REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

REMAKING MIDDLE SCHOOL

Case Studies in Brief

SUSTAINABILITY

http://RemakingMiddleSchool.org

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

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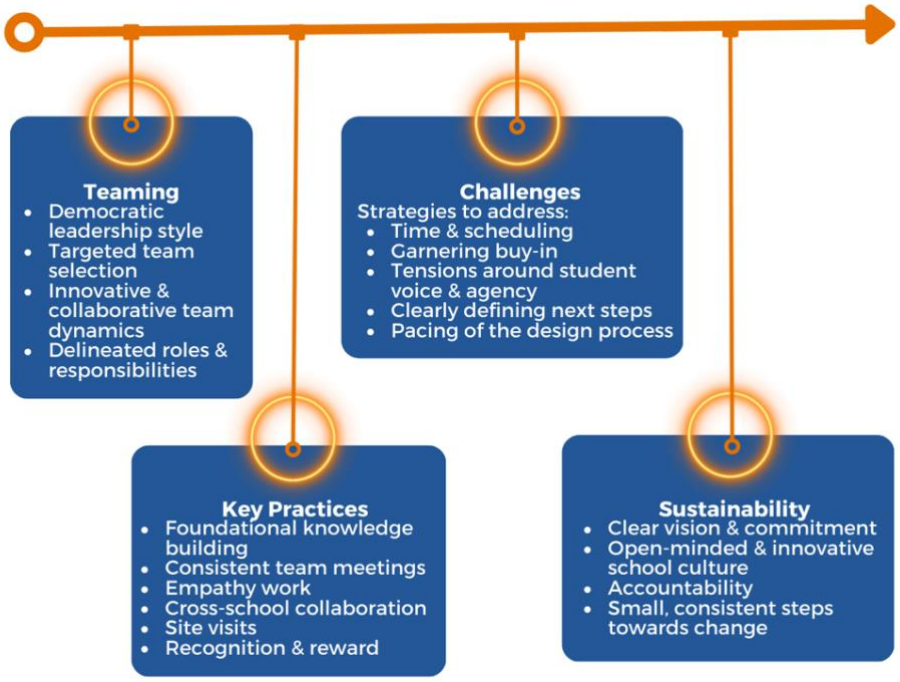
Remaking Middle Schools is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education. Through this initiative, the Remaking Middle School design labs partnered with schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) to reimagine school structures and practices that support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

SUSTAINABILITY

The fourth 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.

SUSTAINABILITY

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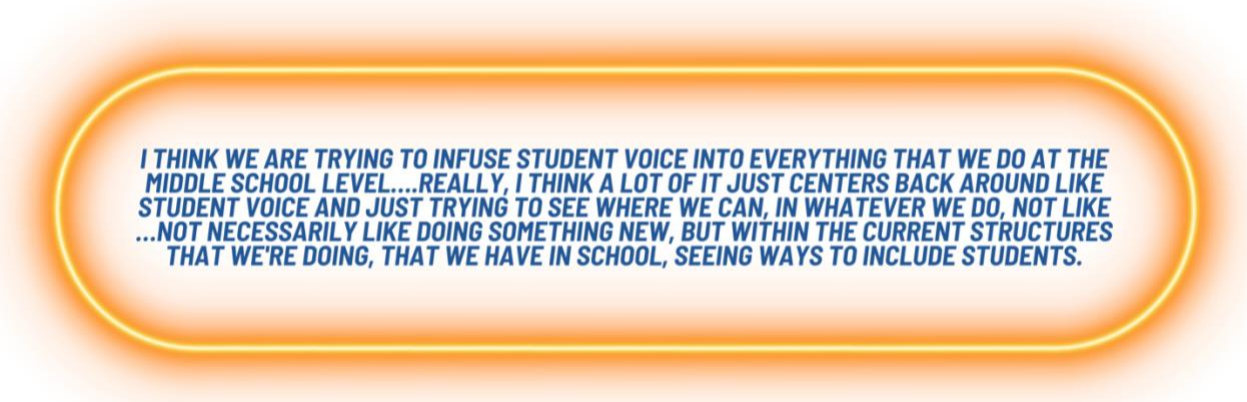
Sustainability is an important consideration even from the start of school redesign. Unfortunately, in large organizations, many efforts start strong and then lose momentum as new initiatives and pressing needs arise. Consequently, we advocate that beginning redesign work with a clear plan for sustainability 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

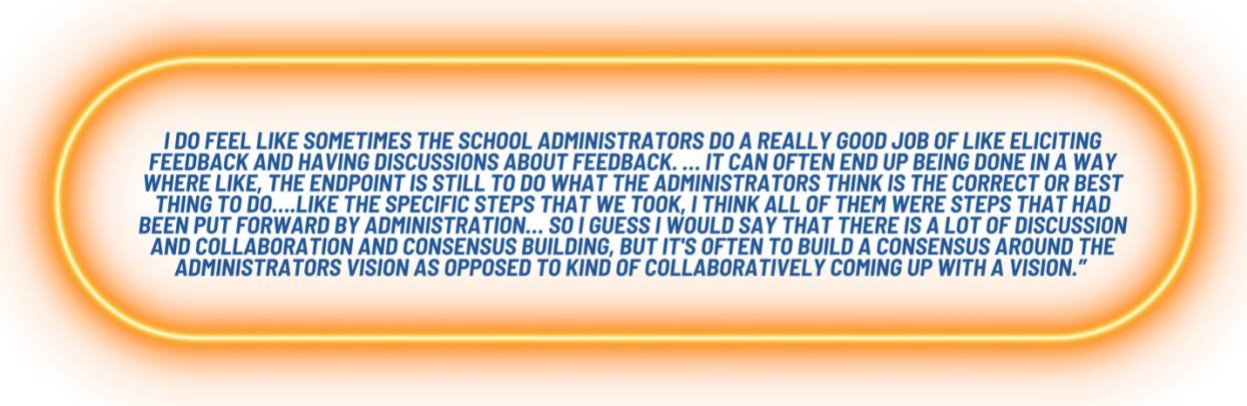
The Summit is a public middle school located in a large urban district serving a diverse population of students. Summit Institute is a well-staffed school with consistent leadership that occasionally experiences turnover in staffing. Summit Institute is currently in their third year of the RMS Design 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.



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.

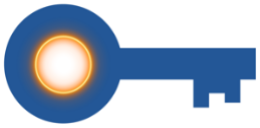
Leadership was another important facilitator of sustainability at Summit Institute. Sam, the school principal, served as a key leader in the RMS initiative. Through her clear vision for the school, Sam was able to move the project forward in ways that complemented existing structures. Sam and her school 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.



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?