



CASE STUDIES: REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Remaking Middle Schools (RMS) is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education.

RMS Design Labs partnered with schools to reimagine school structures that support adolescent development & address equity concerns.



<http://RemakingMiddleSchool.org>



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Remaking Middle Schools is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education. Through this initiative, the Remaking Middle School design labs partnered with schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) to reimagine school structures and practices that support adolescent development and address equity concerns. The RMS design lab used a host of supports and empathy practices (*detailed in the report*) to ground and support teams in the liberatory design framework and current developmental science research. The RMS design lab structure was widely accepted and adopted by the RMS school teams. Educators were highly engaged in the RMS Design lab. Participants shared that the design lab had a positive impact on educators' professional practices, educators' relationships with students, school culture, and students' confidence, advocacy skills, and social-emotional competencies. Thus, we found that the RMS design lab has the potential to change educators' mindsets and practices and positively impact students' experiences.

In the following report, we highlight four case studies from partnering schools to demonstrate key facets of the RMS design lab experience. The goal of these case studies is to serve as practice guides to schools and educators who desire to cultivate educational spaces that fit their student's developmental needs. The first case study explores teaming dynamics that foster redesign work. Key takeaways from this case study include:

- The school design team members should be diverse, committed, and have the capacity to regularly engage in the redesign work;
- It is important for teams to have 1) a strong leader; 2) a democratic process for decision making; and 3) a culture of collaboration, communication, and innovation.

The second case study discusses the importance of specific key practices in facilitating school design work. These key practices include both school- and partner-related practices such as:

- Content-focused Learning sessions and a summer accelerator which helped schools to develop a knowledge of middle-level adolescent development and equity practices;
- Coaching sessions provided a space for school educators to reflect and share ideas; and,
- Site visits and empathy work that shifted the thinking of educators and allowed them to better understand the experiences and perspectives of students.

The third case study in the report discusses the challenges that the redesign teams faced as they worked to reimagine their educational environments. These challenges include but are not limited to:

- Difficulties with time and scheduling RMS efforts given the already intense demands of the school day;
- Difficulties with cultivating school-wide buy-in of redesign efforts; and,
- Challenges with balancing student voice and agency with pre-existing educator mindsets and established school structures.

Finally, the last case study addresses sustainability efforts. In this case study, we discuss key strategies to support the sustainability of redesign efforts, such as

- Ensuring strong leadership with a clear vision for moving the work forward;
- Building accountability structures that hold school design team members accountable to reflection and forward progress; and,
- Fostering an open-minded school climate/culture that promotes changes for the betterment of students.

To conclude the report, we include recommendations for district/school leadership, educators/staff, family, and community members.

REMAKING MIDDLE SCHOOLS OVERVIEW



REMAKING **MIDDLE
SCHOOL**

Remaking Middle Schools (RMS) is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink our approaches to middle level education. In February of 2019, RMS hosted the [Remaking Middle School Summit](#) to reimagine the middle school experience in a way that recognizes the strengths of our youth and aligns with their developmental needs. The summit brought together more than 165 individuals, including practitioners, researchers, youth, policymakers, out-of-school time providers, funders, and others, working strategically to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of all young adolescents (UVA, n.d.-a). Leveraging research on positive youth development, participants utilized design thinking to generate tangible solutions to transform the middle grades. Priority areas included: (1) community and family engagement; (2) school culture and climate; (3) student voice and agency; (4) reframing the middle grades; (5) teacher learning and professional development; (6) teaching and learning; and (7) translating research to practice. Following the Remaking Middle School Summit, RMS convened three design teams aiming to advance these priorities by innovating, accelerating, and investing in new and renewed approaches in young adolescent learning and development.

Partnering with school design teams, the RMS Design Lab worked alongside educators to reimagine how they might design school structures that both meet students’ developmental needs and build on their assets to promote thriving. Specifically, schools learned about developmental science theories from prominent adolescent development researchers. Schools engaged with RMS coaching team who supported their design process (i.e., idea generation, implementation, and testing). Finally, schools became a part of the RMS Design learning community and were provided with research-based tools, resources, practices, and models that aligned with their individual needs.

The RMS design work is centered at the intersection of equitable education and design thinking and is guided by the Liberatory Design Framework (See Figure 1).

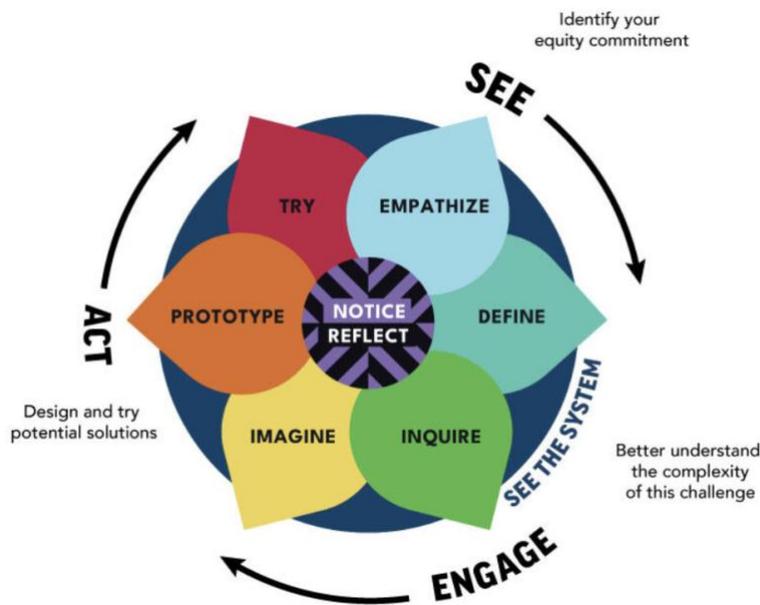


Figure 1. The Liberatory Design Framework

Liberatory Design for Equity Process. (2021). National Equity Project, Oakland, CA, United States. <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/liberatory-design>

The Liberatory Design Framework integrates the restoring power of equity work with the innovative potential of design thinking to tackle large challenges in a variety of contexts. In our educational contexts, we use this framework to help school teams rethink the traditional approaches to middle school. We begin with notice and reflect at the center of the framework and then move out and around from empathize to test. It is important to note that this process is iterative, and teams regularly move back and forth between each of the phases while redesigning. The flexibility of the process allows for engagement of various stakeholders (i.e., students, caregivers, teachers) in both the designing and implementation of their projects.

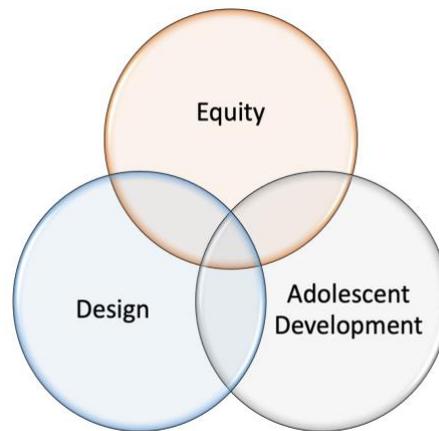


Figure 2. The RMS Framework

We expand the Liberatory Design Model by integrating adolescent development into the RMS Framework (see Figure 2). This encourages school design teams to focus their work at the center of the venn diagram, paying attention to school-wide equity concerns, developmentally supportive practices (e.g., authentic youth engagement through student voice initiatives and adjusting school practices to be centered around the self-determination theory), and innovative / solutions oriented thinking. Combining these two frameworks, we engage schools in a year long process called [Design Labs](#).

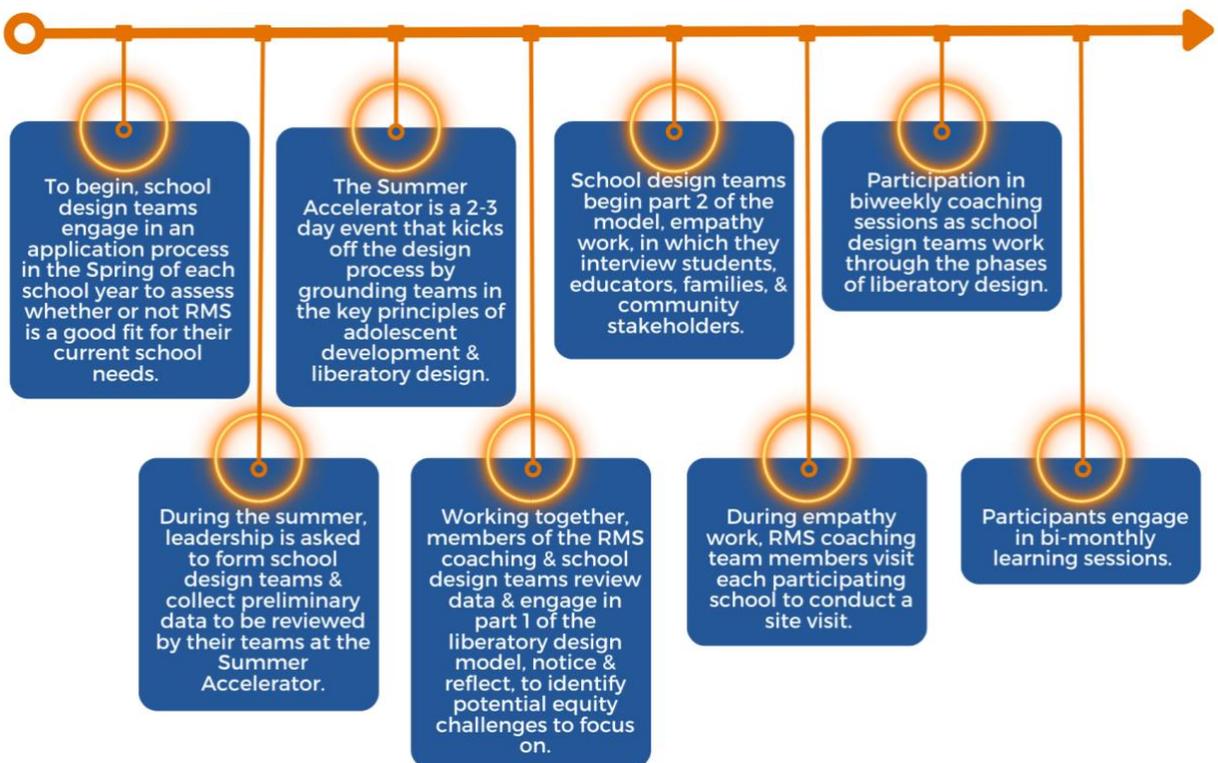
Design Labs include a team of 5-6 school- and community- level stakeholders that are committed to rethinking the structures, policies, and practices at their middle school. Each design team is paired with three coaches throughout the year-long redesign process. To begin, teams engage in an application process in the Spring of each school year to assess whether or not RMS is a good fit for their current school needs. During the summer, leadership is asked to form school design teams and collect preliminary data to be reviewed by their teams at the Summer Accelerator. The Summer Accelerator is a 2-3 day event that kicks off the design process by grounding teams in the key principles of adolescent development and liberatory design. Then, working together, members of the RMS coaching team and school design teams review data and engage in part 1 of the liberatory design model, notice and reflect, to identify potential equity challenges to focus on (e.g., disproportionality in discipline data). Following the Summer Accelerator, school teams begin part 2 of the model, empathy work, in which they interview students,

Key Principles of Adolescent Development

Youths undergo natural biological, social, and emotional changes, question those around them, are open to external stimuli, desire strong emotional connection and relationships, and can cultivate agency, competence, and belonging through student voice initiatives

educators, families, and community stakeholders to gather input from a broad range of stakeholders in their school communities. During empathy work, RMS coaching team members visit each participating school to conduct a site visit. This site visit provides additional data to understand the experiences and perspectives of those impacted by the design work. This information is examined more closely in biweekly coaching sessions as school design teams work through the phases of liberatory design. In these coaching sessions, school design teams meet with a RMS coaching team (e.g., design facilitator, RMS coach, and research coach) to guide their projects from define to test and ensure that they are centering their initiatives in adolescent development.

Outside of these coaching sessions, participants also engage in bi-monthly learning sessions where they 1) interact with other schools in the cohort; 2) listen to expert speakers share key literature and practices in developmental science; and 3) think about the connection between session content and their working RMS project. Finally, in between formal meetings, RMS coaches provide additional support and resources for data collection, design strategies, and general educational practices. The entire Design Lab experience takes a full school year to complete, but is best implemented with continued engagement across more than one year.



RMS DESIGN LAB

The RMS Design Lab enhances participating schools’ knowledge of positive youth development for middle grades using an anti-racist, whole-child approach. In partnership with the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), the pilot program was virtually launched in a midwestern, urban school district during the 2020-2021 school year. Three schools participated in the pilot RMS Design Lab, which was adapted in consultation with district leadership to respond to the emerging needs of youth and schools in the context of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. With guidance and leadership from local and national practitioners, researchers, and experts working in the field, school design teams attended monthly design sessions, where they engaged in the Liberatory Design process. During the 2021-

2022 school year, the full RMS Design Lab program was launched virtually, with four schools committed to redesigning the middle grades experience in their school communities, including one school, which continued from the pilot program. In August, School Design Teams engaged in a 3-day Middle Grades Accelerator. Following the Accelerator, school design teams participated in individual coaching sessions twice a month, as well as bi-monthly learning sessions with all schools.

RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

Throughout the school year, data was collected to evaluate the RMS Design Lab experience. Our research infrastructure aimed to evaluate the implementation of the Design Lab (e.g., acceptability, feasibility, appropriateness, and uptake), its associated outcomes (e.g., resulting school initiatives, changes in educator capacity, and impact on students), and facilitators (and barriers) of success. We collected both qualitative and quantitative data to support these aims.

Qualitative Data. Qualitative data included intervention records, open-response surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Intervention records were collected throughout the training experience and included notes from schools' design activities (e.g., empathy interviews, surveys), design project planning and implementation documents, and slide decks from design sessions. Open-response questions were included on implementation surveys after all design sessions to provide participating educators an opportunity to give specific feedback and recommendations. Individual interviews were conducted with school design team members both mid-year and at the end of the school year. In place of the end-of-year individual interview, school team principals participated in an end-of-year focus group. Employing thematic analysis, we used a hybrid of deductive and inductive coding to investigate and evaluate the implementation of the Design Lab, its associated outcomes, and facilitators of (and barriers to) success. This approach allowed for the core components of the Design Lab (i.e., equity, development, and design) to be integral to the thematic analysis while allowing for emerging themes to be identified (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Quantitative Data. Quantitative data included pre-post surveys, design session feedback surveys, session attendance records, and publicly available school data. School design team members completed pre-post surveys to help determine the impact of Design Lab activities. Feedback surveys were collected after all design sessions to assess implementation outcomes. Contextual data was also collected from the Illinois Report Card and 5Essentials survey, as well as from surveys completed by educators themselves. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. The paired t-test with a covariate (baseline scores) was used to evaluate pre-post changes in outcomes (Hedberg & Ayers, 2015).

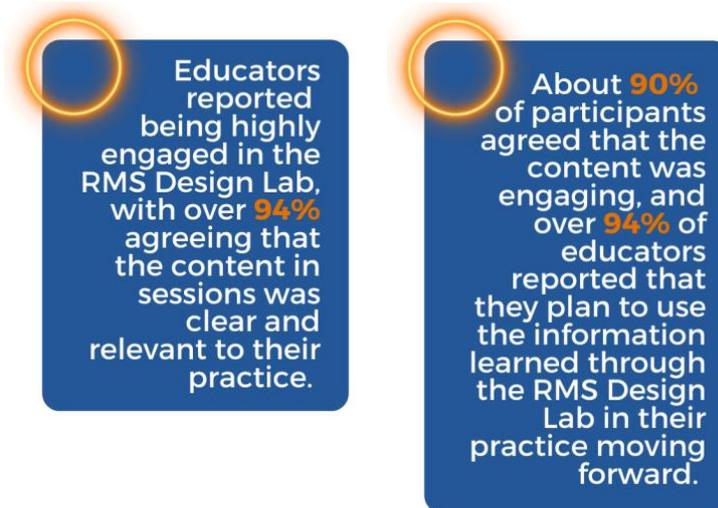
DISTRICT CONTEXT

Southwood school district (SSD; pseudonym) comprises over 500 schools, serving over 300,000 prekindergarten through 12th grade students. Compared to the rest of the state, SSD students are more likely to be from underrepresented racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Over 80% of SSD students are Hispanic/Latino or Black, nearly 80% of SSD students come from low-income backgrounds, and approximately 20% are English-language learners. In contrast to their students, SSD teachers are predominantly White; but, compared to the rest of the state, SSD employs more Black and Hispanic/Latino teachers, who comprise about 40% of the SSD workforce. During the 2021-2022 school year, SSD schools returned to in-person learning for most students, with quarantine procedures in place for students and staff exposed to COVID-19. As with many school districts throughout the U.S., the SSD

community faced significant stressors throughout the year as they navigated COVID safety protocols and subsequent staff shortages, virtual and hybrid learning alternatives, and intermittent closures.

IMPACT OF RMS DESIGN LAB

Evidence to date suggests that the RMS Design Lab is well accepted across school sites and has a multifaceted impact on schools.



Thus, the Design Lab as a structure was well accepted and adopted across the schools. Qualitative data reveals the perceived impact of the Design Lab. Educators described the positive impact the Design Lab experience has had on their (and their team members') professional practices (e.g., facilitating opportunities for student voice, improved problem-solving practices), relationships with students, and school culture (e.g., more positive staff meetings). In addition, participants described the positive impact that their design projects (as well as their improved practices) had on students (e.g., improved behavior, engagement in student voice initiatives, sense of agency). In particular, participants reported that implementation of student voice practices and initiatives appeared to improve students' confidence, advocacy skills, and social-emotional competencies. Pre-post survey results support this, as significant improvements in participants' perceptions of their schools' student voice practices were demonstrated (Cohen's $d = .37$). Thus, evidence suggests that engaging in redesign work of this sort has the potential to change educators' mindsets and practices, and ultimately impact students' experiences in school. In the case studies that follow, we explain the factors that facilitated or hindered the design process across the schools. We hope that you will use these case studies as guidelines for engaging in redesign work within your educational contexts.

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



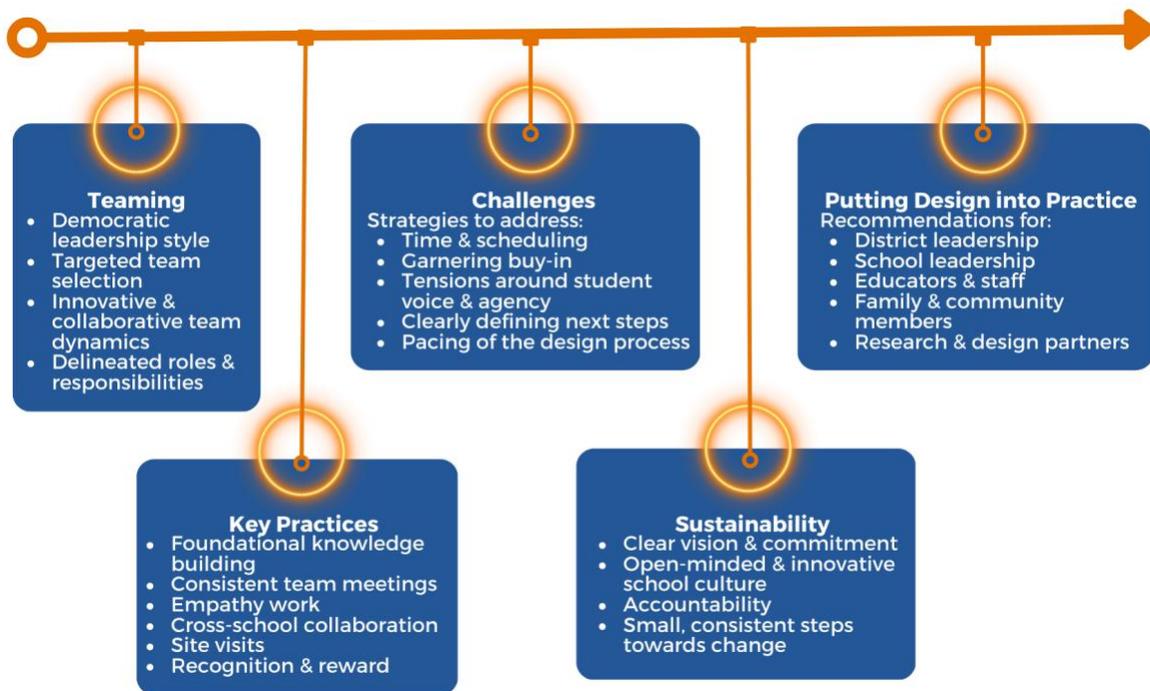
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In the sections that follow, we highlight key findings from our work with the four schools. To protect their identities, each school has been given a pseudonym.

- We begin with a discussion on **teaming**, including the development, dynamics, and roles/leadership that are supportive of redesign work.
- Then, we highlight various **key practices** that support redesign work such as consistent meetings, engagement in empathy work, and providing honorariums for participating educators.
- We then discuss **challenges** that school design teams faced throughout the year,
- And considerations for **sustainability** as schools move beyond year one of redesign.

After detailing each of the key findings, we use example case studies to uncover how these strategies manifest in practice. Each case study ends with reflection questions to prompt self-reflection on the application of this work in the reader’s educational context. We conclude our report with **key takeaways** for various stakeholder groups.





TEAMING



Teaming is a crucial consideration of any work. In the school context, particularly in this sort of design work, *team selection* is the first step to engaging in meaningful redesign. Thus, it is important to develop a team of thoughtful, open-minded, and action-oriented educators. This ensures that team members are prepared to ideate, test out new ideas, and make changes when necessary. It helps when these educators hold diverse positions across the school, allowing them to bring a variety of perspectives into the work. Typically these are educators who are intrinsically motivated to engage in the work. However, oftentimes these team members tend to be those who are involved in a multitude of school teams. It is therefore important for leaders to be mindful of how much they are asking of educators when making their team selection decisions and avoid volunteering educators who may not have capacity to commit to the work.

Another key consideration of teaming are the *team dynamics*, or ways in which the team cultivates a sense of community. Strong teams often foster a supportive and collaborative culture in which members can challenge each other in the development of ideas and partner in the implementation of redesign efforts. Often this is influenced by the culture and climate of the school and the school leaders. Similarly, teams that clearly *delineate roles and responsibilities* amongst team members ensure that work is completed efficiently and that all members experience a sense of ownership and agency with respect to the project and its goals. Working on team dynamics, cultivating a strong sense of community across team members, and ensuring that all team members have clear and realistic roles and responsibilities are all factors that promote productive engagement in school redesign work.

The final key teaming feature identified in our data is *team leadership*. We learned that having a school administrator on the team is a crucial step to making real changes through the school design team. Without the presence of a decision making leader (i.e., principal), it is difficult to make timely decisions about testing and implementation of design prototypes. However, while many of our teams were led by an administrator, they all worked towards a distributed leadership model that placed responsibility on multiple team members, so as to not overburden the school administrator. This approach supported the ownership of all members while ensuring that school leadership was bought into the redesign plans.

In the following case study, we highlight key features of teaming in action. Following the case study, we provide reflection questions for you to consider as you begin to develop your own redesign team.

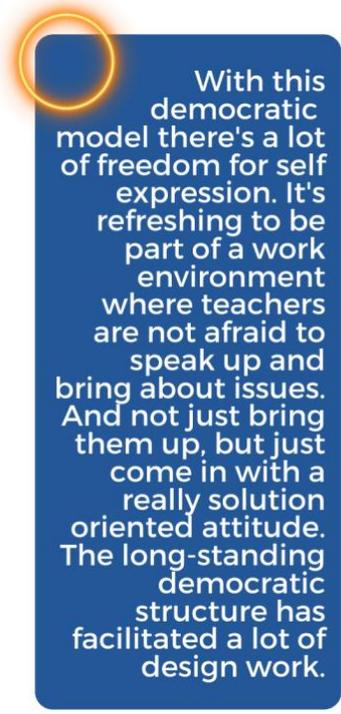
TEAMING AT WOODSIDE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Woodside houses an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. The student population at Woodside is predominantly of Hispanic/Latino heritage. Approximately two-thirds of students are from low-income families, and one-third are English language learners. Woodside has experienced a high degree of staff turnover and shortages over the years, particularly with respect to school leadership. Despite these contextual challenges, the culture at Woodside is one of flexibility, innovation, and democratic processes, which played a key part in advancing their RMS work. Over the course of the Design Lab, Woodside developed and implemented a Student of the Week program and video series with the goal of improving the middle school culture. In recent years, the school had become increasingly problem-focused, and staff, students, and families expressed feeling that the school's "magic" had been lost. Their project was ultimately successful in shifting the school culture to be more inclusive, positive, and strengths-based. Here, we describe how Woodside's teaming practices – specifically, their *leadership style*, method of *team selection*, *team dynamics*, and *delineated roles and responsibilities* – facilitated the implementation and success of their redesign initiative.

The 2021-2022 academic year was Woodside’s first year with RMS. Their participation was initiated by their principal, Ms. B, whose **leadership style** encouraged team engagement, buy-in, and confidence. Ms. B had worked at Woodside for many years, but this was only her third year as principal. While Ms. B had participated in other partnerships as principal, RMS was the first partnership she initiated. *“It’s a proud moment... This is my mark for the middle school team, taking us through this process.”* Ms. B took full ownership over the RMS project, and her belief and investment in its success encouraged others to buy in as well. Due to Ms. B’s longevity with Woodside – as a parent, teacher, and, now, principal – she was aware of and responsive to the needs and responsibilities of various school stakeholders. Her communicative, calm, and deliberate leadership style fostered a **culture of trust** at Woodside that translated to the school design team. *“Ms. B says that this is going to be great, this is going to be worth it, trust me. I did, and it was true.”*

When forming the school design team, Ms. B opened up the opportunity to all Woodside staff but **actively recruited individuals with leadership qualities** that would help garner buy-in among other staff. *“Who are my dancers that I can find to be the wacky crazy ones that start this dance going? We’re going to recruit people who really are in it for this work.”* Ms. B recruited staff who were intrinsically motivated to participate – they were passionate, believed in the RMS mission, and were eager to make a lasting impact on students at Woodside. By communicating to these individuals her belief in them and why she wanted them on the school design team, Ms. B fostered a sense of purpose and value in each team member. *“Not only was the content already interesting to me and valuable, but Ms. B and her advocacy for my participation was also very important to me deciding to engage.”* The Woodside team coalesced around a shared mission to improve the middle school culture – which had become increasingly negative over previous years – and restore its “magic”.

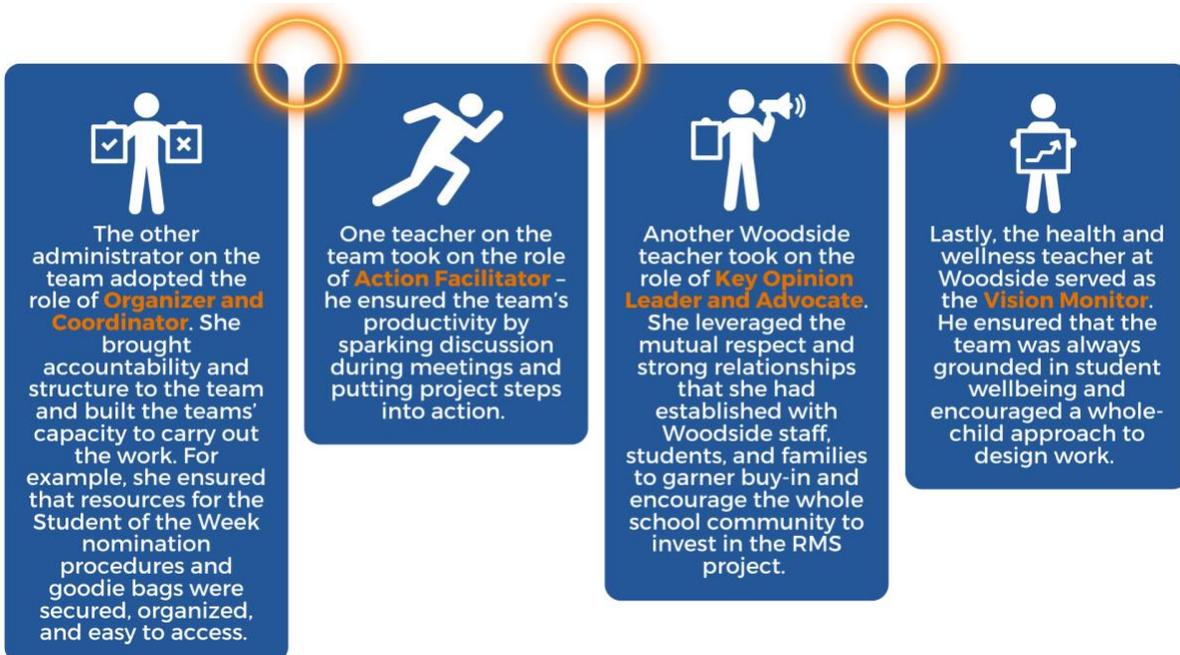
Woodside’s **team dynamics** were characterized by innovation, collaboration, and democratic processes. Like the school overall, the Woodside team employed a democratic approach to teamwork that leveraged the strengths of all members and encouraged shared decision making. Importantly, the team’s shared vision and established trust with one another allowed them to feel safe expressing themselves openly in meetings. They were committed to this work, carved out time to advance action items, and communicated about RMS during their monthly staff meetings. They also shared a solution- and detail-oriented mindset and sense of agency that fostered a sense of confidence and helped them persevere through challenges. When issues arose, they believed they could work through them, and they did. For example, about halfway through the year, the team realized that their work would be fruitless if they did not have the buy-in of other staff, who felt defeated by failed initiatives in the past and were hesitant to get on board with a new initiative. Through collaboration, the Woodside team decided that they needed to shift their mindset to take full ownership of their project, embody its vision, and leverage standing staff meetings to communicate and advocate for its aims and strategies. Through these strategies, the team was successful in ingraining RMS into school culture.



With this democratic model there's a lot of freedom for self expression. It's refreshing to be part of a work environment where teachers are not afraid to speak up and bring about issues. And not just bring them up, but just come in with a really solution oriented attitude. The long-standing democratic structure has facilitated a lot of design work.

"THE WORK THAT WE'VE DONE WITH RMS, WE PRESENTED AS SOMETHING THAT WE WERE SERIOUS ABOUT, THAT WE WANT TO CONTINUE, AND IT'S SUCH A PART OF OUR CULTURE NOW THAT LIKE YOU KIND OF HAVE TO GET WITH THE PROGRAM."

Finally, one of the characteristics of the Woodside team that was most helpful in advancing their design project was their clear *delineation of roles and responsibilities*. While this process was not formalized, Woodside design team members informally adopted key roles that increased the efficiency and effectiveness of design procedures. Outside of Ms. B's leadership role, the other administrator on the team adopted the role of *Organizer and Coordinator*. She brought accountability and structure to the team and built the teams' capacity to carry out the work. For example, she ensured that resources for the Student of the Week nomination procedures and goodie bags were secured, organized, and easy to access. One teacher on the team took on the role of *Action Facilitator* – he ensured the team's productivity by sparking discussion during meetings and putting project steps into action. Another Woodside teacher took on the role of *Key Opinion Leader and Advocate*. She leveraged the mutual respect and strong relationships that she had established with Woodside staff, students, and families to garner buy-in and encourage the whole school community to invest in the RMS project. These two teachers both took on leadership roles within Woodside's project implementation, filming the video series, putting together the goodie bags, and updating the Student of the Week bulletin each week. Lastly, the health and wellness teacher at Woodside served as the *Vision Monitor*. He ensured that the team was always grounded in student wellbeing and encouraged a whole-child approach to design work. Importantly, all team members were keenly aware of the roles and responsibilities that they and others took on and were able to leverage these responsibilities to facilitate implementation.



KEY TAKEAWAYS



The school design team played a crucial role in the successful development and implementation of remaking middle school projects. The design team selection should include the recruitment of diverse and committed staff members who have the capacity to regularly engage in the redesign work and to cultivate buy-in from other school stakeholders. The design team itself becomes a community, so its dynamics become an indicator of its effectiveness and ultimate success. Collaboration, communication, innovation, and the democratic process were all team dynamics that we have seen positively impact the school design team. Finally, it is important that the design team have a leader; this has oftentimes been the school's principal. This leader is responsible for developing a clear vision of the RMS work and ensuring that the team has the structural capacity and support to implement planned tasks. While a team leader is key, it is also crucial that all team members have clear roles and responsibilities and feel a sense of ownership over the design project. It is additionally beneficial if the team develops an accountability system to help support their team members' follow-through with tasks outside of RMS team meetings.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you reflect on the Woodside case study, consider how you might develop a successful school design team and what teaming structures are necessary to support this work at your local school.



What we wish we knew. Woodside design team members were asked what they wished they would have known and what they would share with other schools before beginning this process. Woodside spoke to the importance of having a specific point person to lead the team. They also shared that it is important to have a trajectory at the beginning and to incorporate follow-through, accountability, and reflection structures. Finally, they shared that the school's design team needs to be composed of committed and diverse staff members. The RMS process requires a lot of time but can be supported through this intentionality.

Reflection Questions.

1. Think about **team selection** at your school.
 - a. Who is committed to a shared vision, can cultivate buy-in from other school stakeholders, and has the capacity to be on your school's redesign team?
 - b. How could you utilize individual strengths to support the delineation of roles and responsibilities within your team?
 - c. What roles and responsibilities are needed to help your team run smoothly?
2. Think about the **team dynamics** at your school and within your proposed design team.
 - a. Does your proposed design team already have a developed sense of community?
 - i. If so, how can you help strengthen this community?
 - ii. If not, how can you help cultivate this community?
 - b. Collaboration and communication are two key components needed in one's design team.
 - i. How can you help foster an environment of collaboration and regular communication between your design team members?
3. Think about **team leadership** at your school.
 - a. Who is your team of administrators?
 - b. Are they interested, available, and willing to be a part of your school's design team?
 - c. What structures could you develop or strengthen to help support their participation?

KEY PRACTICES



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Successful school redesign efforts depend on the regular practices of the school design team. Throughout our work with schools, we've noticed various key practices that promote productive redesign. In this section, we will highlight the four most prominent practices across schools. **Teaming**, as highlighted in the section above, is an essential component of efficacious redesign efforts. Thus, when embarking on a redesign journey, be sure to critically consider teaming practices both at the start and regularly throughout the process.

Another key practice is the use of regular **learning and coaching meetings** as a way to prioritize and hold space for design work. In our structure, we had coaching sessions every other week, which allowed school teams to meet together, set project priorities, and determine next steps on project plans. These meetings were intentionally designed by RMS coaching team members who asked guiding questions, led design activities, and kept the teams moving forward on their projects. One essential part of these regular meetings was an opportunity for design-focused reflection, discussion, and group work. Further, we held learning sessions as quarterly meetings where new research in adolescent science was shared with the teams to support **knowledge building**. These meetings were designed to introduce new content, ensure that redesign efforts were developmentally appropriate, and included all school design teams.

We also asked school design teams to engage in **empathy work** as a key feature of their design process. The goal of empathy work is for designers to have conversations and collect data from their community to 1) better understand the needs and desires of the stakeholders and 2) gather feedback on new design ideas. We led teams in this effort by providing them resources for empathy walks (i.e., shadowing a student for a prolonged period of time), empathy interviews (conducted with students, caregivers, and educators), and the use of site visits. In our **site visits**, we observed a day at each school, collected perspectives from students and educators, and shared our findings back with school design team members. This empathy work provided real-time data for schools to consider and encouraged them to critically reflect on the impact of current practices.

A final practice that facilitated our redesign efforts was the **honorarium** that was provided to educators who engaged in the design work. While all educators reported joining the school design team for intrinsically motivated reasons, various educators voiced appreciation for the honorarium, noting that the honorarium made them feel that their extra time was valued by both their administrators and the RMS team. Given that educators are often asked to work additional hours with no compensation, the honorarium served as an added way to appreciate the time and effort that team members gave to the project.

In the following section, we highlight the ways that these key practices supported one school in overcoming challenges and persisting in their redesign work. Again, we conclude this section with reflection questions for you to consider as you develop your own redesign efforts.

KEY PRACTICES AT LAKEWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL

Lakewood is a middle school, magnet center in SSD. The vast majority of their student population identifies as Black, and over 80% are from low-income families. Like many schools returning from Covid, Lakewood had a rocky start to the school year. Staff thought the school year would have less COVID uncertainty, fluctuation, and staff shortages than the previous year, but this wasn't the case. *"We had so many flip flops, what do you call it, flipping a pod, quarantining, um, teacher illnesses, [and] not enough staffing for us to free up the teachers to be able to have the coaching sessions."* Additionally, Lakewood struggled with a lack of connection among their design team members. *"I would say what isn't*

[THE] INITIAL THREE DAYS ACCELERATOR AS WELL AS THE QUARTERLY MEETINGS, A HIGH EMPHASIS WAS ON RESEARCH, RIGHT? SO, LIKE WE'RE NOT JUST MAKING THIS UP. THIS IS A RESEARCH BASED, THIS IS WHAT, YOU KNOW, SHOWN TO BE BEST PRACTICE, WHAT OUR SCHOLARS NEED. SO, THAT PART I ABSOLUTELY LOVE AND I THINK IT'S NECESSARY... SO, THE THREE-DAY ACCELERATOR WAS A GOOD WAY TO GET ME TO START SEEING HOW THIS WORK WOULD START IMPACTING OUR SCHOLARS AND HOW WE'RE PUTTING THAT IN THE CLASS.

working is that our middle school team is not that connected... There isn't that kind of tight knit group of people who are like, you know, like minded and working together collectively, is not there." This lack of connection led to decreased ownership, undefined school design team roles and responsibilities, and, subsequently, limited follow-through by school design team members.

Lakewood began the RMS process through **knowledge-building** activities at the Summer Accelerator. These activities explored adolescent development (e.g., developmental changes during adolescence, adolescent social, emotional, and relationship needs, and the impact of student voice initiatives on student competence, belonging, and agency) and the creation of environments that support adolescent thriving, ultimately setting foundational mindsets for the Lakewood school design team. An **honorarium** was also provided for educators involved in the RMS project. One team member reflected, *"I think the stipend kind of helps educators, like give them a little extra boost for their extra time. Because we do spend a lot of—we already spend a lot of extra time doing other things."* Educators and school staff are often requested or required to complete extra tasks without compensation. The honorarium allowed the Lakewood design team to feel like their time was valued and appreciated.

Fall **site visits and empathy work** (i.e., student surveys) revealed tension between students and educators where students did not feel that educators valued their voices or respected them. Through a combination of **learning and coaching sessions** (i.e., collaboration within and outside of Lakewood's design team), RMS coaching team pushed and encouraged Lakewood's team to reflect on this tension and develop plans to support students' immediate needs. At first, this led to conflicting opinions among Lakewood design team members on how to address the tension and associated student needs. Some members were more open to developmentally responsive practices than others which led to uncomfortable, challenging, and yet productive conversations during coaching sessions. Over time, Lakewood's design team came to view conflict and subsequent resolution as an opportunity for growth. A Lakewood design team member later reflected on this process and shared that they *"love the fact that RMS in their sessions they're pushing, um, our practice, and it forces us to be reflective."* The process wasn't always comfortable, but Lakewood trusted the RMS team and persisted through feelings of discomfort to ultimately change their own mindsets and facilitate positive changes at their school.

These positive changes started with **small, immediate steps** that the Lakewood design team took to address the needs of students. For example, in response to feedback from students during the site visits and empathy work, the school design team changed their approach to assemblies and school uniforms. One design team member reflected on this change noting, *"from that piece of data, we decided to change it, so that instead of having the assembly the fourth through eighth, we had it be sixth to eighth, have the middle schoolers come together to plan the assemblies so that it really would be for them and by them."*

RMS IN THEIR SESSIONS THEY'RE PUSHING OUR PRACTICE, AND IT FORCES US TO BE REFLECTIVE. AN EXAMPLE OF THAT WAS WHEN THEY HAD THE EMPATHY INTERVIEWS WITH OUR SCHOLARS, AND THEN THEY REVEALED THE RESULTS OF THOSE EMPATHY STUDIES. AND SO, WHEN THEY REVEALED IT TO US, YOU KNOW, AT A CERTAIN POINT, I STARTED FEELING MYSELF BECOMING KIND OF, UM, DEFENSIVE TO BE FRANK. RIGHT? BUT THAT'S THE PLACE THAT I THINK WE NEEDED. LIKE THE SCHOLARS, WHEN THEY'RE SHARING WHAT THEY'RE SHARING, IT'S NOT THAT THEY'RE TRYING TO BE... THEY'RE REALLY JUST SHARING THEIR EXPERIENCE.

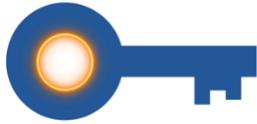
Thus, the team took immediate steps to meet students' developmental needs and honor their voices in school structures. Simultaneously, the school design team worked towards a larger prototype that more intentionally created structures and practices to integrate students' voices in their school. It was the positive feedback from students with regard to these small changes that facilitated school-wide buy-in and cultivated an interest in the larger RMS prototype. Thus, with the support of these key practices (e.g., adolescent development and equity knowledge building, design sessions, empathy work, and a push from the RMS coaching team), the Lakewood community successfully redesigned key aspects of their school and simultaneously noted important improvements.

School design team members noted that educators began taking developmental stages into consideration during their interactions with students. One team member reflected, "*Do I give them choices? Do I give them an opportunity to speak out? Or to voice out? Do I ask them how they are or do we just do the academic thing, right away?. Because it's very important too for me to build that relationship with students.*" In this way, the RMS process highlighted the importance of individual classroom-level practices that support students' development. Similarly, developmentally supportive changes began at the structural level, including the change of assemblies and a new 8th-grade uniform designed by the students themselves. Reflecting on this uniform change, one participant noted, "*When we took the data from that and we even came up with a new eighth grade uniform, they actually designed it and we have it printed and made for them. And since they have worn these uniforms, right, and they stick out, I mean the whole-, their whole personality, persona has changed, and they walk really proudly.*" Alongside these efforts, educators are supporting youth as they learn to advocate for themselves in respectful and impactful ways, not only promoting change in their schools but also providing opportunities for students to develop their own skills. An administrator at Lakewood highlighted these interactions noting:

They always want to speak up for themselves but that becomes a you don't listen to me, you don't. Okay, so now what -- how can you advocate for yourself. How can you get your point across in a positive and respectful manner in which you will be heard, because you're not going to be heard like that because we're going to shut you down. I think that has greatly changed. [The principal] and myself talk about how many student emails we have gotten this year. I mean from, I don't think the teacher is treating me right to we don't like the lunches. Can we have different snacks at school? We're going on a long field trip, it's about an hour on the bus, can we take our phones with us because what we need we need some entertainment on the bus. Most of those we granted because of the way they came.

Thus, despite the challenges that Lakewood initially faced with their RMS design work, the key practices in tandem with their growth mindset fostered more collaboration and stronger relationships amongst educators and students.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



RMS practices played a key role in Lakewood’s sustainability and progression of their redesign work. Learning sessions and the summer accelerator provided Lakewood with knowledge-building activities that helped ground them in the latest research on adolescent development (e.g., the developmental need for autonomy) and equity practices (e.g., student voice) within the middle school context. Coaching sessions held time for their work and provided a safe, facilitated space for school design team members to reflect and share their ideas. Fall site visits and empathy work were paramount in shifting the thinking of Lakewood’s design team members as they helped educators better understand the experiences and perspectives of their students. This student voice component proved to be most effective in shifting the mindsets of educators and school staff. Despite the challenges that Lakewood faced, the educators at Lakewood worked hard in collaboration with the RMS coaching team and brought about positive change for their school community. Thus, proving that although this work is not easy, the RMS process can help support schools’ redesign even in challenging circumstances.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you reflect on the Lakewood case study, consider how you might cultivate some of these key practices at your school or in your district. Might you need to partner with an organization or foster district-wide support for such initiatives?



What we wish we knew. We asked Lakewood design team members to reflect on what they would share with other teams beginning this process. The Lakewood team stressed the importance of starting with a strong grounding in the context and intentions of this work, “*this is what this is about [and] this is what we are moving towards.*” This ensures that your team is on the same page and heading in the same direction. Similarly, regular and strong communication between team members is extremely important. One team member suggested that this could be supported by making sure the team has more than one day of common prep. Finally, it is crucial that your school and school design team are open to the remaking middle school process. A school design team member shared that this openness could be encouraged by sharing the relevancy of this work within the particular context of your school and regularly spotlighting the success and effectiveness of the RMS process at your school.

Reflection Questions.

1. Consider **knowledge-building resources and partnerships** at your school.
 - a. What knowledge-building resources or partnerships do you already have available?
 - b. How might you better align them to the work of redesigning your middle school?
2. Consider how **learning and coaching sessions** could look at your school.
 - a. Who could help facilitate them?
 - b. How could they be structured within or outside of your school day?
3. Consider the **purpose and potential impact of empathy work** at your school.
 - a. Do you have structures in place to garner student input (e.g., student surveys)?

- i. If not, how could these be developed at your school to learn more about your students' experiences and perspectives?
 - ii. If so, are you hearing from all of your students? How could you restructure them to ensure all voices have an opportunity to share?
4. Consider *other supports* that you could offer your design team.
 - a. Is there anything you could offer your school design team members to help them feel like their time is valued and appreciated (e.g., honorarium, coverage for learning, or coaching sessions)?

CHALLENGES



REMAKING
MIDDLE
SCHOOL

Challenges are an inherent part of any type of change. In school redesign efforts, there are a variety of challenges that arise when working in complex and multifaceted school contexts. Throughout our experience working with middle schools, four key challenges regularly arose across the schools. First, ***time and scheduling*** was a persistent issue faced across school sites. Educators are overworked and rarely have enough time to commit to maintaining school structures, much less redesigning them. Due to this, we often faced difficulty when trying to schedule regular coaching meeting times and ensuring that teams had enough time to engage in thoughtful reflection and brainstorming. However, using the aforementioned key practices, and the steps for sustainability detailed below, schools were able to overcome this challenge and move design projects forward.

Secondly, garnering ***school-wide buy-in*** arose as another challenge that school design teams faced. While educators who participated on the RMS teams were excited and ready to partake in the new initiative, participants voiced that some educators in their schools were cautious to jump into another school-wide initiative. This caution led to a lack of school-wide buy-in, which created difficulties when attempting to implement new developmentally supportive strategies. As we will see in the school described below, school design team dynamics and disconnectedness can additionally negatively impact school-wide buy-in.

Relatedly, the third challenge that surfaced during the design process was ***inviting and balancing student voice and agency***. The empathy work during the RMS process is designed to engage stakeholder voices, including students. However, while our schools engaged in this work, they struggled to find a balance between pre-existing structures and authentically integrating students' voices into school structures in ways that provided them with autonomy. Consequently, student-led initiatives were slower to be adopted and, in many cases, more controversial across school communities.

A fourth challenge that surfaced during the design process was ***undefined design team roles and responsibilities***. Undefined roles limited design team members' follow-through, led to confusion around their next steps, and ultimately slowed down the progress of their design projects.

Finally, the ***pacing of the design experience*** served as a final challenge to the RMS initiative. The Liberatory Design Model begins with notice, reflect, empathize and ideate all before implementation can be realized. However, schools are fast-paced, and RMS teams were eager to jump to the implementation of their new ideas without seeking feedback from stakeholders. This often left the process feeling slow in the first few months.

CHALLENGES AT PACIFIC GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Pacific Grove is a public middle school that is located in a large, urban school district and serves a high percentage of minority students from low-income communities. This past school year was rooted in instability generated by COVID-19 and staff changes. The evolving nature of COVID-19 and CDC/school district protocols and recommendations proved to be a large challenge to the Pacific Grove school community. In addition to the COVID-19 challenges, Pacific Grove had two primary teachers leave during the school year, which “*intensified this year already. We get our footing and then having to figure something else out.*” The principal of Pacific Grove Academy was in her first year, which prompted some natural changes (e.g., different procedures, an adjustment in school culture, and increased pressure for academic outcomes).

" I THINK COVID HAS BEEN LIKE PROBABLY THE BIGGEST FACTOR IN THE CHALLENGE... WE'RE LOSING TIME EVERYWHERE, THE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES ARE PRIORITIZED, AND THAT CAN LEAD TO YOU KNOW JUST, MORE LIKE, PUNITIVE THINGS. SO GET OUT OF CLASS, LIKE IT'S FULL IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION, LIKE YELLING, FRUSTRATION, YOU KNOW. SO I THINK THEY'RE LIKE ARE EFFORTS BEING MADE, BUT JUST WITH EVERYTHING KIND OF UP IN THE AIR RIGHT NOW MAKES THEM MORE DIFFICULT TO SYSTEMATIZED OR MAINTAIN."

One school design team member reflected, *"This is her first year as a principal, so everything was kind of like remaking, not just new school, but like just kind of trying to change the rules and just establish like a different culture in the building."* Additionally, the principal took it upon herself to lead the school design team, thereby intentionally recommending school personnel for this team.

The Pacific Grove Academy school design team was made up of a diverse group of individuals (i.e., resource staff member, Community Partner, principal, school counselor, and three teachers). The principal hand-selected these individuals and hoped that the Design Lab experiences would encourage educator mindset shifts and lead to deeper, more positive relationships with students. A school design team member described the principal's participation in the design work to be the difference maker, *"Yeah, I think it was her, my Principal...she was [the] difference maker...I give all the credit to her... They participated in all the sessions, provided feedback, they were like really involved in the process."* However, these principal-led design efforts had their drawbacks, *"I guess in retrospect...on our team, our Principal forwarded the work and held the responsibility of the work, and I think ideally it would have been someone else. I think that maybe would have increased overall participation if it wasn't coming from the Principal."* Pacific Grove Academy's school design team lacked **defined roles** which limited their follow-through on their RMS design project. Another school design team reflected, *"So every time we came to work on it, it was like, we hadn't done anything since the last time; we kind of had to be reminded of all the other stuff."*

Another challenge the Pacific Grove Academy school design team struggled with was **time and scheduling**. One school design team member reflected, *"it's a tough-tough thing because I don't think like an hour is really enough time to meaningfully dig into the work but also, the restraints of the actual school day."* In addition to principal leadership affecting school-wide buy-in, there were strained relationships between new and veteran teachers, which not only impacted **school-wide buy-in** but also created a disagreement between determining an appropriate **balance for student voice and agency**. One school design team member discussed this tension, noting: *"I think it's just the veteran staff... It's kind of like the saying like it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. It's like this has been working. We do this, we're strict with them. We tell them this, we speak to them like this, and not really realizing like this generation of kids have been through everything, literally. What used to work is not working."* In this way, internal staff dynamics slowed the pace of design work, given that not everyone was on board with the student voice initiatives.

School design team members also voiced that the **pacing of the design experiences** was a challenge given their school's results-oriented climate and their lack of educator capacity, which inhibited their energy around design thinking.

WHAT EXCITES ME THE MOST IS WHAT I'VE ALREADY STARTED TO OBSERVE.... SOMETHING SO SIMPLE THAT CAME OUT OF THIS PROCESS WAS WE STARTED DOING AFTERNOON ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND LIKE LETTING THE STUDENTS FROM THE STUDENT VOICE COMMITTEE LEAD THE AFTER SCHOOL ANNOUNCEMENTS. IF YOU'RE AROUND THE OFFICE AT THAT TIME, LIKE YOU SEE A STUDENT IS BUBBLY WALKING DOWN THE HALLWAY, SUPER EXCITED, TO LIKE GIVE... SO JUST LIKE THE WAYS THAT I'M ALREADY SEEING THAT, THE SPACES ARE CREATING JOY, LIKE STUDENTS ARE FEELING PRIDE AROUND SEEING CERTAIN SUGGESTIONS OF THEIRS COMING TO FRUITION.

For example, one school design team member shared, *“I think it's just that it's messy, and you're outcome-oriented. And I think when you're in a high-stress situation, you're like, vying for time too.”* Thus, the struggle for time and the results-oriented nature of the school inhibited the school design team's ability to ideate and test innovative solutions to their school-level challenges.

Despite the challenges that Pacific Grove Academy and its school design team faced, they still made school and educator-level changes through the Design Lab that led to positive shifts in students and educators. For example, educators experienced mindset shifts in which they became open to hearing and seeking out students' perspectives on a regular basis. One school design team member reflected, *“I think [we are] much more willing or open to hear their perspective, just like having that open mind without jumping to the defense.”* As evidenced, these mindset shifts led to changes in educator practices that ultimately fostered stronger relationships and collaboration between educators and students. Practices at the school level also began to change as student voice became ingrained into the school processes and culture (e.g., student voice committee, processes for regularly seeking student input). Participants reflected that these complementary initiatives created a more equitable school culture: *“I think the process impacted equity... by just like creating a space to have the conversations that kind of like facilitated us trying some things out to make more equitable learning spaces for sure.”* Subsequently, students began to take ownership over these opportunities, and educators even noticed changes in students' behaviors as their voices were honored. School design team members highlighted how *“kids are a lot more calm”* and that there are *“not as many conflicts with students.”* Thus, amidst challenges experienced throughout the Design Lab, the Pacific Grove school design team was able to implement changes that fostered a true culture shift at their school.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Challenges within the redesign work include limited follow-through, time and scheduling, school-wide buy-in, balancing student voice and agency, and the pacing of the design experience. However, despite these challenges, our partnering schools developed projects through the redesign process that shifted educator mindsets, had an impact on their students, and influenced the overall school. If you and your school are planning on entering the redesign process, consider how you could help mitigate the challenges described above at your own school.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you reflect on the Pacific Grove case study, consider what challenges your school team might face and how you might overcome them.

What we wish we knew. We asked Pacific Grove Academy’s school design team to reflect on recommendations they would share with other teams and schools about to begin this process. They recommended that school design teams establish a clear and realistic vision for the redesign process. This vision can be supported through strong accountability structures and a school design team that includes various school stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, counselors, administration, social workers, parents), has time and capacity for this work, and is large enough to evenly divide the workload. Pacific Grove Academy’s school design team also recommended “starting with the kids.” Begin the design process by considering how students can be involved in the process and voice their opinions from the beginning.



Reflection Questions.

1. Think about the state of the current culture and climate at your school.
 - a. Are some of the unstable circumstances described above present at your school? Considering these factors, what structures could you implement to support your redesign efforts?
 - b. Does your school have a results-oriented climate? Or low educator capacity? If so, how could you help support the school design team's feelings about the *pacing of the design experience*?
2. Reflect on the defined roles and challenges discussed above.
 - a. What could your school design team *roles and responsibilities* look like to support clear and distinct expectations among your school design team?
3. Think about your school’s *time and schedule*.
 - a. Could your school design team meetings fit within your school day, or would they need to be scheduled outside of school? What structures need to be in place to help support the time your school design team will need to complete this work?
4. Reflect on your staff dynamic.
 - a. How might this dynamic impact *school buy-in* of this work?
5. Think about the importance of *student voice and agency* in middle school.
 - a. How could you elicit student feedback and voice at the start of your redesign process?
 - b. How could you support student agency in your school and within your design projects?

SUSTAINABILITY



SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX



Sustainability is an important consideration even from the start of school redesign. Unfortunately, in large organizations, many efforts start strong and then lose momentum as new initiatives and pressing needs arise. Consequently, we advocate that beginning redesign work with a clear plan for sustainability is essential. In this section, we detail the four key considerations for sustainability in school redesign efforts. To begin, and as described in the first case study, a ***clear vision*** led by strong and consistent ***leadership*** is essential to maintaining progress and commitment to school redesign.

Secondly, school design teams aiming for sustainability should develop a plan to cultivate school-wide buy-in. As demonstrated in the last case study, school-wide buy in is a challenge that is not unique to redesign initiatives. However, when successfully managed, this type of buy-in allows the redesign initiative to be enveloped into school structures, making it a normal part of the school's culture and climate. This is most easily facilitated in a ***school culture and climate*** that is open-minded and improvement-oriented, thus willing to implement new ideas. When this is achieved, efforts are less intensive, given that they are more seamlessly integrated into the everyday functioning of the school. In this case study, we highlight steps that Summit Institute took that led to a ***snowball effect*** in achieving this type of school-wide buy-in.

Finally, ***accountability*** is important at all stages of a redesign but takes on a more vital role when schools are moving into long-term sustainability efforts. Across our school teams, educators regularly reported that RMS was beneficial to them because the structure of the program ensured that they stuck to their plans and created space for their redesign project. However, accountability can be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as 1) working with a redesign program (i.e., RMS) that regularly checks in; 2) partnering with a cohort of schools that regularly meets to discuss redesign efforts and help each other move forward; or 3) having a leader on your school design team to ensure the work maintains its pace, rigor, and importance. Regardless of how your school plans to approach it, setting goals and plans for accountability efforts from the beginning was a regularly suggested practice across our school teams.

SUSTAINABILITY AT SUMMIT MIDDLE SCHOOL

The Summit is a public middle school located in a large urban district serving a diverse population of students. Summit Institute is a well-staffed school with consistent leadership that occasionally experiences turnover in staffing. Summit Institute is currently in their third year of the RMS Design Lab, and the team has thought carefully about the sustainability of their initiatives. Here, we detail some key facilitators to the initiation and sustainability of their work over time. For one, school design team members at Summit Institute share a well defined equity concern within their school. During their first year of the Design Lab, they noted disproportionality in their discipline data, with 8th-grade boys being disciplined at higher rates than all other students. The identification of these inequities supported their development of a ***clear vision*** around what middle school redesign might look like for their school. Further, as the team progressed through the Design Lab, they jointly experienced an “aha moment” during a learning session which caused them to reflect that they “*can make one of two conclusions, either that there's somethings inherently wrong with middle school boys or that there is something with the way that we're doing school that's not working for that population.*” In response to this “aha moment”, educators at Summit Institute began to rally around how they might redesign pre-existing school structures, policies, and environments to better integrate the voices and perspectives of students to cultivate better learning environments for all students.

I THINK WE ARE TRYING TO INFUSE STUDENT VOICE INTO EVERYTHING THAT WE DO AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL....REALLY, I THINK A LOT OF IT JUST CENTERS BACK AROUND LIKE STUDENT VOICE AND JUST TRYING TO SEE WHERE WE CAN, IN WHATEVER WE DO, NOT LIKE ...NOT NECESSARILY LIKE DOING SOMETHING NEW, BUT WITHIN THE CURRENT STRUCTURES THAT WE'RE DOING, THAT WE HAVE IN SCHOOL, SEEING WAYS TO INCLUDE STUDENTS.

Given the school's *open-minded and improvement-oriented school culture and climate*, this integration of student voice came naturally to the team. Reflecting on their school culture, one school design team member noted, *"I think everybody wants to do the best they can for the students... I also think that one strength is that we just recognized that... for a long time we weren't serving middle school boys very well. So I think having the ability to say that as a school that we're not doing it well, and trying to fix it, or trying to figure out a different way, is important."* The RMS coaching team began this work by leaning into empathy interviews to capture the perspectives of school stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, and non-classroom educators such as lunch staff and recess monitors). These empathy efforts, coupled with strong data practices and regular discussions of RMS efforts at staff meetings, facilitated school staff buy-in and provided opportunities to gather feedback and continue to iterate on the redesign of structures. Ultimately, these practices implemented by the RMS coaching team fostered staff buy-in in ways that encouraged educators to implement small-scale student voice initiatives.

Over time, these small-scale initiatives led to a *snowball effect* that impacted their entire school community. For example, students were encouraged to regularly voice their suggestions and concerns, which in turn led to multiple school-level changes (e.g., dress code changes, updated recess equipment, and student-led changes to discipline policies). Additionally, educators began thinking about and interacting with their students in different ways leading to a shift in their mindsets around students. The assistant principal noted that they were *"surprised by how quickly asking a couple of our more challenging students their perspective on something was going to have a positive impact on the relationship between me and them, between them and their other teachers."* This mindset shift impacted disciplinary interactions leading typically overlooked students to *"be given chances to try to do better and rising to that challenge, versus being penalized and"* further *"marginalized."* These initial successes enhanced the Summit Institute school design team's self-efficacy and the school community's buy-in, which helped support Summit Institute's sustainability in the RMS work.

Leadership was another important facilitator of sustainability at Summit Institute. Sam, the school principal, served as a key leader in the RMS initiative. Through her clear vision for the school, Sam was able to move the project forward in ways that complemented existing structures. Sam and her school design team members noted that she took on the burden of the RMS work in the first two years, which allowed the team to quickly implement key strategies to support student voice. However, she is now thinking about ways to distribute this work across the team moving forward, as the current structure creates a complicated juxtaposition between the collaborative nature of the school design team and the power dynamics of a principal-led initiative.

I DO FEEL LIKE SOMETIMES THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS DO A REALLY GOOD JOB OF LIKE ELICITING FEEDBACK AND HAVING DISCUSSIONS ABOUT FEEDBACK. ... IT CAN OFTEN END UP BEING DONE IN A WAY WHERE LIKE, THE ENDPOINT IS STILL TO DO WHAT THE ADMINISTRATORS THINK IS THE CORRECT OR BEST THING TO DO....LIKE THE SPECIFIC STEPS THAT WE TOOK, I THINK ALL OF THEM WERE STEPS THAT HAD BEEN PUT FORWARD BY ADMINISTRATION... SO I GUESS I WOULD SAY THAT THERE IS A LOT OF DISCUSSION AND COLLABORATION AND CONSENSUS BUILDING, BUT IT'S OFTEN TO BUILD A CONSENSUS AROUND THE ADMINISTRATORS VISION AS OPPOSED TO KIND OF COLLABORATIVELY COMING UP WITH A VISION."

Commenting on this juxtaposition, Sam noted, *“that is where our team has suffered... I am happy to do the work, and... I'll do all these things and facilitate the time in the schedule for these things to happen, but it means, it's at the expense of my teachers having the concerted work time to own the work and be the deliverer of that information.”* Similarly, one school design team member reflects on this noting that the RMS team would often *“build a consensus around the administrators vision as opposed to kind of collaboratively coming up with a vision.”* Together, these reflections demonstrate that while Sam’s strong leadership was beneficial in the progression and sustainability of Summit Institute’s work, the principal-led nature of the work did limit teacher and staff buy-in.

Finally, **accountability** supported Summit Institute’s sustainability and their desire to continue to build out their initiatives. One school design team member reflected, *“I think it is really helpful to have y'all from the outside kind of helping us to help her to keep us in check and keep us on track.”* This accountability took form in the RMS coaching team and their extensive support, the effective coaching facilitation, and the delicate balance between implementing the RMS framework while allowing for school autonomy and flexibility. In tandem, the Summit Institute and RMS coaching teams participated in true collaboration, which included providing honest feedback and timely responding to feedback from one another. This strong collaboration between both teams helped shape effective and sustainable RMS processes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Sustainability for redesign efforts can be supported through strong leadership, a clear vision, accountability, and an open-minded school climate/culture. Additionally, at Summit Institute, sustainability was supported through a snowball effect of small-scale initiatives that led to school-wide, system changes.

Consistent reflection on the impacts of your redesign efforts could help support a snowball effect at your school, thereby increasing school-wide-buy and educator/student support.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you reflect on the Summit Institute case study, think about how these sustainability practices could live at your school.

What we wish we knew. Summit Institute reflected on what they wished they had known before starting the RMS design process and shared this wisdom to help support other schools’ sustainability of this work. According to Summit Institute, school design team members need to be grounded under a shared vision, and a school’s design team should have the chance



to provide feedback on this shared vision and its subsequent path, throughout the process. Summit Institute design team members also shared that it is important for your school design team to know your school community (i.e., its needs, strengths, and weaknesses). Finally, Summit Institute wanted other schools to know that the redesign work is difficult and requires collaboration, consistency, time, and introspection.

Reflection Questions.

1. Consider **leadership** at your school.
 - a. Who is someone that could develop a clear vision for the redesign of your school?
 - b. Does that person have the capacity to lead a school team through the redesign process?
 - c. How could your school offer support to this individual?
2. Consider your school's current **climate and culture**.
 - a. What is your school's current climate and culture?
 - b. How could this help strengthen redesign efforts at your school?
 - c. What challenges could this create in the redesign efforts at your school?
 - d. How can your team anticipate and support these potential challenges?
3. Consider **accountability** at your school.
 - a. What could accountability look like at your school? How will your school ensure that the design work stays on track?
 - b. What school structures could be used or added to support multiple levels of accountability for your school team?

PUTTING DESIGN INTO PRACTICE



In this section, we highlight key takeaways for educational stakeholders at various levels (e.g., district level, school level, classroom level). To begin this work, educators should engage in deep reflection using the reflection questions at the end of each case study topic. After spending time in critical reflection, these action recommendations are a great next step towards engaging in school redesign.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Efforts to redesign school structures are nearly impossible without district support. Thus, district leadership, including superintendents, Equity Officers, school board members, and other central office staff, should support school-wide redesign efforts, both in word and in action. This support can take shape through verbal and written commitments, supporting schools undergoing redesign journeys, financial support and stipends for the additional training associated with redesign efforts, and lightened restrictions to allow for more school-level flexibility in policies and practices. Support of this sort provides the platform for principals to feel comfortable committing to undertaking the design process. The following are recommendations that district leaders can adopt to support their schools.

- Support schools in their district (both verbally and in writing) interested in undertaking redesign efforts.
- Consider partnering at the district level with expert design partners to provide schools with access to redesign facilitators.
- Consider partnering at the district level with university or organizational researchers to help support redesign efforts that incorporate developmental science research and theories.
- Identify and prioritize schools who 1) have the capacity to undertake redesign efforts and 2) may lack access to similar supports and trainings.
- Support the sustainability of these efforts, particularly during leadership turnover, to ensure continuity of support to students.
- Provide schools with financial support and stipends for the costs associated with redesign (e.g., paying school design team members for extra efforts, providing stipends for empathy work participants, etc.)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Strong, committed school leadership, school-wide buy-in, and an open-minded, improvement-oriented school climate and culture that normalize the redesign initiative are essential to successful school redesign. School leaders, including principals, assistant principals, deans of students, school counselor and special education coordinators, and other members of the school leadership team should be committed, “bought-in,” and open-minded regarding the redesign initiative. School leadership can support redesign initiatives through the following efforts:

- Adopt a clear vision regarding the redesign process and outcome.
- Serve as a committed leader or member of the school design team.
- Identify a prosocial, strong, committed leader to facilitate the redesign process and lead the school design team.
- Elicit school-wide buy-in by cultivating an open-minded, improvement-oriented school culture and climate that normalize the redesign initiative.
- Provide opportunities for the school design team to learn about adolescent development and support their creation of research-based redesign projects.

- Be familiar with school constituents (e.g., students, teachers, staff) and provide opportunities to gain insight into their perspectives and vision for school redesign. For example, be intentional about mindfully listening to diverse student voices; support student agency.
- Provide dedicated times for the school design team to meet.
- Express appreciation for the school design team by compensating and/or acknowledging them for their dedication and hard work.
- Provide opportunities for the school design team to share relevancy of the redesign work and spotlight successes, accomplishments, and effectiveness of the redesign process.
- Cultivate partnerships with school design teams at other schools both at the same and more advanced levels of the redesign process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS/STAFF

Educators and staff are key playmakers in remaking middle school design efforts. They are often working directly with students, families, administration, other educators, and district leaders to enact, explain, and promote school redesign projects. Additionally, they serve on school design teams to help develop initiatives that positively impact their students, school, and community at large. Educators and staff involved in the redesign process can include teachers, school counselors, librarians, and cafeteria and maintenance staff. The following are recommendations for educators and staff partnering with their school community to begin or continue school-wide redesign efforts.

- Support the development of a school design team by recruiting school personnel with different job descriptions to help form a truly diverse school design team.
- Leverage your unique position within the school to seek and gain parent, student, and community members' perspectives on redesign efforts.
- Consider adolescent development and equity while developing redesign projects that work to support the current challenges and opportunities faced by your students and school community.
- Develop school design team procedures that prioritize accountability, time, and consistency while being mindful of the scheduling and personnel limitations specific to your design team and school.
- Directly support the implementation of the redesign projects by identifying action steps that link to concrete outcomes.
- Support the development of a strong and positive school design team culture and climate.
- Monitor redesign meetings and stakeholder input to make sure that all voices are being heard and all needs are being met.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILY & COMMUNITY MEMBERS

School redesign efforts take a village. Thus, it is important that community stakeholders take an active role in supporting school redesign. These community stakeholders include parents/guardians, families, community-based organizations (CBO), local faith-based organizations, local funders, and community organizers. While each of these individuals play a unique role in school redesign efforts, they all may provide valuable input on community / student needs and assets, as well as lend their expertise, services, and financial resources to support robust efforts to develop more developmentally appropriate and equitable school contexts. See the following recommendations for how you might partner with the school community to support their redesign work.

- School-based CBO or program leaders should consider participating on school design teams to provide vital insights into students’ out-of-school experiences and, where appropriate, align those experiences with the school’s redesign efforts.
- Parents/guardians/family members should consider participating in interviews and focus groups when school design teams are conducting empathy work to share their expertise on students in family structures.
- Local funders should consider ways to fund / support school design team initiatives, particularly in communities with under-resourced schools.
- Community stakeholders should consider how they might volunteer their hours and expertise to provide support, training (e.g., developmental science: evidence-based principals of adolescent development), and programming to students and staff.
- Local CBOs, faith-based organizations, and community organizers should provide insights about how out-of-school supports can promote school-day redesign efforts.
- All family and community members should rally behind schools engaging in this work, providing encouragement and support, celebrating successes, and providing patience and understanding during challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH & DESIGN PARTNERS

Design partners support schools throughout the implementation and evaluation of the redesign process. These partners include coaches, researchers, content experts, funders, and organizers that help to build local capacity and contribute to the larger literature base of school design efforts. For example, coaches help schools establish design team operating procedures and apply design thinking and implementation skills; content experts help translate evidence-based knowledge to the local context; and researchers collaborate with school design teams to solidify their data-driven decision making processes and to generalize findings to other settings. While the specific roles of diverse partners may vary, all partners play an important role in working with schools to develop policies, practices, and resources that support design work. The following are recommendations for research and design partners collaborating with schools on the redesign process.

- Foster a sense of trust and ownership among school design team members by creating space for open dialogue and balancing directive and nondirective approaches to facilitation.
- Provide school teams with foundational and actionable knowledge about developmental science and evidence-based educational practices that are relevant to their local context.
- Engage with the larger school community of design teams by conducting site visits, focus groups, and interviews – be sure to summarize your observations and findings and provide the feedback to school design teams.
- Work with schools to develop accountability systems that facilitate the implementation of their design projects.
- Encourage and challenge schools to maintain an equity lens throughout redesign efforts.
- Establish learning communities among schools engaging in similar redesign efforts.
- Clarifying expectations at the start, identifying action steps, and linking actions to outcomes.
- Ensure funding mechanisms include monetary compensations for school design team members to demonstrate the value of their time and contributions.



CONCLUSION



These case studies each provide real examples of middle schools engaged in developmentally focused redesign efforts. The Liberatory Design framework was a central component of the redesign process and allowed schools to consider equity and adolescent development when redesigning school procedures and structures. Within our findings, teaming, key practices, challenges, and sustainability arose as four key themes. The school design team members formed a community whose dynamics became an important indicator of the effectiveness and ultimate success in redesign efforts. Additionally, many design schools had a team leader who worked to delineate roles and responsibilities across design team members. These teaming practices were crucial in successfully developing and implementing the remaking middle school projects.

The RMS practices grounded design team members in the latest research on adolescent development and equity practices within the middle school context. Additionally, coaching sessions provided schools with a safe and consistent space to continue their redesign efforts. Finally, the flexibility the RMS coaching team offered helped educators feel supported during a particularly tumultuous time in teaching.

School systems' complexity formed several notable challenges to successfully implementing redesign projects. These challenges included: limited follow-through, time and scheduling, school-wide buy-in, balancing student voice and agency, and the pacing of the design experience; however, despite these challenges, our schools saw positive impacts through their redesign projects. At the same time, strong leadership, a clear vision, accountability, and an open-minded school climate/culture strengthened school redesign teams' sustainability and helped redesign efforts continue throughout the school year.

Through the redesign work, we have learned that school redesign is complex, requires school-wide support, and committed leadership. However, efforts of this sort have the potential to significantly improve student and educator experiences in schools. These case studies are designed to support your reflection, planning, and engagement in redesign efforts within your own educational organization. We hope that you will rely on them as a resource to your work. Additional resources can be found in the attached appendices and at our [Remaking Middle Schools website](#).

APPENDIX



UNIVERSITY
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YOUTH-NEX





Remaking Middle School Empathy Toolkit

Please use this toolkit and the associated resources to think through how your team will engage in empathy work. There are various ideas/options here so select the tools that make the most sense for your team.

Options for Empathy work:

1. [Student Empathy Interview Template](#) -- Your team may consider conducting informal interviews with students. You may also consider pulling together a group of students in a Town hall or focus group type setting to conduct this empathy interview. When selecting students, please be mindful of which voices you have / have not heard. We want diversity in the student voices that we hear.
2. [Adult Empathy Interview Template](#) -- Educators, community members, and parents are other key personnel who are impacted by our redesign efforts. Your team may consider using this template to conduct some empathy interviews with these stakeholders. Similar to student interviews, your team may consider pulling together a group of adult stakeholders in a Town hall or focus group type setting to conduct this empathy interview.
3. [Shadowing a Student](#) -- Some team members may choose to shadow a student for a day using this protocol. This shadowing is likely most easily done by a counselor or non-teaching staff.
4. [Survey Template](#) -- Your team might be at a place where it makes sense to gather a wide range of more broad perspectives on your HMW/equity area. In that case, please use this template as a starting point for developing a survey to send out to your students, educators, parents, or other community members.
5. [Sharing Data with Students](#) -- Viewing data is a powerful tool when considering students' experiences. Though it is not a common practice, this empathy work is a prime opportunity to share data with students to hear their perspectives on key issues that the data is illuminating. This provides an opportunity to learn about consistencies/discrepancies in students' lived experiences and the experiences that are documented through surveys/data reports. If this is of interest to your team, gather a group of diverse students and use this tool as a resource to guide the data conversation. Reach out to a coach if you need support with data organization and presentation.
6. [Mid-year Empathy Interviews / Site Visits](#) -- After your team has started to work with your HMW statement and/or empathy area, we encourage you to pause and gather feedback from the stakeholders in your school. Use these tools to help that intentional feedback gathering with both students and adult stakeholders.

For other empathy ideas, check out these resources:

- [Get to know your students](#)
- [Tools for Change](#)

Empathy Plan

Adopted from [*IDEO Design Thinking for Educators*](#)

⇒ As you seek to learn more about your design challenge, who do you want to talk to and learn from? Think of at least three different “users” or sources of inspiration. Be sure to engage a variety of experience, ethnicity, gender, etc.

	User Type (e.g., 6th grade students, math teachers, 8th grade families, students with high attendance rates, community partners)	Why is it important that you talk to and learn from this user?
1		
2		
3		

⇒ Thinking about the various Empathy methods listed above, how will you engage each user type? You might use a different method for each user or not.

	User Type	What empathy method will you use to talk to and learn from this user? (e.g., interviews, data talk, shadowing, survey, etc.)
1		
2		
3		

⇒ What are your next steps for each Empathy method? Note specific next steps for each method below.

Empathy Method	Team Coordinator	List your specific next steps.	Completion Date