REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

REMAKING MIDDLE SCHOOL

Case Studies in Brief

CHALLENGES

http://RemakingMiddleSchool.org

UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA | SCHOOL of EDUCATION and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX

View the full report at: http://education.virginia.edu/Youth-Nex/RMS/DesignLab

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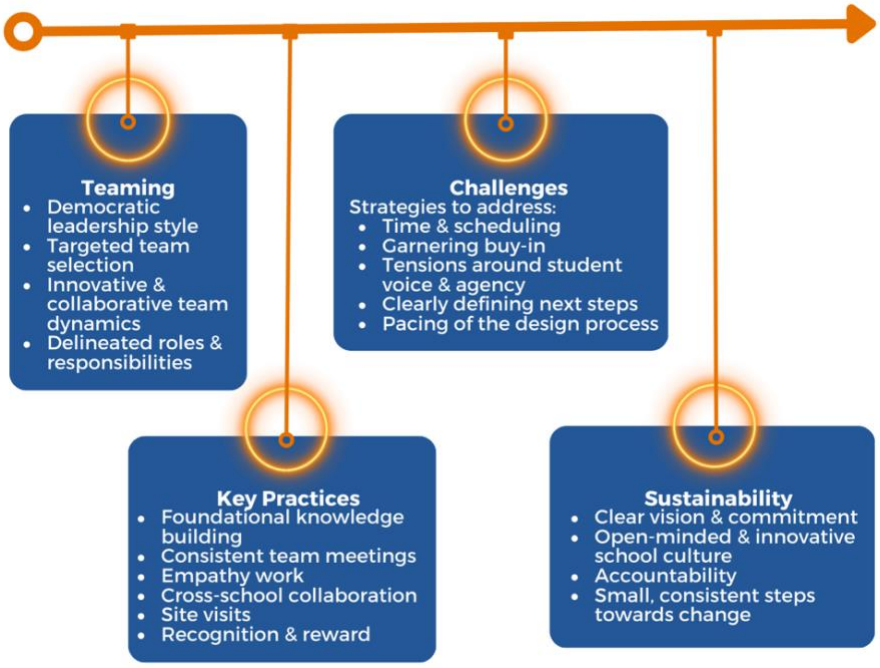
Remaking Middle Schools is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education. Through this initiative, the Remaking Middle School design labs partnered with schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) to reimagine school structures and practices that support adolescent development and address equity concerns. The RMS design lab used a host of supports and empathy practices (*detailed in the full report*) to ground and support teams in the liberatory design framework and current developmental science research. In the full report, we highlight **four case studies** from partnering schools to demonstrate key facets of the RMS design lab experience:

- 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.



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.

CHALLENGES

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.

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.

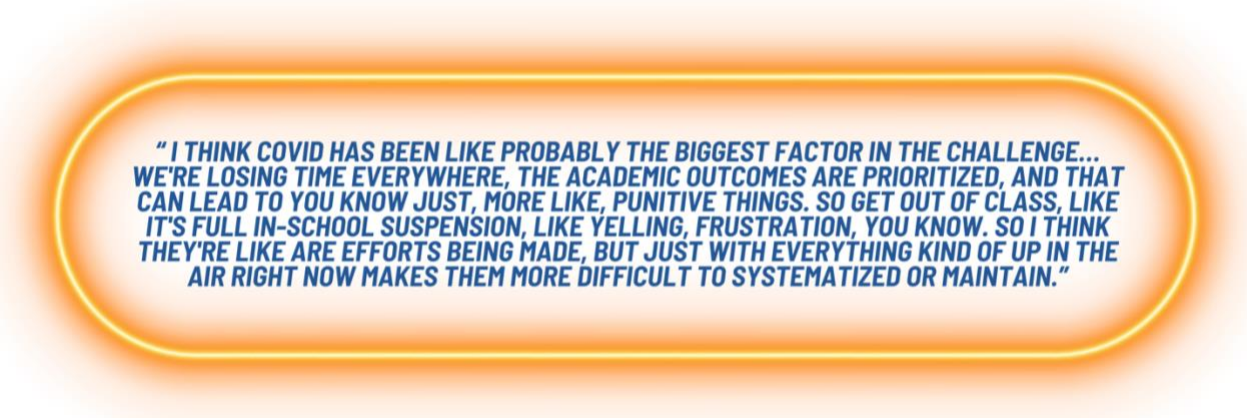
Relatedly, the third challenge that surfaced during the design process was ***inviting and balancing student voice and agency***. The empathy work during the RMS process is designed to engage stakeholder voices, including students. However, while our schools engaged in this work, they struggled to find 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).



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.

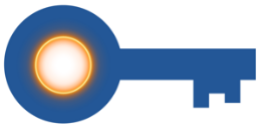
School design team members also voiced that the ***pacing of the design experiences*** was a challenge given their school's results-oriented climate and their lack of educator capacity, which inhibited their energy around design thinking.

> 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?