

Case study 1: Profile of a Graduate

When Brett Jacobsen arrived as the head of school at Mount Vernon Presbyterian School in Atlanta in 2009, the region was reeling from the recession and housing crisis. Enrollment was in decline at the independent school, which had added a high school shortly before the economic downturn. Those conditions created the opportunity for change inside the school.

To prepare for his challenging new role, Jacobsen immersed himself in research about change leadership. *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*, by Michael Watkins, inspired him to think of his school as a start-up. He knew that at the relatively young high school, “there wasn’t systemic inertia. In many ways, we were starting with a clean slate.”

He looked for ways to differentiate the school rather than delivering the same model already available at other institutions in the region. “We didn’t want to be known as another traditional college prep school. We wanted to shape our brand and shape the narrative around our brand.”

Looking for a place to take action, Jacobsen focused first on revising the school’s mission statement. The previous mission statement had little traction beyond the school website. The new statement, adopted by the school board, begins: “We are a school of inquiry, innovation, and impact.” Each of those three *i* words is a call to action. Inquiry demands questioning. Innovation requires creative problem solving. Impact involves making a difference that matters.

Figuring out how to make those concepts come alive in the classroom has helped to drive the school’s transformation over the past seven years. One early milestone was the development of a conceptual map known as the Mount Vernon Mind. It defines six mindsets that the school considers to be essential for 21st century success: Solution Seeker, Ethical Decision-Maker, Communicator, Creative Thinker, Innovator, and Collaborator.

The whole staff was involved in identifying and defining these competencies, starting with a book study of *The Global Achievement Gap*. Feedback sessions gave teachers opportunities to voice their ideas when the mindsets were still in draft. A team then came together to synthesize feedback and research into a concise model that would apply across the school. Early drafts were revised again, based on more staff feedback, before Jacobsen introduced a final version. That work set the stage for another round of collaborative work, focusing on how to assess the mindsets and give students feedback on their growth.

This iterative process is indicative of how the school moves forward and reflects a schoolwide use of design thinking. Explains Jacobsen, “We’ll ship an idea, troubleshoot, and then ship it again.”

Case study 2: Remake Learning

When Gregg Behr arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2006 to become the executive director of the Grable Foundation, he didn't realize that he was about to catalyze a grassroots effort to reinvent learning. The philanthropy focuses its grant-making efforts on improving the lives of children across the region. To get acquainted with his new community, Behr met with a variety of youth-serving organizations. As he sat down with teachers, school leaders, museum directors, librarians, and others who work with children and young people in both formal and informal education, he asked about their key concerns and challenges. He recalls feeling "dumbstruck" to hear nearly everyone he met say something similar: "I'm not connecting with kids the way I used to."

That refrain sparked his curiosity, which in turn has sparked an extended—and highly productive—community conversation about rethinking education to better meet the needs of today's digitally connected learners. Within a decade, the Pittsburgh region has emerged as a national model for innovation in education. In schools and community settings, youth are now learning by making and coding, creating and connecting. Teachers are learning, too, through hands-on professional development in everything from robotics to game mechanics to kinesthetic learning facilitated by motion-capture technology. Connecting all these initiatives is a cross-sector network called Remake Learning. It has grown organically to include some 250 organizations and more than 2,000 individual stakeholders, united by their commitment to make learning more relevant and engaging.

Remake Learning emerged organically from community conversations about the future of education. Gregg Behr sparked the first such discussions by reaching out to some of the nation's leading experts in the field of learning sciences to ask, "What are we learning about learning?" That turned out to be just the right question at just the right time. He began hearing about young people pursuing knowledge outside of traditional school, leveraging technology, peer learning, and community resources in new ways.

To build on these discussions, the Grable Foundation began hosting informal breakfast meetings open to anyone who wanted to talk about the future of learning. The invitation drew people of diverse backgrounds—teachers, parents, librarians, gamers, museum staff, roboticists, cognitive scientists, superintendents. "The conversations were so resonant," Behr recalls, "that everyone who came to one meeting thought of three or four people to invite to the next one." Eventually, the cross-sector conversations sparked ideas for projects that had potential to change the game for young people across the region.

Case study 3: Iowa BIG

Throughout more than two decades as a teacher, school district administrator, and entrepreneur in Iowa, Trace Pickering has been interested in questions that have the potential to shake up traditional notions of school. For example, what if school systems considered what students know and can do rather than counting how many minutes they spend in class? “For the bulk of my career, I’ve been interested in ideas like competency-based education,” he says. “It just never seemed to be the right time to make anything happen.”

He found an ally in Shawn Cornally, an innovative teacher and blogger, who had been experimenting in his own Iowa classroom with nontraditional ideas for student-centered learning. Together, they brainstormed ideas “to get the community engaged to tell us what they want,” Pickering says. “Our theory was, if we design what people say they want, then they should be willing to stand up and defend it.”

At first, they tried simply talking with community members about the need for school change. Informal discussions would begin with an invitation for people to describe the skills that students need to be ready for the future. From one group to the next, answers were consistent with big-picture thinking about 21st century learning: know how to collaborate; learn that failure is a good thing; be able to communicate and work with diverse people; find information quickly; build a network.

Then they would ask, so what do schools need to do to achieve those results? Once again, the answers were consistent. From group to group, people suggested ideas such as longer school days, tougher standards, more Advanced Placement classes, better teachers. “Shawn and I would look at each other and think, those are all non-solutions!” Pickering says. “Nothing you’re advocating has any chance of producing the results that you say you want.” How could they help community members recognize the disconnect in their thinking?

Cornally found inspiration in an old Adam Sandler movie. What if, like the lead character in *Billy Madison*, adults in the community were sent back to school? What if they weren’t treated as adult visitors, but literally walked in students’ shoes? “Let’s give them books, pencils, and a schedule to follow. Then let’s have a conversation,” Pickering agreed.

About 50 diverse citizens agreed to be part of what became known as the Back-to-School Project. In cohorts of six to eight, participants were randomly assigned to spend a half day in one of the seven area high schools that agreed to take part in the experiment. After each cohort completed its student shadowing, participants met with Pickering and Cornally to debrief their experience.

The first debrief question: As an adult, what do you need to know and be able to do in life to be successful? That question generated the previously mentioned list of skills and dispositions needed for 21st century success. Next, participants discussed: How much of that list did you experience during your half day as a “student”? Most adults found little overlap between their wish list and the reality of high school.

Finally, participants were invited to start fresh and imagine a version of school that would lead to the profile that they want to see in graduates. Across cohorts, a new vision emerged: Design a school focused on student passions. Give students real work to do. Get them out of classrooms and into the community. “They told us, we aren’t sure how, but we want schools to produce passionate people who love what they’re doing,” Pickering says. “Adults understand that when you’re passionate, you’re willing to do the hard work, suffer through failure, and persist when challenged.”

They also saw the value that students could add, if their energies were focused on local problem solving. “They told us, our communities have more problems than we’ll ever get to solving. Why aren’t we engaging our 5,000 high school students in these real challenges?” Those conversations shaped the Iowa BIG model, which is based on passion, projects, and community.

Case study 4: Design for Learning

Design for Learning is a national initiative in the U.S. that brings together architects and educators to redesign schools through a highly collaborative design process. The goal is to simultaneously rethink both pedagogies and physical environments so that students experience a more personalized education suited to 21st century learning needs. Let's take a look at one example of a school that has emerged from the process.

A year before the doors opened on the Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship Academy (better known as IDEA), longtime educators Sarah Ritsema and Courtney Egelston stepped away from other responsibilities in the Dallas, Texas, district to lead the design team. The two educators began with a big question: *If we could do school differently, what would we do?* They were granted a full school year to conduct research, do community outreach, and devise a blueprint.

Before committing to any design specifics, Ritsema and Egelston pored over academic research, attended conferences, consulted with experts, and visited innovative schools to see different approaches in action. They settled on three broad goals:

- Provide personalized learning so that every student is appropriately challenged
- Match a community mentor to every student and arrange internships
- Coach students to develop next-generation skills for careers and college

With these three pillars in place, it was time to invite community partners to fill in the rest of the picture. "We needed our partners to help us bring these priorities to life," Egelston says, and define next-generation skills. Because of the emphasis on mentors and internships in the school design, the planners knew they had to do more than sell stakeholders on the philosophy and goals of the school. They needed to recruit partners who would commit to getting some skin in the game as mentors and collaborators.

Egelston and Ritsema drew on their own relationships with students to animate discussions about school change. "It made sense to talk about students we knew, students we had both worked with," Egelston recalls. Three stories in particular seemed to represent the struggles that many students experience in traditional high schools:

Ricardo is cool, but he struggles academically because of language gaps. He needs more time to develop English fluency. Amanda is a high-performing student who will do anything you ask, but she has a lot of anxiety and apprehension about the future. She will be the first in her family to go to college. She wants to become a lawyer but lacks connections and role models who could help her. Then there's Nick. He's just a character. He hates school. He thinks it's boring. He would rather work on his side businesses that use his creativity.

Ricardo, Amanda, and Nick were not composites or fictional characters. These were real kids who struggled with school different reasons. Sharing their stories—complete with photos—became an effective way to communicate with audiences about the need for new school models that would better meet the needs of students (students gave permission to have their stories shared). “When we met with community members and potential partners, these stories painted a picture. Then we could talk in more depth about, so what kind of school would work for all three kids [and others like them]?” Egelston says.