESHS’s educators went through their two-year PBL training; working with a team with no awareness of their school’s past allowed them to remain open minded, more readily digest feedback, and take suggestion without questioning motives.

The Staff’s Capacity to Grow Is the Students’ Capacity Grow

The school reports that the NTN team did not tell the educators what to do; rather, they guided them to their own understanding of PBL. They also pointed out the common alignment between their strengths and their students’ strengths, their weaknesses and their students’ weaknesses. The principal identifies this as a transformative light bulb moment for his team. They came to understand that their capacity to grow as a staff sets the ceiling for that of their students.

Thanks to the nature of the staff’s collaboration with the NTN team, the message was received without defensiveness. The circumstances were such that the message could make its greatest impact. With the link between the educators’ growth capacity so tightly correlated to that of their students’ starkly in front of them, they were imbued extra motivation to do the hard work to keep growing—for their students. They also felt how vital it was to adopt a growth mindset and ensure each of their students did as well.

Perfection Isn’t the Goal: Iterate, Iterate, Iterate

The high school’s leadership team grasps something fundamental about innovation: it is an iterative process. The first pass of an innovation does not need to be perfect. In fact, if perfection is the goal, an innovation will be automatically be set up for failure or never get off the ground in the first place. Instead, ESHS’s leadership understands that the way an innovation becomes sustainable is through thoughtful trial an error, where feedback and lessons learned along the way are applied to revamp and advance the innovation, again and again. The model is borrowed from how so many of today’s technology companies function, by introducing a minimum viable product and then releasing updates to keep improving it.

The school’s iterative approach can be seen in the introduction and improvement of their modular schedule. ESHS didn’t intend to build a modular schedule, per se. They intended to create an entirely different learning environment for their students, one where learning and the daily school experience could be individualized to each student. They also wanted to establish a format that looked more like a college and less like a typical high school, where all students are

plugged into the same system and structure. Akin to learning in a college setting, they wanted students to be able to do their work, with teachers available to discuss it and assist as needed.

An exploration process, with ideas and input welcome from all staff, led ESHS to the concept of a flexible modular class schedule. While challenging to formulate and implement, a modular schedule showed great promise for reinventing their learning environment to enable individualized learning. It is also far more conducive to supporting the needs and structure of a full-scale PBL curriculum, for which the school was simultaneously training and preparing to implement.

A chief problem the team wanted to solve as they conceived a modular schedule was the reality that students work at different paces. In the traditional classroom period, where a teacher lectures and then students do work, rigor is usually uniform and targeted to the average students. Work times also vary for each student; what might take one student ten minutes could take a second student an hour. ESHS wanted their new schedule to let both of these students optimize their learning days. For the first student, this would mean the ability to move onto a more rigorous assignment with teacher guidance as needed; for the second, it would mean access to ongoing teacher support to complete the original assignment.

The result, which ESHS implemented in the 2017-18 school year, was a flexible modular schedule built on 17, roughly 22-minute sections each day. There are no bells. Students are free to spend each section as needed to get their work done and, for the most part, it is up to them to manage their schedules and time. There are three learning zones where students can work individually or collaboratively on projects. (With grant money, moderate construction was done to merge individual classrooms into larger spaces to make these zones.) At any given time, there are three teachers in each learning zone. They also have dedicated resource periods, where students can get subject-area support from teachers (there are typically two to three teachers in a resource room at any given time). Of note, teachers do not have their own classrooms or offices. Rather, they have a desk in a fixed resource room.

When ESHS launched their modular schedule, they underestimated the impact of handing so much freedom and time management responsibility to students. They hoped students would embrace newfound ownership over their schedules, but many struggled to adapt. This was most pronounced among freshmen and least pronounced among seniors. So, they iterated the schedule to restrict some of the freedom for freshmen.

As students age and excel, the school also handed more options for how they wish to use their time. As an example, there is a “trust zone,” or a learning space with no adult supervision. Older students with a high grade average are awarded “trust cards” that give them access to this zone.

They also provided additional support opportunities for students struggling academically or with time management at any grade level. These students are assigned to some amount of guided learning time. The school’s full-time interventionist remains available to students in guided learning time. How much assistance a student needs will dictate how much guided learning time they receive and for how many days a week. When all 800 of ESHS students are moving from space to space on their own timing, it is often unknown who is in guided learning time. Thus, the potential stigma for needing additional help is essentially a non-issue.

Prior to the launch of the modular schedule, the school installed biometric scanners in all rooms where students were not assigned, but chose to go. The thinking was this would build in accountability for students to use their time to work or get learning support, and it would free teachers from the burden of keeping tabs on students. Because of the difficulty in managing the technology and logistics for tracking students, the school will likely eliminate biometrics and return a more traditional attendance process tracked by resources teachers.

Discussion among the staff remains ongoing about how to continue to tweak and modify the schedule to provide more rigor and accountability. The school understands that an undertaking as extensive and fundamental as a modular schedule will continue to require improvement and adaptation. Thus, thanks to the culture, the entire team knows they must remain nimble, vigilant of possible pitfalls of the schedule, and open to possible pathways to iterate upon it as needed.

Students Must Know the Point of and Their Purpose in School

When the district and the high school began surveying students several years ago in advance of planning cultural changes, a distressing pattern emerged among students: too many did not know the purpose of school. Too many of ESHS students didn’t see goals for themselves beyond those pertinent to daily high school requirements. Even many students who performed well didn’t see how their high school experience translated to post-secondary education or careers.

This was a major red flag. Culling through the data, leadership found that the students who reported seeing the relationship between high school and life potential after it were also those who were able to set goals. Thus, they felt they needed to proactively and constantly discuss with

students their options, and what they mean, after high school. And they knew they had to nurture goal-setting capacity and the social emotional skills needed to achieve goals. Through dialogue with stakeholders, agency was determined the most crucial foundational attribute needed to set and meet future goals. That students must become active agents in their academic experience expressly to open promising doors beyond school was then adopted as a cornerstone of ESHS.

A team of teachers and administrators broke student agency down into five categories of personal attributes (self-awareness, self-regulation, teamwork, confidence, and conflict management) and the eight defined skills that drive them (goal setting, assertiveness, initiative, problem solving, adaptability, communication, time management, and perseverance), all of which are built on ownership and a growth mindset. A team member designed a graphic that captures all the components of agency. It's an image that can be found all through ESHS, from a large banner at the school entrance to signage in halls and classrooms. See Appendix 1 for the student agency graphic.

Agency is not mere conversation; it is built into learning and graded. PBL has played a crucial role here, as it naturally requires so many of the skills that comprise agency and it is rooted in linking schoolwork to the real world. Embedded in NTN's PBL protocol are school-wide learning objectives broken down as follows: knowledge, 25%; thinking, 25%; written communications, 15%; oral communications, 15%; collaboration, 10%; agency, 10%. For academic skills, teachers create their own rubrics (and/or use NTN guiding rubrics as needed) and create and score their own assessments. For social emotional skills, they use NTN rubrics. This approach to grading means that students and teachers routinely have conversations about their agency skills, progress, and growth capacity.

An intended and critical effect of emphasizing and teaching agency as a matter of daily practice is that students report feeling more and more valued and valuable. When many felt school had no purpose beyond getting through the day, they felt they had no purpose beyond the day. When repeatedly called to envision a future, they grasp that they are the ones who must create it. When their future matters—not just to themselves but also to those who will be in it professionally and personally—they know they matter today.

The Impact

ESHS's dramatic changes are, for the most part, only in their second year of operation. While data indicators of their innovations remain limited and early-stage, the school celebrates with staff and students the qualitative and anecdotal evidence that their efforts are paying off.

From staff to students, those on the ESHS campus are more engaged in their roles and responsibilities and see themselves as vital agents in improving their own experience at the school and that of everyone else in it. Several educators have told the principal that they've never worked harder *and* that they've never loved their work more. Students report a belief that their educators are trying really hard to tailor learning to their individual needs and make school feel more meaningful and enjoyable.

Overall, students have embraced agency. As one indicator, the principal reports that in a typical week, ten to 15 students will come up to him directly to present an idea or suggest an improvement. Prior to the school's proactive agency efforts, this did not happen. Today, students feel comfortable using their voices with the adults on campus and always do so with respect and professionalism.

Thanks to the modular schedule, discipline issues dropped considerably. This is in part due to the daily practice of agency. It is also in part a byproduct of the elimination of all eight-hundred students changing classes at the same time—the four-minute window, six times a day where most of ESHS's discipline issues had occurred in the past. Now at any given time there are approximately 100 kids moving around the halls in between sections.

It is not the objective or habit of leadership, in the district or the high school, to beat their chests and draw attention to results. They acknowledge much work remains to turn all their schools into true 21st-century learning environments where students know their value and create their futures. What many in the district are most passionate about drawing attention to is that it's ok to try something new and different even if where it's going isn't yet totally known. They want to advertise that it's ok to take chances and be uncomfortable, particularly when our students' futures are at stake. Given that the district was for so long stuck in compliance and indifference, what leadership views as the most important success story is: we had the courage to try.

Discussion Questions

1. When it comes to overseeing and guiding change, are we educated on the fundamentals of change leadership? Do we understand the risks of forcing change too soon and too fast? What can we do to make our teams comfortable and reassured through the often uncomfortable and disruptive change process?

2. Do we understand that change and innovation are often uncomfortable? What can we do to become comfortable with discomfort so that it doesn't stand in the way of our capacity to grow on behalf of students and their futures? How can we make our teachers feel safe taking risks and trying new things?
3. Are there situations where it would behoove us to solicit a third party for expertise and guidance? As needed, how can we be creative in gaining the necessary resources for such partnerships?
4. Do our students know the purpose of school and their purpose in it? If not, what can we do to help them understand that school is vital to their futures? And what do we need to do or change to make sure the education we provide them is actually useful and related to their futures?

Appendix 1: Student Agency Graphic

The student agency graphic is seen throughout the school to remind students what's expected of them in school and what the foundational skills are to setting goals for long, bright, and successful futures.

Student Agency



