REDEFINING EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY

How leadership put flexibility first and freed systems, staff, and students to innovate

Baldwin Union Free School District

Long Island, New York

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

Creating a modern-day educational system that prepares every student for the future of work has become one of the guiding principles for Baldwin Union Free School District on New York's Long Island. When new district leadership came on board, they brought with them the conviction that elevating instruction so that learning is directly tied to college, career, and civic readiness was an imperative. The team sought comprehensive and creative innovations that would enable students to learn in a highly relevant, engaging, and multidisciplinary environment. It was made possible through an intense and unrelenting belief that students need and deserve the kind of education that will prepare them for *their* futures, in addition to leadership's commitment to removing any and all barriers to innovation and to wholesale support of educators as they transitioned to a new model of education.

The Challenge

Baldwin Union Free School District is a K-12 public school district located in Nassau County, which is New York State's Long Island. The school district serves approximately 4,500 students across one high school, one grades 6-8 middle school, and five K-5 elementary schools. The district also has a satellite career and technical education (CTE) program for high school aged students. Students at this campus work on credit recovery and complete one of several CTE tracks. The student population comprises approximately 37% economically disadvantaged students, 17% students with disabilities, and 6% English language learners. The racial makeup of the population is 47% African American, 30% Hispanic or Latin American, 15% White, 4% Asian, and 3% multi-racial.

For years, Baldwin had been a high performing school district. Yet, to its new leadership, strong performance measured in traditional testing wasn't enough. They wanted students to feel deeply connected to and engaged in their learning. They wanted them to learn in ways that were interdisciplinary, collaborative, and joyful. They wanted students to know why they were learning what they were learning and grasp its relevance to their futures and careers. In short, they wanted school to be exciting and meaningful every day.

To achieve this, leadership believed they would have to find creative ways to break beyond the traditional school day, which remained centered around the bell schedule, with classes divided by discipline. They accepted these as relics of a different time and barriers to the kind of innovation that could bring greater relevance and learner engagement to their schools. Leadership unleashed teachers and staff to collaborate and conceive new ways to deliver a multidisciplinary, hands-on learning program. Along the way, leadership worked to remove barriers to their ideas, provide resources to implement their ideas, and build a robust professional learning program that set teachers up to thrive in their novel approach to school.

Central to this vision was leadership's continual reassurance to teachers that how they are measured and evaluated would extend to include new quantitative and qualitative indicators that went beyond historical and narrow metrics. Leadership understood that the traditional modes of evaluation would fail to capture the kind of engagement and joy for learning they were determined to produce in their schools. They did not want evaluation concerns to deter teachers from applying their creative agency in conceiving and realizing innovative ideas.

The Innovation

Five core beliefs guided everyone in the system as they implemented a breadth of innovations.

High Traditional Standardized Test Scores Are Not the Only Goal
An often-asked question about innovative schools is *But how good are the test scores?* Baldwin students' test at or above state averages on standardized state assessment tests. However, Baldwin's goals far surpass raising test scores due to test scores' inability to measure much about a students' growth and potential. When district-wide focus is on guiding students to think deeply, solve real-world problems, work effectively in groups, and express opinions and findings with support and confidence, standardized tests simply fall short of capturing students' growth in these areas. Leadership believes that if you teach only to the test, you will gain only strong test scores at the expense of rich and relevant learning. Instead, they espouse the belief that if standards are set high, standardized test scores will follow on top of enriching, deep learning.

Baldwin's leadership has led an ongoing dialogue with students, families, and the greater Baldwin community about the importance of education that extends beyond the test and tests' inability to meaningfully measure student success. Increasingly, students, families, and the community are accepting that there are far more revealing and enriching ways for students to show evidence of learning. Parents and the community are deeply invested in its students and participate in opportunities to observe students as they showcase their learning, be it through presentations to an audience that include families and community members, learning fairs, competitive events, and more. The community has developed a comfort with students focusing on work that yields more meaningful measures of achievement and growth.

While Baldwin tracks data and applies insights to inform instruction and learning, its leaders recognize the limits of data as the only tool for school improvement. Leadership believes that much of what makes for an enriching learning experience—including social-emotional growth— cannot yet be easily, accurately, or consistently tracked. Instead, they provide support in helping teachers track insightful data and merge it with their professional learning and decisions about how to create a stimulating classroom, where students feel motivated and excited to learn and stretch.

Make it Easy for the Community to Get Involved, and They Will Get Involved
Baldwin recognizes the power of strong relationships between its schools and the larger community. Leadership has learned to leverage partnerships with local and regional businesses in a range of creative ways to empower college, career, and civic readiness for all students, grades K through 12. As one such example, Baldwin students don't have to wait for college to experience work in a chosen field; instead, they can begin as early as sophomore year. Students can engage in school-to-career programs, win internships, or participate in shadow days, to name some. Our students with special needs are frequently given opportunities to work in local stores.

Many of our community partnerships also create opportunities for students to partake in competitions. Examples include business plan competitions, music competitions, mock trial, sports, and more. Students take pride in representing the school district, and leaders appreciate the dual benefit of brand promotion to the larger community.

Additionally, student learning exhibitions routinely link to or involve the community. Elementary students learn about their community through field trips and guest presenters, and all such activities lead to a learning activity or project. As one example, students applied coding skills to map their community and track how a bee might pollinate flowers throughout the community. Middle school students post hundreds of stories on the district website about work projects they've completed that both involve the community and build upon their interests and passions. The high schools regularly tap local employers and professionals to serve as coaches, consultants, judges, and experts in student learning opportunities.

Community-involved projects often include students from multiple grade levels. As one example, students from elementary, middle, and high school participated in the creation of the *Baldwin Then and Now* book. The collaboration spanned two years and ultimately resulted in a book depicting Baldwin's history. Second grade teachers and students interviewed longtime Baldwin residents as part of their social studies and writing curriculum. Then, once those same students moved up to third grade, they wrote about Baldwin as it is today and how it has changed. High school photography students and teachers took field trips to capture images of Baldwin. They then turned selected photos into "coloring book" pages. High school and middle school students wrote historical captions for "old" Baldwin photos. Throughout, students liaised with members of the community, such as employees of the Baldwin Historical Society, to source stories and photos for inclusion in the book.

Future Readiness Is Imbedded in Everything
Across Baldwin, students are viewed as producers. The intent of this mindset is to remind students, teachers, and everyone else that the work of being a student is not passive; rather, students are expected to be hands-on in their learning and produce evidence of learning through challenging, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary projects. As producers, students' voice and choice are a fixture of their proactive learning. This is part of preparing students to be independent and creative thinkers, which will help them succeed well beyond their high school years.

If you walk into a Baldwin classroom, you will rarely see students sitting quietly listening to a teacher. Instead, classrooms buzz with students working in teams as they collaborate on projects. Often, it takes a moment to locate the teacher, who is constantly circulating to check in with teams, offer additional support as needed, or provide coaching to individuals or groups in need of targeted support.

When teachers act more as facilitators of learning and coaches to students and less as disseminators of information, their time is freed to personalize additional assistance to the students who need it most. This capacity enables Baldwin's educators to act on a district-wide belief that all students are inherently gifted and talented and have natural strengths and areas opportune for growth. Whereas many districts identify select students as gifted and talented and then offer only them more challenging work, Baldwin provides enrichment for all students. All Baldwin learners are expected to complete challenging work that rests heavily on student agency, thus freeing teachers to create learning opportunities and operate as coaches available when students need additional assistance. Teachers meet all students where they are and personalize support so that they can continue to grow and complete challenging work tasks that are relevant to the real world, interdisciplinary, and involve social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

These high expectations of students as producers apply to all students, from kindergarten to high school seniors. For example, elementary students are expected to operate as scientists do, posing questions and collecting data. As one application, all elementary schools have a native garden that students learn to cultivate and nurture. As another, third grade students study the biology, habitats, and behaviors of birds throughout the school year in partnership with the Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary and Audubon Center. In art, they paint a picture of a bird most exciting to them and then write an accompanying piece detailing their knowledge of and interest in the bird. All work then is compiled and bound into a book. Such projects require interdisciplinary and critical thinking, a breadth of both creative and cognitive skills, and elevated vocabulary.

As a middle school example of students operating as producers, students complete a Better World Day project. They start with essential and real-world questions, such as *Is change good?* or *Do we impact society, or does society impact us?* Students must do their own research to evaluate various perspectives and ultimately support their positions in a presentation. Instead of listening to a teacher explain various positions or even engaging in dialogue as a class, students are called to apply a range of skills—from research to analysis to critical thinking and more skills—to build and validate their own decisions and means of sharing it with classmates.

High school students have the option to take the AP Seminar and AP Research, which are largely self-directed and allow students to go deeper into researching and analyzing areas of learning. These courses are required courses for students to earn the AP Capstone Diploma designation. The AP Seminar course is an inquiry-based, research-driven course that engages students in cross-curricular conversations that explore real-world topics and issues from multiple perspectives. Students in this course work collaboratively toward the completion of a team research project and presentation, an individual research-based essay and presentation, and an end-of-course examination administered by the AP College Board. In AP Research, students engage in a yearlong investigation to address a research question. Students explore a topic or question of personal interest and develop a comprehensive argument and solution. The course culminates in an academic paper of 4,000 to 5,000 words (accompanied by a performance, exhibit or product where applicable) and a presentation with an oral defense.

When students are producers of work so tightly linked to professional careers and skills, they can, in theory, begin laying postsecondary foundations even before high school graduation. Baldwin has enabled students to do this in practice. For example, at the CTE program within the high school, students can choose paths that range from medical technician to police science to barbering, and more. Students are able to take part-time jobs in the same area as their CTE track while they're still in school, dramatically increasing the likelihood of gaining full-time employment upon graduation, if they choose. As another example, high school seniors who meet the requirements of community college admission can apply to be full-time college students on the local community college campus. These students learn alongside actual college students and are held to the same expectations. Leadership created this opportunity so that, instead of "suffering from senioritis," seniors could remain deeply engaged in learning as they also gain up to 32 college credits. Not surprisingly, these students experience a near seamless transition to the colleges they choose.

Throughout their learning trajectory, all Baldwin students develop confidence through practicing agency, using their voices, making learning choices, and cultivating their interests and passions. The culmination of this work of operating as producers is students' involvement in one of

Baldwin's seven High School Academies, which are: STEM/engineering, global business, government/law, medical/health sciences, education, fine and performing arts, and new media. Two factors determine the kinds of academies that are created: 1) the local economy and its impact on the evolving career landscape and 2) student interests. While academies complement the more classic high school curriculum, they exist to allow students to learn and engage more deeply in an area of personal interest. Intentionally built into every academy are real-world relevant instruction, business partners who enrich learning, job shadowing, internships, and opportunities to transfer learning through competitions and learning demonstrations.

Academies are optional, but many students opt into one out of a curiosity about a specific professional career. Students are welcome to attend pre-academies in eighth grade in preparation for the high school level academy, or they may begin in high school. Academies are not schools-within-a school nor are they isolated from everyone else in school. They are developed through the elective options offered throughout high school. Ultimately, students are provided the hands-on career experience that can help them clarify postsecondary goals and choose the pathways that will lead them towards career success and fulfillment.

The Layout, Design, and Furnishings in the Learning Space Matter
Baldwin believes that the learning environment is not an after-thought but an opportunity to enhance learning and its relevance. Leadership wanted to depart entirely from the traditional classroom model—where students sit in rows of desks and stare at the backs of classmates' heads and the teacher at the front—and replace it with a layout most conducive to the learning that must happen within the room. For inspiration, leadership convened a group to visit a host of professional offices, including Google, Mashable, and WeWork, to gather ideas for modern classrooms that prepare students for professional work. However, it wasn't leadership's goal to decide on one modernized approach and apply it to all classrooms; instead, they empowered teachers to draw from ideas gathered on office visits and recommend the layout that would facilitate the deepest learning in their classrooms. Learning content and the nature of student work ultimately dictate classroom design.

For example, at the high school level, the government/law academy classroom was designed to simulate a courtroom, with wood-paneled walls, a space designated for opposing legal teams, and a judge's bench at the front of the room. An elementary classroom was designed around the concept of performances and another around media. No two rooms look alike. All classrooms are fitted with modular, adjustable furniture. Layouts can be easily reconfigured based on the needs of the day—be it individual work, group work, presentations, lively discussion, and so on.

Technology is thoughtfully selected and installed in every classroom. Baldwin is committed to intentional technology use that enhances student learning, engagement, and teacher efficacy. Leaders believe that having all students working on a tablet or laptop at the same time can become as routine and un-engaging as students sitting in rows of desks listening to lecture. Included in the design of every classroom is not only the most up-to-date technology but also technology that is relevant to the task at hand.

Customizing all learning spaces was a time-consuming undertaking for the district. Yet it was viewed as and proven to be an investment yielding enormous returns. Content tailored and flexible layouts have the effect of permitting teamwork and thus enabling students to nurture professional collaboration skills. High school students who job shadow and hold internships

report a seamless transition from school to place of work; when their classrooms are so similar to the real world, they feel much more comfortable working in an actual office space.

Teachers Deserve and Need the Support to Succeed
Central to Baldwin's success is a relentless support of teachers and their professional learning. District and school leaders appreciate that they ask teachers to function differently from how they historically have. They also grasp that if professional learning commensurate to the ask of such innovative instruction is not consistently available to teachers, they would be set up to fail. And teachers deserve better.

Leadership has built a multifaceted professional learning program to support teachers' ongoing growth. Modalities are flexible and varied—from online learning to instructional coaching to access to consultants with area expertise and team learning—so teachers can elect the kind of support that is most aligned to how they learn. Teachers are encouraged to learn and grow together, and technology platforms are leveraged to enable team learning.

All new teachers enter a cohort with all teachers also new that year and that meets monthly for four years. The goal of this program is to ensure that all new teachers learn the strategies they are expected to master and that new teachers are provided an instant support group. They exchange ideas, coach each other, and—importantly—often become close friends and a tight knit support network.

District leadership believes that the space in which teachers learn is as important as the professional learning itself. A space was redesigned and dedicated to teachers as the Professional Learning Lab. The lab is modern, attractive, and flexible; it can be used for team learning, individual study, workshops, and group discussions. Comfortable furnishings can be adjusted based on the need, and the space has the range of technologies available for individual learning, collaborative learning, and workshops. Allocating and designing a new professional learning space is a visual reminder to teachers they are valued and valuable, and that professional learning is essential to their success. Furthermore, leadership recognized that if teachers could learn in rooms similar in layout and flexibility as the rooms in which their students learn, they could also learn how to teach in them.

The Impact

Prior to district-wide evolutions in the name of innovation, Baldwin's students already performed well. Yet the changes the district has undertaken have propelled that much more success. Impacts of the district's innovations include but are not limited to:

- In 2020 for the first time and in 2021 for the second time, Baldwin High School was included on the *US News & World Report*'s list of top performing best high schools in the United States.
- From 2018 to 2021, the high school graduation rate has been 96%, 98%, 97%, and 98%, respectively.
- Of the high school's approximately 1,500 students, over 500 participate annually in school career programs, and there are about 990 total seats filled for Advanced Placement courses (this includes students taking more than one AP course).

Most importantly in the eyes of district leadership, Baldwin students love going to school. Students across grade levels routinely report that they are learning what they might want to do and what they do *not* want to do for a career. By the time they graduate high school, some students feel prepared to enter careers of their choosing or gain vocational training. And the students who go onto college do so with an atypical level of awareness of their career interests and how to optimize their time in college.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the barriers to innovation in our system? Are there barriers we've long since assumed cannot be removed but are worth revisiting? Thinking creatively, how might we work to remove them? Or, at least, reduce their interference with innovation?

2. Do our students enjoy school? Do they understand why they are learning what they are learning? How can we draw a greater connection between the school day and students' postsecondary options? How can we layer learning with voice and choice so learning feels personal to students and tied to their interests and passions? How can we adapt student assessments to track new and deeper approaches to learning?

3. Have we made it easy for community members to collaborate with us? How can we reduce impediments to their involvement and expand the ways they can engage with students?

4. Are our student and adult learning environments optimizing learning? Are they conducive to the kind of work that will cultivate students' career-ready skills? How can we modify learning spaces and bring more flexibility to them so they may be reconfigured to meet learning needs?