

REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL SPACES



Case Studies in Brief

KEY PRACTICES



<http://RemakingMiddleSchool.org>



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YOUTH-NEX

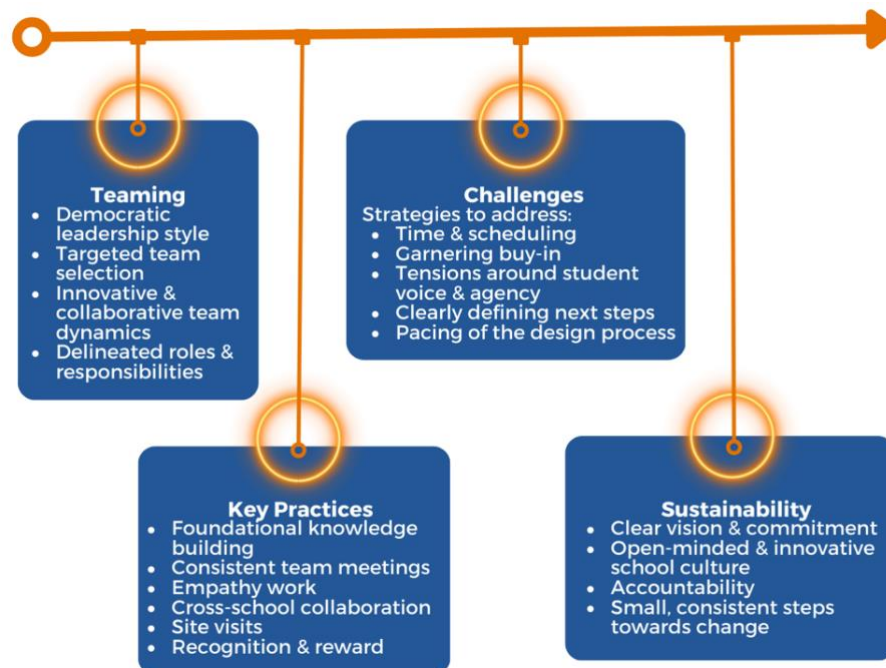
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Remaking Middle Schools is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education. Through this initiative, the Remaking Middle School design labs partnered with schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) to 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.

KEY PRACTICES

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.

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.

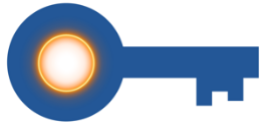
Thus, the team took immediate steps to meet students' developmental needs and honor their voices in school structures. Simultaneously, the school design team worked towards a larger prototype that more intentionally created structures and practices to integrate students' voices in their school. It was 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)?