REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

REMAKING MIDDLE SCHOOL

Case Studies in Brief

TEAMING

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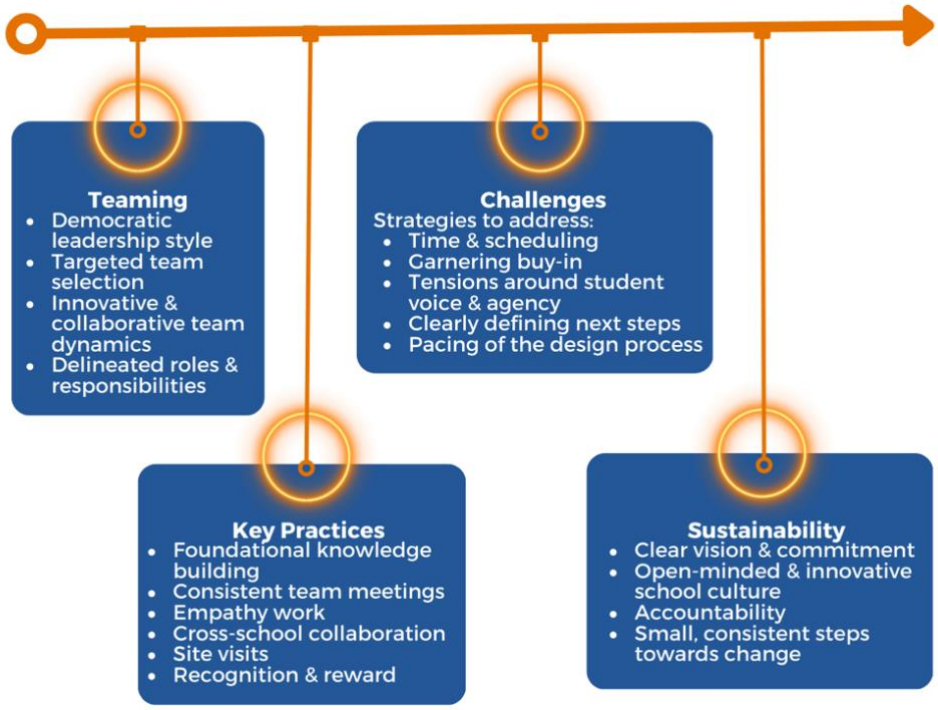
Remaking Middle Schools is a nationwide initiative designed to rethink approaches to middle-level education. Through this initiative, the Remaking Middle School design labs partnered with schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) to reimagine school structures and practices that support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

TEAMING

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.

REMAKING MIDDLE SCHOOL

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.

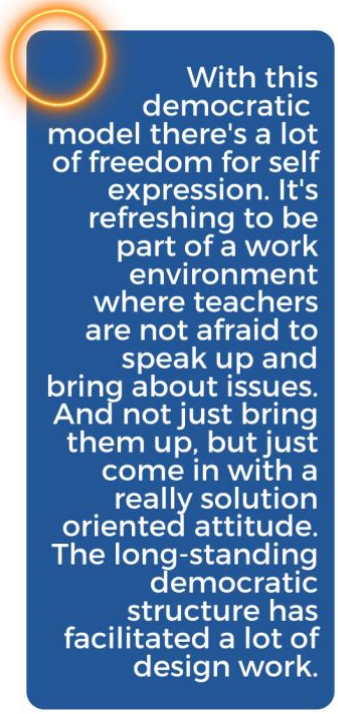
TEAMING AT WOODSIDE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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.

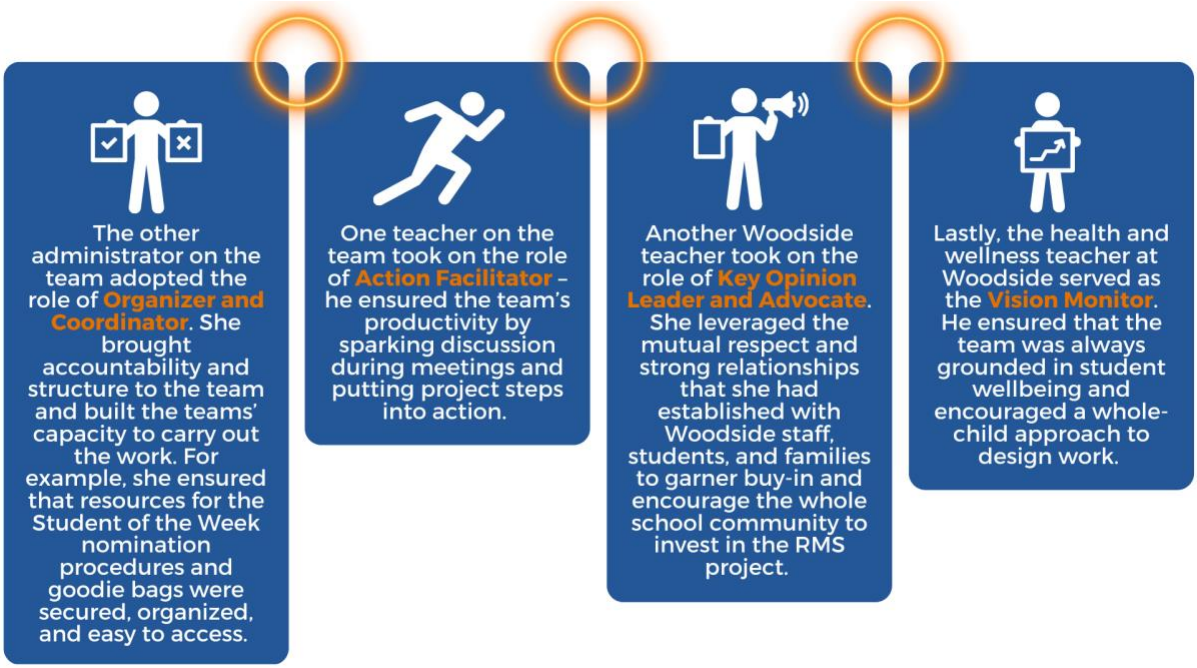
The 2021-2022 academic year was Woodside's first year with RMS. Their participation was initiated by their principal, Ms. B, whose ***leadership style*** encouraged team engagement, buy-in, and confidence. Ms. B had worked at Woodside for many years, but this was only her third year as principal. While 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".

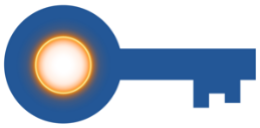
Woodside's ***team dynamics*** were characterized by innovation, collaboration, and democratic processes. Like the school overall, the Woodside team employed a democratic approach to teamwork that leveraged the strengths of all members and encouraged shared decision making. Importantly, the team's shared 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 ***s***hift 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.



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?