



TEACHER-CENTERED + STUDENT-CENTERED

An innovative strategy
for changing teaching and improving learning
undertaken by two Minnesota school districts:

Farmington Public Schools, District #192
Spring Lake Park Public Schools, District #16

A Case Study

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PREFACE

Public education is trying to find a way to make the changes it now needs to make. It is not enough to advocate and describe new and better schools. Proclaiming the objective is not a strategy. There has to be a way to get there.

Change has been difficult for a public system locked into the model of education brought from Prussia and spread across America almost 200 years ago. Its standardized, uniform schooling is all most of us know. It is ‘real school’. Deeply embedded in law and practice, it does not welcome ‘different’.

Today, in our modern society and with young people now so different from before and from each other, traditional school works less and less well. The clash between standardized-school and non-standardized students has much to do with the low performance, the lack of student engagement and the gaps in achievement about which Minnesota is so concerned today.

Despite the visible need, it remains difficult to change ‘real school’. The desire for personalized learning is growing, and people are again talking about education being ‘transformed’. But once again hopes are likely to be dashed. Joe Graba, a teacher and later a legislator, puts the problem perfectly: “Almost everybody wants school to be better but almost nobody wants it to be different”. *To make school better we must now find a way to make school different.*

Against this background the effort described in this case study takes on special importance. Farmington and Spring Lake Park have been trying an innovative approach to change. Rather than mandating some particular new model for everyone to adopt, they are giving their teachers the opportunity to change *however they wish, if they wish*. Change is voluntary; and gradual. Elsewhere, ‘real school’ continues.

Charlie Kyte has let the teachers and administrators in these two districts speak for themselves. You’ll hear them delighted with their new ‘agency’, the freedom they now have; to teach, and to motivate, their students as individuals.

Separately, also in Minnesota, another approach is making it possible for teachers to control their work: the initiative launched in 2014 by Education Evolving—in

which teachers form a workers' cooperative or professional partnership to operate a discrete school.

These efforts, in different ways creating for teachers “a climate of encouragement for innovation”, disrupt the rigidity, the ‘must’ and ‘may not’, that holds school in its traditional form. What Professor Goodlad wrote in 1985 is still the challenge: “The cards are stacked against innovation”. (“Thank God education *doesn't* change”, the head of a state association in Minnesota once said to me.)

State policy leadership needs to think soon about letting the rules of education evolve: age-grading, seat time, achievement, etc.

In successful systems the rules do evolve. In sports, certainly, as players develop their skills, as coaches come up with new game-plans and as the public's desire for a better game rises. There's a wonderful history of Iowa girls' basketball in which you see the old game—players in bloomers, the court divided into thirds, two players in each third, practically no dribbling, shots underhanded and a center jump after every basket—changing as the rules were continually adjusted. The title says it all: *From Six on Six to Full-Court Press*.

Hopefully this innovation will spread in Minnesota. Certainly what is emerging here should get to the attention of those in other states—teachers, and unions—who are thinking increasingly, if still quietly, about the appeal of a truly professional future.

—Ted Kolderie
Senior Fellow, Center for Policy Design

INTRODUCTION

This case study of the Farmington and Spring Lake Park School Districts examines the approach and experiences of these two districts over the past ten years as they moved significantly, and on a district wide basis, to personalize the learning of their students and to provide their schools and teachers a much wider freedom (referred to as ‘agency’) to reinvent the backbone of how they approached the education of their students. The study will attempt to explain the WHY, WHAT, HOW and RESULTS of their journey.

Teachers, coordinators and administrators were interviewed in each district; a total of 33 interviews, each about one hour in length. The interviews were an attempt to capture the experiences and opinions of the actual leaders and staff as they changed their whole district’s approach to teaching and learning. A similar interview format was used throughout, although the questions were tailored toward the role of the person being interviewed.

The questions after familiarization included:

- How did the district’s strategic plan affect you and your school’s approach?
- What are you now doing differently and how did this evolve over time?
- How have students reacted and what were the results?
- What was the process of faculty ‘buy in’ and/or resistance?
- What are your additional thoughts?

This research and case study sets out to understand their journey and to share the successes and challenges they met along the way.

Later in this case study there are summaries of the interviews with many teachers and administrators from each district. These interviews, arranged by elementary, middle/intermediate school, high school and district office staff provides a richness of strategies employed and the inspiration that these educators have for this journey.

THIS IS THEIR STORY!

SETTING THE STAGE

Just over 10 years ago a small group of school superintendents began meeting to discuss the ‘WHY’ and ‘HOW’ in regard to opportunities and methodologies of providing learners with quality learning experiences. They sought to look at WHY were we organizing and operating schools as we were and what might be done to provide both teachers and students a greater latitude to teach and learn.

This was a time of heavy bureaucratic controls via standardized testing and mandated curriculums coming from federal and state authorities, and difficult financial times for school districts. It also followed a number of other state level changes in the organization of schools including the advent of open enrollment, post-secondary options for high school students, charter schooling and societal changes including growing diversity of student populations and a persistent achievement gap.

The superintendents dreamed of teachers having the freedom to utilize their own creativity to teach and to encourage students to take responsibility for guiding some of their own education. They hoped to change the whole paradigm of how student growth is measured; anchoring it in critical-thinking skills and individual initiative rather than in routine standardized measurements.

As with many of these types of discussions not much happened immediately, but some seeds were produced that encouraged *two emerging leaders to help their school districts decide to reinvent the whole backbone of their education systems*. These two districts, Farmington and Spring Lake Park had just hired new leaders in Jay Haugen at Farmington and Jeff Ronneberg at Spring Lake Park.

Both of these leaders were formerly teachers and administrators in other districts. They had come to recognize that the present system of schooling was failing some students and limiting many more from reaching their full potential. They asked WHY this was so and decided that they would launch their entire districts on the road to personalized instruction. These leaders came from differing backgrounds, but both were frustrated with rigid systems and wanted to provide ‘AGENCY’ to staff to create innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Each anchored the efforts

in simple, but strong strategic plans and then set off to allow their staffs to create, as long as the teaching led toward the learning ideals within the strategic roadmaps.

Teachers were challenged to think about ‘HOW’ they were approaching teaching in traditional ways and were encouraged to innovate in their approaches. As one teacher put it, they were encouraged to ‘fail forward’, always learning and adjusting as they went along.

Encouraged by several education reformers, these superintendents lobbied the Minnesota legislature to pass a limited ‘Innovation Zone’ legislation in 2012 that allowed their districts to not be required to follow the rigid constructs of the existing education bureaucracies. It was hoped that this legislation might lead to a ‘split screen’ strategy as described by Ted Kolderie in his book *The Split Screen Strategy—How to Turn Education into a Self-Improving System* in which he argues that education should look increasingly to schools and teachers for ways to improve learning and should consider how differently teachers would behave if they had truly professional roles and how much better students would learn if school were organized to maximize motivation.



Thus this 10-year experiment was born. It happened with the right leaders in place who stayed in place long term. The districts emerged from difficult times and with able management they each began a sustained period of innovative teaching and student involvement in their learning plans.

As other districts begin to move toward personalization of learning and of teaching it would be helpful to learn from the experiences of the Farmington and Spring Lake Park schools. This case study will allow others to reflect on what were the critical elements that were present, and the approaches used that helped to move these two districts, and to make possible the ‘agency’ (freedom) to teach and learn.

These districts, outer edge suburban districts near the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area, had just emerged from difficult political and financial circumstances and began a period of steady enrollment growth. They are among the few (if any) districts that set out to do a whole school district effort rather than a smaller single-school experiment.

Jay Haugen began his experience in smaller rural districts and was at one time the superintendent in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota and later in a traditional suburban district. His experience in small schools may have helped him to design an approach that was very

‘organic’ with staff encouraged to experiment and come on board with innovative ideas only when ready to do so. Jay Haugen recently retired and was replaced by Jason Berg who served as a school principal and then as assistant superintendent in Farmington, so there is a huge opportunity for continuation of leadership in that district.

Superintendent **Jeff Ronneberg** began his teaching and leadership career in a larger and prominent suburban district and moved to Spring Lake Park as the assistant superintendent of learning and instruction. He was provided wide latitude by then Superintendent Don Helmstetter, who was struggling with financial deficits, a restless community and facility challenges. Upon Helmstetter’s retirement, Ronneberg became the superintendent of schools. His background in coordinator and central administrative roles may have influenced him to utilize a more organized approach to designing innovation.

A key decision each made was to equip all staff and students with personal technology devices. The purpose was not simply to introduce everyone to these emerging technologies, but also to provide a tool which would allow the personalization of learning to flourish. Another key decision was to inspire the staff through articulating their vision of personalizing learning.

Many staff members at Farmington, who were in the district 10 years ago, distinctly remember the speech of Superintendent Haugen at his opening meeting with the teaching staff. Likewise, teachers at Spring Lake Park remember the inspiration of Superintendent Ronneberg as he articulated his vision for personalizing the process of learning.

Both districts began to experience significant enrollment growth. As each leader began to promote a new strategic direction for learning, they had the opportunity to hire new teaching and administrative staff that shared their enthusiasm. They were able to redesign and build new facilities that could better accommodate individualized learning. Thus, young teachers came on board, eager to experiment and the newly designed facilities allowed much more flexibility of student groupings, individual learning spaces and teaching settings.

As each district evolved over the ensuing years there emerged similarities in results, but with differences in approaches. This case study will attempt to describe the experience of each district and will show where they were similar and where they diverged. In each case the results have been impressive and the enjoyment that teachers and students are experiencing is exciting to behold.

These districts held constant cross-conversations between the districts by staff at all levels thus encouraging the spread of new innovations and approaches. These conversations: teacher to teacher; business manager to business manager; learning coaches to learning coaches; principals to principals, have helped to create a true learning environment for staff across both districts.

THE INTERVIEWS: HOW EDUCATORS RESPONDED

Teachers, coordinators and administrators were interviewed in each district; a total of 33 interviews, each about one hour in length. A similar interview format was used throughout, although the questions were tailored toward the role of the person being interviewed.

The questions after familiarization included:

- How did the districts strategic plan affect you and your schools' approach?
- What are you now doing differently and how did this evolve over time?
- How have students reacted and what were the results?
- What was the process of faculty 'buy in' and/or resistance?
- What are your additional thoughts?

The scripts of commentaries by staff members in the Farmington and Spring Lake Park sections of this report provide a way to see in a repeated fashion the cultures within the schools, the shifts over time of thought and innovation and the underlying enthusiasm of the staff for the work underway.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Reports from the Farmington Schools

Staci Hutmacher is a third-grade teacher at North Trail Elementary. She heard superintendent Haugen's original speech to the faculty, and said it was amazing and a breath of fresh air. The focus on 'agency' is freedom for teachers and for students. The concept of it being okay to try and even possibly fail excited her, other teachers and even students.

When working on reading with students in small groups they have eliminated the busy work; students now have objectives and they use activities to reach them. With this greater freedom students are actually anticipating learning to read. As an example, she pointed to one struggling reading student who became interested in coyotes, read all he could about them and even advised her, the teacher, how to control them in her neighborhood.

She reports that there is a strong Professional Learning Community (PLC) at grade three and the focus is on personalized learning for the teachers as well as for the students. She says this works so well because although started by administration it wasn't forced on the teachers; rather, they were allowed to experiment and received 'top down' support.

Katie Landers is a kindergarten teacher at Farmington elementary, in her seventh year. She had a great mentor teacher who is still on her team. She first followed the lead of this mentor, but then evolved her own style. Having the freedom to use her own ideas allowed her to try different things. So she began to reduce the centralized control of her classroom and let the kids have more freedom.

She made the point that there is a difference between 'controlling' and being in control. As an example, she begins a school year with assigned seating but then later allows students to find their spaces within the classroom from which to work. She involved parents so they could hear what she was doing so it wouldn't be seen as a free-for-all.

In reflecting on her faculty and team, Katie reports she is part of an adventurous team and yet recognizes that each teacher needs to personalize their own teaching style. She indicates that the whole school has been moving toward a student-centered learning style from the more traditional approach over the past three to five years and now more than 50 per cent of the teachers are experimenting with new approaches. Katie has helped develop Learner Profiles which are personalized profiles of what students like/don't-like and can be followed over time; the purpose being to help the students understand themselves and their learning style better.

Angie Asher Carlson, in her 21st year of teaching, came to Riverview Elementary four years ago. She is on a team of third-grade teachers and is a math specialist. She works in a Learning Studio in an open learning area. She reports that the student-directed approach is gaining momentum, and that it takes several different forms; including flexible groupings and models of different successful projects. There has been more

experimentation at the third-grade level and this year the teachers at the fourth grade are using a student-directed approach as well. They are seeing movement as teachers are shifting from arranged desks to different learning environments. She feels that about half of the staff is on board with the new direction and they have formed a partnership with EdVisions to get the whole building moving.

The movement toward more freedom for students to take partial charge of their own learning is not without challenges. They have to convince parents that students can regulate themselves and that there is choice, but with expectations. These are, after all still eight- and nine-year-old learners.

Angie is also on a cohort to develop authentic competency-based modules and they are well along with literacy competencies, but developing math competencies is harder. She reports that ‘freedom’ is huge and although there are still a few traditionalists on their staff, the ‘spark’ is growing.

Steven Geis has been the principal at North Trail Elementary for 16 years and has also served as president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). He felt that his vision and philosophy for education really aligned with that of Superintendent Haugen. While the world has changed over the years, education really hadn’t changed. He liked that the Superintendent gave the principals much more leeway and choice to work with their teachers to design education in their buildings, allowing teachers and students to experiment. However, there wasn’t pressure to engage: as teachers they could remain traditional, stepping only their ‘toes in the water’, or could just jump into personalized learning within the guide of the strategic plan.

He reports that while there are differences between the five elementary schools in the district, the differences are more between grade levels than from building to building. All of the elementary principals have given teachers ‘agency’. He commented that it is harder to ‘water the seed’ if you don’t have some leaders within the ranks and that it is important to find ‘champions’ who go out to see what others are doing and then innovate on their own. He says that giving teachers their own direction to seek professional development is powerful.

Reports from the Spring Lake Park Schools

Melissa Gustafson teaches first-graders at Centerview Elementary, a school that opened two years ago with a totally flexible design. Student learning is going well

in this open environment. They are totally committed to a '1 to 1' environment and teachers know how to use technology and the students know how to learn with technology. She has been in the district for over 20 years, has four of her own children in the district giving her a wide view of what is happening and claims to be one of the older teachers at Centerview but 'young at heart' and having a great time teaching. She feels that Superintendent Ronneberg had an amazing vision and didn't want learning to just be confined to a space or building.

While Centerview Elementary was designed with flexible spaces and furniture, all buildings in the district are moving toward greater flexibility. She is proud of the fact that she doesn't even have a desk and that students have reading groups on couches. She reports that her class area (there are only two walls) looks like organized chaos. She has a strong management style, but if students have an idea for learning she lets them do it. There are six first-grade teachers at Centerview. She does some partnering with other teachers and groupings can be spontaneous. Their teaching area has a STEM lab and students can move about the area. When Centerview was about to open, the district gave all elementary teachers a choice of where they wanted to teach. There is a Spanish immersion school, two more traditional elementary schools and the flexible-spaced Centerview school.

In her estimation all of the schools are moving more toward personalized learning. She reports that when students are coached to be responsible they can handle more choice. At present her teaching team is redesigning conferences and are looking for ways to strengthen the bond of understanding the learning process between the child and the parents.

Michael Wojtalewicz is now an instructional coach for all the general-education teachers at Northpoint Elementary and he previously had eight years teaching third grade, served as a reading and math interventionist and for the last two years has been an instructional coach. He reports that district leadership was easy to get behind and leadership is encouraged at all levels. He was hired in 2012 when the '1 to 1' devices were introduced. They were a novelty then and now the teachers are quite sophisticated. In the early days the use of technology was messy and imperfect and veteran teachers were actually learning from the students. He watched the 'SAMR' progression of the use of technology as it went from 1) Substitution, to 2) Augmentation, to 3) Modification, and finally to 4) Redefining teaching.

He feels that most elementary teachers have embraced innovation as the curriculum, the furniture and the spaces have become more flexible. In terms of personalizing

learning it is natural for teachers initially to fear chaos, but he found when students have some ownership of space and time the opposite actually happens. The district's recent focus is on making learning opportunities more authentic and purpose-based for kids—taking the emphasis away from simply memorizing facts and information, and instead placing it on fostering critical thinking, creativity, resourcefulness, problem-solving, collaboration, design, etc.

For professional development he cites the work in their district by Heidi Jacobs who wrote *Bold Moves for Schools*. Teachers were first helped with technology coaches, who evolved into instructional coaches. Teachers are feeling safe experimenting and failure is seen to be okay. Over time the culture has really changed. He stresses that technology is just a tool and real work is around 'purpose-based' learning and making learning authentic. Students really get excited about this. Overall he sees the Spring Lake Park teachers having high expectations for how they can create a successful environment for learning.

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Reports from the Farmington Middle School

Rachel Smetana Knudsen is in her sixth year and teaches seventh- and eighth-grade life and earth science. She feels lucky to have the support of the administration to try almost anything. If it works well, celebrate it; if not so well, discard it! She developed self-directed units based on observing what some teachers were doing at the high school level and then adapted to seventh grade. She provides a lot of choice to students in learning in these self-directed units. She also has an 'end of year' project for students where they can showcase what they have learned. Rachel also has students do 'reflections' at the end of each class during a self-directed unit so that students can identify what learning experiences worked best for them. She sees the continuum of providing more student freedom from 6th thru 7th and then 8th grade. It is important to create a level of freedom that works for the students.

Jenna Schlatter is a middle school language arts teacher in her 10th year of teaching and is now in her fourth year at Farmington. She is part of the 'Interstellar Team' which combines the disciplines of language arts, math and United States history and

is in its second year. This interdisciplinary setting meets every other day and the other days the students are in the more traditional disciplinary settings. The team has learned a lot. In their first year in this setting they saw the value of community content time and the sense of community this fostered in the students. They watched the learners taking ownership of their time although they recognize that this is a work in progress. This whole effort was the teacher's idea and they began with language arts and history and when the principal suggested including another core subject, they recruited a math teacher who was pretty innovative.

Their system is getting better. In their first year the reaction of other teachers was some skepticism, some supportiveness; others thought it was a lot of work. Now in the second year the interdisciplinary teaming is being duplicated by others with a second group in grade seven and a group in grade eight. The teachers love the freedom and also the planning time.

They grade students on competencies. Last year they were the only group grading this way and this year half of the seventh-grade teachers grade on competencies. They see the competency approach allowing for more personalization. She sees the heart of teaching as to prepare students to be lifelong learners. A product of personalized learning is that students become more aware of how they learn.

Jacob Sand teaches middle-school math. He grew up in Farmington and attended school there from kindergarten through graduation. He began teaching in Farmington five years ago after four years in another district. He is also the assistant basketball coach. Throughout his tenure he has served on leadership, tech integration, and positive behavioral intervention teams. Jacob has his Master in Educational Leadership degree from St. Mary's University of Minnesota and has completed the K-12 administrative licensure program at Concordia University in Saint Paul. He sees two really big initiatives in the district; personalized learning, which he really likes, and competency-based grading that he is not so sure about yet.

His experience in teaching prior to coming to Farmington was very content-laden and focused on the MCA tests. In that setting teachers had a hard time feeling like they could slow down to help struggling kids. At Farmington he experienced a lot of freedom that allowed teachers to do what they wanted. He provides students choices on how to learn. He has over 100 YouTube videos and students can decide to learn by utilizing lectures, large/small group, partner, or individual work. He actually sees students in math every other day for 90 minutes, unless they need additional support. The challenge at the middle-school level in math for competency-based grading

is that the competencies have to do with applications and depth of knowledge, and many students are still learning math skills.

He appreciates that administration gives a lot of professional discretion. He sees this as mostly good although for some older and newer teachers they need to be pushed a little harder to meet the ever-changing needs of students. Being too 'laissez faire' has a down side, and there sometimes need to be difficult conversations with people who are trying to take advantage of the hands-off attitude. He feels students at middle-school age, given more choice and responsibility, must also be coached to get them ready to thrive. He sees most, but not all students doing well with responsibility and freedom. He believes that the relationship a teacher builds with students is what really matters; students have a hard time asking for help unless they really trust you.

Chad Olson has a shared position as a physical-education teacher and personalized learning coach at Dodge middle school and has been in the Farmington District for 10 years. He was on the team that originally made a visit to CESA 1 in Wisconsin, was inspired, and proposed the split position in which he now serves. He reports that the 'buy in' for personalizing learning at Dodge has about 80 per cent of the teachers doing some sort of personalized learning, 10 to 12 teachers fully on-board, and a few that avoid it.

He says it is important that while the district's strategic plan focuses on student-centered learning, that is not demanded of teachers, or forced. Teachers can go at their own pace. An example is in their art department with two completely open rooms. There is a set of competencies and all of the students are doing projects to meet the competencies. Art students work on the various projects and have the agency to decide which competencies their project will meet. This is very much a multi-aged approach. Student reaction to personalized learning has been positive and teachers find students really liking the common areas. They like the freedom of small groups, classes or studying independently. He acknowledges that some students don't thrive in this environment and teachers need to control the level of freedom based on how well the students are handling it. However, he observes that whenever students are given agency of their learning they almost always do better.

Chad stresses the importance of leadership and the importance of administrators modeling. An example is professional development days; administration lets teachers decide what is best for them. He also indicated that the district continuously invites students and teachers to school board meetings to share personalized learning with them. This, in turn, helps the school board members see the enthusiasm of stu-

dents and staff. He remembers the 'Big Speech' by superintendent Haugen 10 years ago. Chad said the staff he had doubts at first, but the district learning team and the building personalized-learning coaches helped by always letting teachers set their own pace.

Megan Blazek is in her third year as the principal at Farmington's Boeckman middle school. Previously she was a middle-school life science teacher (department head) and dean of students at Chaska's Chanhassen high school. During her time at Chanhsssen she participated in a personalized learning summit that was organized by Farmington, Edina and Chaska. It was the personalization of learning for teachers as well as for students that drew her to Farmington. Teachers were given 'agency (freedom) and at her previous school teachers had to do competencies. At Farmington you could use this approach when ready.

A part of this is intentionally reorienting teachers to be more student-centered, accepting that the teachers are the experts and the principal plays a supporting role. For her, Jim Rickabaugh, at CESA 1 in Milwaukee was a mentor. She reports that although prior to three years ago teachers felt they were very traditional, there were some groups really moving. One was the 'Interstellar Team' (referenced earlier) that started their student's day with a daily focus, team-building and seminars. The students then develop their own learning schedule and complete their work for the three separate courses. This initiative originally created some division in the overall staff, but the concept has now moved to the next grade level. The students had authentic experiences and also met the competencies.

One of the keys is that they needed to go to the district level to find the professional dollars to help these teachers with the development and the money came through. She also reports that the superintendent stressed not to worry about the MCA scores and the district now uses testing that helps teachers see student growth.

One challenge is to get parents to understand: They want measurement! A second challenge is to be able to measure students' personal skills. This is much more qualitative. She feels that the teachers know more about the individual students, but this is hard to measure. On the helpful side there is good pride in the Farmington community about the schools and the school board is seen as quite supportive. Teachers and students provide reports to the school board at almost every meeting and this keeps the school board engaged in what is happening in the schools and remaining supportive of the movement toward student-directed learning.

Reports from Spring Lake Park Intermediate School

Lindsay Leet is a seventh-grade life science teacher. She is in her 10th year and actually began as a paraprofessional who went back to school to become a teacher. She was a part of the original '1 to 1' initiative, is on the middle-school leadership team and also works as a curriculum lead. She uses Schoology extensively and her team has moved to digital textbooks. She has also participated on design teams to develop more flexible learning approaches. She is part of the competency-based cohort and has worked on this outside of the classroom for several days. She teaches three regular life science courses and two honors courses and is a participant in the Panther Time advisory.

She reports that teachers have a lot of freedom to meet the Essential Learning Outcomes based on standards and learning targets. She is part of a PLC group and together they decided to do some cross-curricular units and these worked well. She arranges her students in pathways and gives them the choice of the framework from which they can learn in. She describes the three levels as 1) Straight hikers, 2) Puddle Jumpers, and 3) Mountain Climbers and these different approaches to learning fit different students. They can pick their route by the different learning concepts.

Lindsay is very excited about the competency work, realizes that it will take time, but has great potential. Her teaching area is flexible with a smart-board area, a lab and smaller group areas. Also, some students can go to other project areas throughout the building. She and the students want more flexible use of time.

Angela Skauge began teaching in Arizona and came to Spring Lake Park School District in 2008 teaching grades two and three. She now teaches math at the sixth-grade level and as a math academic specialist focuses on helping struggling learners. She also teaches one honors class. She feels that teaching in the district is 'like teaching in the pros!'. There are many opportunities for professional development; initiatives are researched-based, progressive and ever-changing. The district focuses on PLCs and they work as teams. At the forefront is doing what is best for students and learning their individual interests and strengths. They work hard at really knowing the students by name, strength, interest and needs.

She shared about teachers using 'Panther Time' during which the teachers once a week work individually with students on their learner profiles and this helps the students take more interest in their learning. She sees a broad range of how students want to learn and observes that her honors class students tend to be content to be

teacher-led. She enjoys watching students change as they are encouraged to take charge of their own learning. Overall the staff is relatively young and is committed to change, although there will always be some educators that hesitate to make changes with their instruction. Staff recognize that many students will some day have jobs not yet invented.

The competency-based movement is designed to have students work through real life problems rather than in the abstract. As an example, Angela's algebra students, rather than taking a unit test, had to work thru a real-life problem. The problem they worked on was based on the scenario of the opening of a new movie theater and the design of the popcorn boxes and drink containers, while working out the portions and costs. In another example some of the struggling students are laying out a garden, measuring plant sizes and growth. The competency movement gives students more freedom to see a purpose to their learning.

Tom Larson began his career in California in grades two and three, where a lot of peer coaching was going on. In 1990 he worked in technology and curriculum in the Minnetonka district and has now been the principal at Westwood intermediate school for 17 years. He was in the initial cohort with Superintendent Ronneberg that was talking about what schools should look like in five years. They visited the Institute for Personalized Learning and then brought the community together to think about personalized learning and about flexible space and time. From this emerged the district's strategic plan. This was a period of extreme innovation and they implemented professional learning communities throughout the district without investing additional dollars. The evolution was that the administration was in the lead and brought the school board along. The plan began with learner profiles and a more flexible learning environment. They then worked on flexible learning maps that were designed to help struggling students close learning gaps.

They are now moving into competency-based learning and from these competencies teachers are designing authentic learning units. Teachers are given quite a bit of freedom to approach competency-based projects and they have one team working in an interdisciplinary fashion and another is working with multi-year levels of students. This all requires a lot of professional development time and when teachers hit a roadblock they tend to fall back into more traditional approaches. In regard to the competency approach, teacher resistance was initially higher because they thought they each had to do 150 lesson plans for 150 students. The coaches and administra-

tion helped the teachers take small steps in regard to grouping and the use time of and spaces.

Over time there was more buy in and better conversations on how to empower the students. At the middle level all classes are electives and students have choices. They expanded the choices that students wanted. This was a step toward what students could expect when they reached high school.

Mr. Larson concluded that it has been a great change to student-centered platforms from the former 'teacher-centered' platforms. It does require a principal who can work in this environment and not everyone can do it.

HIGH SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

Reports from Farmington High School

Julian Buss has taught in Farmington for 14 years; chemistry and biology. He also is an Apple Distinguished Educator and has worked as a tech coach in the district. At one point he started an eleventh-grade earth science class at the time of the iPad '1 to 1' initiative and incorporated the ability for students to access technology into that course. In his present high school classes his team developed an alternating daily schedule with labs and classes. Julian created lab videos and on some days students did not need to be in the classroom. This was the beginning of giving students 'agency'. The freedom to get out of the classroom was a huge motivator for students. He also made accommodations for students with disabilities and this worked out pretty well. For biology classes his team of four teachers have divided the course work into three levels; Basic, Proficiency and Mastery. It is in the mastery level where there is the greatest level of student choice.

Julian indicated that the administration is good at defining the strategic direction and mission. Then teachers can do whatever they choose as long as it is tied to the strategic plan, mission and goals. He also reports that Farmington doesn't have a 'district centered' way of doing teaching. Thus, there is a range of teacher-directed and student-centered classes.

Adam Fischer teaches ninth-grade English, is in his 13th year of teaching and fifth year at Farmington. He is also the head high school football coach. Coming from an

International Baccalaureate (IB) school he couldn't believe the level of trust and freedom he had as a teacher and the freedom and trust given to students in Farmington. Teachers were challenged to make things better and provide more 'agency' for students. As an example, he cited the use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a typical ninth-grade read: Teachers loved this book, but kids not so much. His team decided to give students more choice in what they would read, but they still needed to do critical analysis. There were good discussions. With more choice there was more student buy in and they began to enjoy literature more. In a personalized approach some students were not actually in the classroom and with this 'radical trust' the teachers were able to work more closely with smaller groups of students.

People like data, and Adam shared that five years ago 117 students failed ninth-grade English and that last year only 35 did—this change coming at the same time they 'upped' the standards. He feels that Farmington's uniqueness is that they do not force a technique on the teachers. Adam has also created a strategic plan for his coaching that includes a strategic plan, mission statement, objectives, goals and competencies.

Celeste Kogl is a 30-year career teacher currently teaching ninth-grade physics at both the introductory and honors levels. In her 13th year at Farmington, she sees something wonderful in how the district encourages individuals to try new approaches to both teaching and learning, even if there are unintended results along the way. Failure is viewed as just one part of the learning process. This model has enlarged each teacher's 'bag of tricks' and is greatly appreciated. In particular, she and her team value inquiry and exploration, value providing time for students to engage in hands-on opportunities with science materials. She reports that at Farmington High School students are allowed many liberties with their use of time. She does, however, feel it isn't always advantageous to provide ninth-grade students 'too long a leash'. She says attention to follow-through and accountability should be differentiated among students, and on a gradual-release basis in order to set and maintain appropriate academic expectations. She feels positive about being in a district where teachers can establish their own pace and direction and hopes that this freedom ultimately results in students reaching their highest potential.

Dan Pickens is the Farmington high school principal, in his second year; following Jason Berg after Jason moved to the district office (and now has been named the new school superintendent). He first came to Farmington as a ninth-grade math specialist, became the STEM coordinator and a technology coach. From there he became the assistant principal and now serves as principal. Dan was part of a group of about 30

staff members that Superintendent Haugen brought together 10 years ago and said “Blue Sky: If there were no rules or district-office constraints, what would schools look like?” After thinking and discussions they came up with individualizing learning and providing every student with a technology device. He jokes that they weren’t sure if the superintendent was a genius or a mad man (maybe a little of both). But that is where the process started and led to the strategic plan that still today guides the district.

A group went out to Apple in California and developed the key elements of the plan including a) personalization and b) becoming a center for inspiration and cultivation of ideas. This was a big reach since at the time Farmington was a laggard among school districts. However, they went all-in with the district buying everyone (staff and students) ‘1 to 1’ devices and using the strategic plan to drive decisions. Slowly staff began to get on board.

An important point: No one told teachers that they had to do anything. Today, 10 years later, almost none of the teachers are teaching as they did years ago: half are ‘full in’ on personalized learning; 40 to 50 per cent are trying new approaches but probably aren’t up to capacity yet. Although there was a slow roll-out, giving teachers autonomy was very important. Today (10 years later) there are close to no teachers doing nothing, half are fully in, and 40 to 45 per cent are trying new approaches but probably aren’t up to capacity yet. They do still get some pushback from parents of new ninth-graders around issues of ‘freedom’. He would like to find more ways to scaffold that for the ninth-graders, but as the middle school buildings add more of these experiences it has gotten much better. Dan says that trust is very important and hopes that more and more parents can trust the teachers just as the administration has trusted them to teach. Last year about 80 different districts had teachers visit the high school and this has acted like an aphrodisiac for the staff.

Reports from Spring Lake Park High School

Ann Enstad has taught from the beginning of her career at Spring Lake Park and is in her 13th year. She began teaching environmental science and now teaches honors (pre-AP chemistry). When she arrived in the district chemistry was taught very traditionally and she was encouraged to become more innovative. Thus she experienced the transition from traditional to innovative. Over time her classes were redesigned to help them better meet the needs of students. Teachers were encouraged to try new

approaches and even when they didn't work they were still supported and 'failing forward' was celebrated. One example she cites is the idea to create a murder-mystery lab. It didn't work well and the very open-ended approach didn't work at that time. She has found that students mostly appreciate the flexible learning spaces that were redesigned and are being more responsible for their own learning.

The idea of innovation and sharing was hard at the beginning. Teachers were guarded with their supplies and of their students. Having the more flexible space helped and over time teachers became more of a team. Parents have overall been pleased with the more personalized approach although, again, it did take some time to adjust. As a teacher she is really impressed with all the cross-curricular connections in the Pathways programs. Schooling isn't so isolated by discipline and even non-Pathways teachers can be participating. Interdisciplinary teaching is important. For her, hybrid classes are her 'sweet spot' along with partially 'flipped' classrooms.

Kathy Stalnaker came to Spring Lake Park high school three years ago after teaching for 20 years in a rural district and spending a year at TIES as a technology coach. She teaches ninth and tenth-grade language arts in both hybrid and 'in-person' classes. She is a member of two PLC's, one at each grade level. These two PLC's work with the same learning targets, but do different formative and summative work to help students show what they know and can do. She has always been comfortable with student voice and choice, but after two years in the district she became more comfortable with inserting that style into her teaching because formerly it often seemed teacher-directed.

Her observation is that in Spring Lake Park the elementary staffs were ahead in adopting personalized learning approaches, but she sees grades seven to twelve now coming on strong. She is part of the competency-based cohort. She observes that to personalize for students you have to give teachers the ability to personalize how and what they teach. She sees teachers being a little afraid of the competency movement as they flash back to the old standards-based movement that forced change on them. She also observes that if you are in a PLC that wants 'sameness', it makes it harder to innovate.

She observes that it is hard for students conditioned to 'point-collecting' to become self-directed learners. This may be even more prevalent with high-achieving students who have been successful in a traditional system. Thus, reactions differ among students. Some are really happy with exploring and reflecting while others want a traditional approach. She reports that it is super-exciting that schools are

finally looking at the ‘science’ of how children learn and what approaches work for different students. She says that there are important conversations going on in the PLCs about learning.

Melissa Olson is a 20-year educator who began her career teaching English language arts in Apple Valley, then for two years in Berlin, Germany and 10 years in Minnetonka. She became passionate about how students learn and in the alternative learning program in Minnetonka helped change the curriculum into a personalized learning approach. She then went on to help launch their “Vantage Program” for career and college readiness. She is now in her third year at Spring Lake Park with the assignment to build their career and college readiness program out of personalized learning and teaching.

She is the coordinator of the high-school-level Pathways program, works with teachers and helps find community partners for the program. There are three distinct Pathways programs including a) The Business and Entrepreneurship pathway; b) the Health and Human Services pathway; and the c) Technology, Engineering and Design pathway. There are 10 teachers and about 500 students that participate which is a third of the high school students. Students can participate in the Pathways programs full or part time and there are opportunities for internships and partnering with area businesses and institutions.

The teachers have adapted their teaching styles to become more like facilitators and Melissa did a lot of ‘on boarding’ to help this happen. The Pathways program tends to draw students from the middle of the road; sees the biggest resistance coming from high-performing, compliance-oriented students concerned about college admission and GPAs. There is, not surprising, also some mild resistance from content-area teachers. Overall, parents really like the Pathways program, although it takes effort to condition students to student-centered/student-owned learning.

She observes that some districts want to leap into innovation, but really need to start with instructional program design and she sees this as missing in many districts. Giving students ‘space’ and ‘time’ freedom is something that needs to be taught.

DISTRICT LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS

Reports from the Farmington District Office

Dan Miller is the district facility director and says that the concept of ‘agency’ extends to managers in the district. He indicates that his head custodians have quite a bit of freedom, but they still need to work closely with teachers and administration to meet the strategic purposes of the facilities which is often to create more flexibility for students and to have usable student-centered spaces that allow student autonomy—versus the students always being adult directed.

As a district administrative team, they are very collaborative with the building principals about how to make spaces work better. Dan feels that he and his staff work hard to support what is best for kids. Since they have a small administrative staff, building and maintenance staff have as much autonomy as possible. He reports that there are very few instances that head custodians and building administrators are in conflict and if one does occur they quickly fall back on ‘what’s the reason for doing this?’. His staff believes that the look and feel of the buildings is important; to be both clean and exciting. Occasionally they run into an issue of cleaners having a tough time tolerating more disarray. However, the Farmington teachers feel really positive about the custodial and maintenance staff.

Jane Houska has been the district’s business manager and arrived in the district shortly before superintendent Haugen. At the time the former strategic plan was (as many of them are) just a document for the shelf with little meat behind it. When superintendent Haugen’s ideas for the strategic plan emerged, and it was decided to go to ‘1 to 1’ devices, she worried about how they would pay for it and didn’t really want to lead in this direction. However, the document made sense and was student-centered. The transition began with a few brave teachers who stepped forward to experiment as long as it was tied to the strategic plan. There were failures and successes and it became okay to try and to fail.

As the strategic plan took hold students became enthusiastic. As an example, Jane watched three students who were ‘a little rough around the edges’ present their “Rock Band” project to the board and saw that their passion was just unbelievable. They had developed on their own a whole curriculum.

For her, reporting to the state is pretty well controlled. As a result, Farmington helped the legislature to pass the ‘Innovation Zone’ legislation, but found that the

Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) staff almost continuously said ‘no’. While much of the financial reporting upstream hasn’t changed, at the local level the business office has worked to be a supportive problem-solver. The mindset change is that rather than saying ‘no’ to requests, the question became ‘how can we work together’? Her reality is that the legislature and the MDE aren’t really on the same page regarding the legislation, but she has found that the local administration and the local school board are always working together.

Jason Berg has a long history at Farmington who began as a high school math teacher, then was for a few years an elementary principal in another district, then came back to Farmington in 2012 as the high school’s assistant principal. One of the first things to happen was the ‘1 to 1’ adoption. He stresses that this was not a technology initiative, but rather a step to personalized learning. He also worked in these earlier years on changing the times and locations for learning. As students got more freedom they saw fewer ‘tardies’ and saw behaviors improving. More ‘1 to 1’ teaching took place.

The high school used Jim Rickabaugh’s/CESA 1 guidelines for personalized learning and in the fall of 2013 they were also using the University of Minnesota’s ‘Ramp Up to Readiness’ materials. Teachers wanted office hours and professional learning time. They changed the concept of the school day to be from bus-arrival to bus-leaving time and made these accommodations. All staff picked a few of the personal learning guidelines and explored how they could use them.

Jason’s observation was that in these early years about 60 per cent of high-school, 40 per cent of middle-school and 20 per cent of elementary teachers were working to personalize learning. There has been a metamorphosis over the past three years and now he estimates that 85 per cent of high-school, 70 per cent of middle-school and 70 per cent of elementary staff is moving in line with the district’s strategic direction. The district did not want any of this to be seen as a ‘new’ initiative. Instead they targeted toward the strategic plan and let the teachers make progress when they were ready.

They recognized that not every teacher would get on board, even with mentoring and coaching. That was okay and they decided that it wasn’t worthwhile to battle with the 15 per cent or so that did not want to change. They do see negativity being replaced with more positivity and more teachers are asking for help. They absolutely respect that teachers have to have the agency to move at their own paces. Jason reports that Farmington teachers are really passionate about what is happening in their schools, and that when they go out to do professional development for others this creates even more internal momentum; an unexpected benefit.

At the district level, Jason reports that they quit asking the MDE whether something can be done, and reframed the question to be “*how* can this be done?”. They let the teachers do what they wanted to do as long as it worked in conjunction with the strategic plan and the superintendent and district office acted as a ‘shield’ for them.

Jacilyn Doyle—The current school board chair, she teaches in a charter school in an on-line learning environment. She looks forward to board meetings to hear the constant presentations from teachers and students about their experiences in personalized learning. These are a highlight of the Board meetings. She likes that the Farmington Board doesn’t micro-manage and that teachers are trying new approaches and that these are well thought out before being launched. She recognizes that it takes time, sometime several years, to get new initiatives working really well. She reports that the school board members support the district’s strategic direction. Her own children, who attend Farmington schools, like school and she says they are learning early-on to have choices and to self-advocate. She has teaching friends in other districts that would really like the opportunity to teach in the Farmington Schools.

Reports from the Spring Lake Park District Office

Elizabeth Nordgren has been at Spring Lake Park for 12 years, with four years teaching, four years as a continuous improvement and innovation coach (CIIC) and the last five years as the coordinator of learning where she works on increasing engagement, innovation and personalized learning. Most recently, her work has focused on supporting teachers, and building leaders K-12 on various components of innovative and personalized learning, including:

- *Developing learner maps*—which helps students better understand who they are as learners and how they learn. Learner profiles also supports teachers in knowing their students more deeply; better equipping them to personalize.
- *Personalizing learning maps*—This work includes developing short-, middle- and long-term maps to guide students’ learning. This work began creating short-term maps for learners with identified needs K-12 and long-term (more than four-year) maps at the secondary level.
- *Transitioning toward competency-based learning*—One of the biggest components of this transition has been working with 31 teachers/CIIC’s and two principals writing competencies and rubrics, performance assessments and

units in four core areas K-12 as part of a competency-based learning innovation project.

She has collaborated with colleagues from Farmington and observes that Farmington started with developing competencies that are grade-level-specific with smaller teams of teachers, while Spring Lake Park opted to start by creating a K-12 progression. She acknowledges that the work of shifting to competency-based learning has been exciting and challenging, and given those challenges, each teacher will need different levels of support and time to fully integrate it into their work. Even in the areas of learning profiles and learning maps it takes time to have teachers become comfortable. Each school has embraced their use differently. One of her biggest successes has been helping teachers to develop unit and performance assessments aligned with their newly prototyped competencies. She acknowledges a need to partner closely and to provide support to principals and CIIC's in leading adoptions and to speak to the 'why' with teachers to scale this work as well.

She recognizes that while progress is being made it is a challenge to get from small pieces of change to true 'scaling'. Spring Lake Park's approach to scaling competency-based learning has been to start with an innovation cohort of teachers and principals interested in taking the lead, who will then help lead and support adoption at the building level. This approach helps teachers support their colleagues by leveraging enthusiasm and collaboration within their PLC's.

She indicates that the recent change to distance learning is causing a loss of contact with teachers.

Amy Schultz is the Spring Lake Park schools' director of business services. She began her career as an independent auditor with a focus on cities and school districts. A desire to work in education led her to the finance director position at South Washington County schools and then to Spring Lake Park where she has been for 12 years.

Spring Lake Park Schools' focus on a systems view with the student experience at the center was evident from the beginning. Principals were offering to share resources allocated to their school if they saw a greater student need elsewhere. Innovation is supported at all levels of the organization. Funds are set aside each year and staff are encouraged to propose innovative programs. These are done through Spring Lake Park School's Levels of Innovation. (Hope discussed this in more detail).

The student-centered approach also drives the staffing process. It starts with enrollment as well as individual student needs at each site. Each site is staffed based on those conversations. Funding sources are then reviewed to ensure that guidelines

are followed and resources are available to cover the staffing allocated. Funds are used flexibly where legislation or grant guidelines allow. For example, compensatory education funds are allocated based on students who have applied and qualified for free or reduced priced meals. Legislation allows districts to reallocate a portion of those funds, with school board support, to other sites. Schools with a very low percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-priced meals have students who struggle academically, so a portion of funds are redistributed to support those at-risk students. By staffing based on need rather than by funding source, principals and staff can focus on the needs and experiences of their students.

Enrollment has been steadily growing for over 15 years. This has provided the opportunity, with strong community support, to design new and to remodel existing facilities to fit more flexibly to the way students learn. Teachers and other school staff were the primary designers of the new spaces, and students were brought in to provide feedback on both the space and furniture options. Glass replaced at least one wall in classrooms so learning is on display, and flexible furniture allows students easily to move seating around to work in different groups. Small conference rooms allow students to work in groups on projects and presentations. Open spaces were also created with comfortable, mobile seating, where students can work independently or in groups, trusting the students to use the spaces well.

She finds it exciting to be part of a school district with a desire to change the current system of education, to one in which each student experiences personalized learning and leaves seeing no limits to their future.

Ryan Stromberg came to Spring Lake Park almost 10 years ago as director of human resources and organizational development and it was the following year the school district passed a capital levy which created the opportunity to buy the '1 to 1' devices for the whole district. Under Superintendent Ronneberg's leadership they have managed budgets well and essentially adopted a private-sector budget approach to managing revenue and expenses. The superintendent, whom Ryan refers to as a CEO, is wicked smart with budget and finance, and in many other areas beyond the learning and teaching of the organization.

The district also deliberately moved to a 'professional-teacher heavy' model a few years back. The district has 90 to 100 paraprofessionals, while a typical school district of their size would have 200 to 225. This freed money to hire 10 FTE's of innovation coaches (23 in total, many in blended part-time positions). He observes that people like working here, and there has been a low turnover of administrators. The average

age of their teaching staff is approximately 37. He calls the hierarchy squished—in a positive way—with broad responsibility at all levels. The administrators continue to increase their own skills with technology.

The district's philosophy is that none of its 800 employees can disagree with the strategic plan (the 'what'), but they all have permission to decide the 'how' and the 'why' in the meeting of it. The district is very researched-based and each building has places for design so teachers can use space and time differently for learning. They put a lot of trust in their teachers and when innovation and personalized learning occurs, the gaps in many inequalities decrease establishing a greater level of equality.

Ryan reports that the leadership team has tried to create an environment in which students, teachers and all staff can thrive. The principals and teachers really enjoy being a part of Spring Lake Park. In conversation with Ryan recently an associate principal in the organization referred to it as a little like a 'cult' in which the culture is very positive and really hard to find outside of the organization.

Lindsay Johnson is the district coordinator of learning and teaching support, having first served as a kindergarten and first-grade teacher and instructional coach. She is spending significant time this year in one of the elementary schools that has shifted to a new principal. The former principal was very thoughtful and process-oriented and the new principal is really tuned to teaching and learning; is confident, direct and timely. This was a new style of leadership. Lindsey is helping with the transition.

Lindsey's early experience was with principal Mike Callahan who encouraged her to try new approaches and to not be afraid to fail: He called it 'falling forward'. The teachers formed PLC's and worked as a team. Now, as a coordinator, she is seeing success with the new distance learning that has been thrust upon everyone. It is giving students much more agency (freedom) and teachers have had to get better at diagnosing student learning styles and working with smaller groups of students. A challenge brought to our attention by a consultant was that we are oftentimes okay with average results. We we shouldn't be. This was eye-opening to Lindsay; to be dissatisfied with average. She sees it as leadership's job to help get teachers fully on board. Yet there is some resistance. Lindsey works 70 per cent of her time supporting elementary instruction and 30 per cent supporting the learning coaches.

In regard to 'agency', she sees younger students taking to this more easily because they don't really know what traditional schooling looks like. Older students aren't as open to risk-taking and are more used to being compliant. A few years ago, in a professional development session many teachers watched the movie "Most Likely to

Succeed”, the story from California’s High Tech High. This movie moved staff and there was a much greater inspiration to move in the direction of personalized learning. It helped teachers understand the ‘why’.

Hope Rahn is the director of learning and innovation; in her fifth year in that position. She began 20 years ago in Spring Lake Park as a school psychologist, transitioned to student services coordinator, and then moved to the district level working with data, analytics and program evaluation. She experienced the ‘1 to 1’ initiative during her years as a school psychologist, and in her current role, emphasizes the importance of aligning learning technology with the personalized learning needs of learners and the purposes of instruction. She sees it as one of means by which students can demonstrate their understanding of learning.

Hope said their work in innovative and personalized learning was spurred by many conversations and learning experiences grounded in human-centered design. Spring Lake Park’s model of human-centered design (3D: Discover, Design, and Deliver) serves as a foundation for work throughout the system, from district-level process design, to project design, to learning design. She discussed the use of leadership frameworks and common language and imagery as another key element of the work in Spring Lake Park, and these are used continuously to establish coherence, alignment, and shared understanding of the work that is happening. One of those frameworks includes Spring Lake Park’s Levels of Innovation, which provides a framework to create the conditions for innovation throughout the system:

- Just Do It—Incremental change, often at the individual teacher or PLC level, using rapid prototyping
- Let’s Try It—Adaptive change, and something that we can bring to life largely within our existing resources
- Let’s Build It—Disruptive or breakthrough change that requires additional learning work, deeper design, providing new ways of working
- Some examples of Let’s Build It that Hope mentioned include:
 - Competency-Based Learning Innovation Cohort, which is a team of about 30 teachers that met throughout the year to engage in learning and design around academic and life competencies
 - Ignite, which is a team of four teachers at ninth grade who work together to design learning in a multidisciplinary way, and are not restricted by a bell-to-bell schedule at the high school

- Project-Based Learning Looping, which is a team of five teachers at Westwood Intermediate and Middle School, who use inquiry projects as a primary means for instruction and demonstration of learning

Lighthouse School for Insatiable and highly-gifted learners; a program for students in grades one to 12 to engage in inquiry-based, self-directed learning.

Moving toward an education system that embraces core components of innovative and personalized learning is more than just a minor tweak to a system that has existed for more than a century. It is more akin to replacing the backbone of education. In order to do this, Spring Lake Park embraces design mindsets, such as: tapping each person's creative confidence, seeing failure as an opportunity to learn, embracing urgent optimism, and engaging in continual iteration based on their learning.

At the core, personalized learning is about the learner. It's about experiences that make learning more relevant for each learner in terms of who they are, how they learn, and where they want to go. And when all of that comes together, we see powerful, joy-filled learners who are engaged with their learning and the world around them.

INTERPRETATIONS: HOW THE DISTRICTS RESPONDED

Farmington's Story

The Farmington school district evolved a philosophy of personalized learning, gave teachers autonomy to teach freely and has utilized '1 to 1' technology all within the general guidelines of a district strategic plan. This strategic plan has evolved a bit over the past 10 years, but is essentially similar to the plan first presented by then superintendent Jay Haugen and adopted by the school board in 2012-13. The plan was the result of the superintendent meeting with and listening to over 2,000 community members over a period of four months.

The idea to have a school system operate in this free manner came from Superintendent Haugen over time. In a previous district he experimented less successfully by trying to have smart people at the top of the organization figure out what should be done and then have the teachers do it. Seeing that this top-down approach wouldn't work, Superintendent Haugen, at Farmington, decided to have the district outline a strategic plan, identify the competencies that students should have and then let the staff innovate to get the results by whatever means they could.

It helped that the school board, coming off several years of turmoil and with new leadership gave the staff a great deal of leeway. As positive experiences and results began coming back to the board they continued to be supportive. This cycle of board support and positive demonstrable feedback to them by students and teachers on a regular basis was energizing. Over time Farmington began to be recognized for their innovation by other districts and this positive attention also drove the concept forward.

The strategic plan encouraged all learners to possess the capacity and resiliency to create opportunities and master challenges through:

- Collaboration
- Self-Direction and resiliency
- Creative and critical thinking
- Effective communication.

Much ‘agency’ was provided to teachers to experiment and create learning environments in which students could be to a degree freed of the requirements of space, location and time. Especially at the high school, students were treated more as adults and generally responded very well to having more freedom to study and forge some of their own direction. In addition to regular classrooms, there are both quiet learning spaces throughout the buildings and also areas for students to work together in groups.

As a result, the use of a central staff diminished as teachers and principals created their own direction. In fact, the central office was reduced to only six directors and the district employs only four instructional coaches. In reality teachers are now doing more work, but they aren’t being told, from above, what they need to do.

A key message to the teaching staff was that the administration would stop telling them what to do, and rather support them with what is needed. Teachers were then accountable for results and could recreate their classrooms however they preferred.

It does need to be acknowledged that not all teachers thrived in this environment. Key to acceptance to change was the message from the superintendent that no one needed to change or could do so when they were ready. As a result, over nearly 10 years many teachers changed their teaching approaches, but there are some who have not and this remains ‘okay’. In a few instances principals and senior teachers retired early.

The district did grow over this period with enrollments increasing from around 3,000 students to 7,000 students. This provided the opportunity to build and remodel school buildings and to bring on many additional teachers. The district provided \$2 million to redesign facilities and two teachers from each building worked with architects on the remodeling redesigns. New facilities were designed with more open and comfortable spaces and the district quit buying traditional desks and instead replaced them with tables, couches, wobbly chairs, etc. New teachers selected were more entrepreneurial and creative, thus being ready to experiment with innovation. The term

“failing forward” was used to let everyone know that not every change would work and would rather be a chance to build upon as time moved forward.

One individual is worthy of special note, Tara Lee. She began as a parent agitator, was elected to the school board, quickly became the chair, helped with the exit of the previous superintendent and was instrumental in hiring superintendent Haugen. She guided the difficult discussions to purchase individual devices for all students, encouraged the creation of the new strategic plan and nurtured the changes in the district in the early years. Becoming excited about the direction of the district she returned to college, earned a teaching degree and after completing terms on the school board was hired as an elementary teacher. In this present capacity she is a leader in fostering ‘agency’ for teachers and students and is a leader in this capacity within her school. She is now pursuing an administrative license and hopes to someday become a principal.

Ms. Lee reports that from a board perspective they didn’t see much impact. Teachers were initially overwhelmed and others ‘circled around’ hoping this too might pass. There was progress, but leadership teachers were still in a minority. However, within the last three to four years she has seen a tipping point and then exponential growth.

Thus, from the time superintendent Haugen laid out the ‘vision’ in 2012 to the tipping point coming in about 2017, five years transpired. However, even now, there are differences in adoption of the ‘agency’ philosophy with some elementary schools fully on board and others still in the beginning stages. A question in Ms. Lee’s mind is whether the new administration, of which she is very supportive, can be patient enough to let this ‘organic’ change move on at the present pace.

A key step was the administration allowing teachers to go to observe others and to invest quite heavily in professional development; not typical large-group PD sessions, but visits by teachers to interact with some of the more forward thinkers in school innovation around the country.

An important point was that teachers had the freedom to design their own approaches and only when they were ready to do so.

Spring Lake Park's Story

The movement toward a strategic plan that would move the district toward innovation and student-directed learning began in about 2010 during a time of turmoil. The former superintendent Don Helmstetter was working hard to correct a huge financial deficit as well as to convince the citizens of the district to invest in the infrastructure of the school buildings. At this time Jeff Ronneberg, now the current superintendent, came from the Edina district as the assistant superintendent in charge of learning and curriculum. Fortunately, the citizens did approve a technology levy although the move toward '1 to 1' devices wasn't specific in the voting question. Superintendent Helmstetter then retired and Ronneberg assumed that role.

He continued to move forward with redefining the districts strategic plan as he and his team were influenced by Dr. Phillip Schlechty working from Kentucky who was writing and teaching about 'design thinking and 3D design'. Dr. Schlechty had one of the best explanations going, defining learning engagement as "active" and "requiring students to be attentive as well as in attendance." The district's design team began moving in their thinking from a teaching platform to a learning platform. The district also looked outside of education to the way businesses engaged their customers and there were numerous staff visits for professional development including to Wisconsin based CESA 1's Institute for Personalized Learning. From this, they presented their plan to the school board which endorsed the plan, which with modifications and enhancements is still in place today.

This strategic roadmap focuses on student success and outlined projects that lead to the district accomplishing the principles identified in the strategic plan. This plan was not to be static, rather it laid out goals for the next five years and was adapted over time. Their plan was to always focus on student learning success and they diligently looked outside the system for ideas and guidance on emerging trends and technologies.

The current strategic plan identifies the purpose as having high expectations and high achievement for all, with no excuses. As a world-class learning community, it calls for fostering personalized learning that would result in college and career readiness and for students to aspire toward success. It further called for continuous improvement based around three strategic anchors:

- Strategic Anchor #1....Engaged and Enthusiastic Learners
- Strategic Anchor #2....Effective operations

- Strategic Anchor #3....Communications and connections

Anchor #1 called for adults to align to continuously improve personalized learning and include four specific goals:

- A Pathways to Career and College Program in the high school and vertically aligned grades 7-8 elective programming.
- Online and Hybrid Learning.
- Inviting Student Learning Engagement with deepening implementation of classroom and management practices.
- Develop options for computer science for grades K-8

Anchor #2 called to improve the effective management of human, financial and physical resources with these goals:

- Develop customized dashboards to align school, classroom and student information.
- Examine the relationship with the 'Metro Heights' school to identify options to enhance the experience and success of students needing an alternative learning environment.
- Support individual schools in design and implementation of school improvement and innovation plans and personalized learning processes and inviting innovation.
- Increase the readiness of all pre-kindergarten students so that students and families can experience a seamless transition.

Anchor #3 called for increased communication, engagement and support of families and of the community with the following goals:

- Identify current methods and tools used by schools and teachers to communicate with families.
- Continue to refine measures to increase school safety and crisis responsiveness.
- Develop a campaign strategy and communications leading to successful renewal of existing operating and capital projects levies.

The spirit of *innovation* is found everywhere in the district and is reported and repeated by administrators, coordinators and teachers. Even the lead administrator for learning has the title of "Director of Learning and Innovation".

The district also began to grow in student enrollment from about 5,000 to 6,500 students. This necessitated the addition of facilities and the district used design principles leading to flexible learning spaces with input from the community and professional services from the Cunningham Architectural Group. Changing spaces were following the changes in teaching and learning styles. Throughout, flexible learning was a key consideration.

Enrollment growth also required the hiring of teachers. With many newer teachers coming on, the average age of the teaching staff, even now, is 37 years old. All this time innovation was constantly promoted. The district partnered with Flip Grid which provided innovation directed professional development seminars (a bit like TED talks) with 100 teachers participating at each of four different times. The commitment to professional development was significant.

This led to forming project teams which created programs such as an elementary 'looped classroom' initiative, the Pathways program at the high school and implementation of design thinking across the district.

The school board participated in two retreats with Jim Rickabaugh and became excited that the conversations at the board level had shifted toward what was best for students. The board included a champion, Amy Hennen, who is now the board chair and Jim Amstein who was determined to keep the board out of micromanagement. The board members also helped to navigate parent concerns.

Key administrators that helped in numerous ways include Hope Rahn, the director of learning and innovation, Ryan Stromberg, Director of Human Resources and Amy Schultz, director of business services. At the building levels a number of the principals really believed in advancing personalized learning. A few believed, but were unable to bring their staffs along. They had to make changes in approach that meant giving up control and giving more agency (freedom) to their teaching staffs. In a few instances this didn't happen and there were administrative changes.

The district also invested heavily, but wisely, in learning coaches. These positions evolved over time as needs changed. The district now employs 23 full- or part-time coaches/coordinators. This was a deliberate shift in resources with a decision to limit the number of para professional aides and use these funds to hire more skilled professional licensed staff. A typical district of this size would have 200-250 aides and Spring Lake Park employs fewer than 100. Again, because of limited finances, the district would make more 'one-time' expenditures, especially in professional develop-

ment and design teams as a way to avoid the pitfall of permanently funding programs that then couldn't be sustained.

The whole district 'brand' is about innovation and teachers are living it daily.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE REDESIGN BETWEEN FARMINGTON AND SPRING LAKE PARK

Several similarities in the experiences of these two districts have been mentioned already; including emerging from difficult times, student enrollment growth, early adoption of '1 to 1' technology strategies and smart leadership.

Throughout this case study the words '1 to 1' appear. This refers to the districts making a decision to provide a technology device for every student and staff member. In many cases these were Apple iPads; in some districts In some cases they were Google Chromebooks. In either case, every student and staff member had access to the internet and the ability to communicate with each other.

There are additional similarities that have led to success including:

- Investment in Professional Development
- A culture of Innovation
- Removal of fear of failure
- Student responsibility for learning
- Simple and workable Strategic Plans
- Flattened organizational structure
- Creative and able financial management

Both districts *invested heavily in professional development*. Significant numbers of staff visited other learning communities such as High Tech High in California, the Apple visitors' site at Cupertino, California and programs across the nation. Further they brought in education leaders and people looking to the future, such as Jim Rickabaugh of CESA 1 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Incidentally Dr. Rickabaugh was a former superintendent in Burnsville, MN. Teachers even today cite experiences of movies shown and speakers at district level workshops that inspired them. In addition, each of the superintendents articulated their vision for education to their staffs.

As time progressed a *culture of innovation* became almost cult-like among the professional staffs. Teachers relished the chance to try new approaches and the fear of failure dissipated. It should be noted that staff were also allowed to come along at their own pace and within their comfort zones. Thus, this did not feel so much like a forced new program in the beginning years.

Both districts looked for ways to *encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning programs*. Students were provided many opportunities to learn outside of their desks; in multiple work stations, in nooks and crannies in halls and open areas. The districts worked overtime to create more and more of these areas in their buildings. One business manager could not even remember the last time the district even bought a desk.

Both districts developed *workable, simple and direct strategic plans*. These plans were notably short, didn't go into binders in a bookcase, but were used regularly by staff as they looked at the WHY and the HOW of their approaches. Many of the new experiments tried were vetted in research about organization success that came from both inside and from beyond the field of education. The strategic plans can be seen on the districts' websites: www.farmington.k12.mn.us and www.springlakeparkschools.org.

In each district the *organizational structure was flattened*. Principals, coordinators and lead teachers were given wide authority to encourage and approve innovative ideas. The districts also were blessed with excellent school boards, on which many members remained for extended periods. The boards were influential in shaping the strategic direction of each district and were constantly kept informed of new initiatives; otherwise stayed at an appropriate distance as they gave the professional staffs the latitude to experiment and innovate.

In both districts the teacher unions have been supportive. In Farmington the current president is a facilitator of instructional support in one of the buildings, and in Spring Lake Park the current union president is a member of the competency-based cohort and is considered a leader in this work.

Finally, each district had a *creative and able financial manager* who was able to embrace the idea of flexible innovation and at the same time manage the finances of the district in a responsible manner. Often one-time expenditures were used, to avoid increasing cost; at other times strategic reductions in one area offset increased expenses in others. Each of these districts had modest funding streams compared to comparable districts.

There were also differences as each district took this journey.

In the case of Farmington, schools and staff were granted large latitude to experiment with little control from central office administrators. In fact, the central office became more of an enterprise system and the schools purchased services. It was quickly found that not all the central office services were wanted or necessary. Thus, the central functions of the district were reduced significantly and the funding shifted toward the schools. There were only minimal investments made in coordinators and coaches. Rather principals and the teaching staffs began to experiment with new approaches consistent with the overarching strategic vision and goals. A significant part of the district level administration's work was to provide cover and support so these experiments could flourish. This feeling of freedom for the staff was important and infectious, thus encouraging more staff and schools to participate.

In the case of Spring Lake Park, the support within the system was more directed with the evolution of innovation coaches and coordinators that had responsibility to help and encourage teachers as new programs and approaches were developed. There were champions among the school administrators that embraced the principles of personalizing learning and helped their staffs begin to form teaching teams that would combine curricular areas, design new programs and participate in planning to remodel spaces within the buildings that gave students more freedom of location for learning. At the high school level there was a major effort to create vocational pathways for students and the school reached out to the business communities for participation and guidance.

In conclusion, the differences were mainly in the structure of the effort. Farmington was more organic with less support from the district and intermediate administrative levels. Spring Lake Park decided to utilize lead persons to a greater extent to be the coaches that supported and encouraged the reinvention of their approaches to learning. *In each case the movement toward personalization of learning and of providing greater 'agency' for teachers was a steady and growing movement.*

Each District had similar experiences with utilizing the "Innovation Zone" 2012 legislation. Both superintendents found the Innovation Zone legislation to have little tangible value. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) wasn't seen as helpful to either district in removing barriers, although Spring Lake Park didn't see the MDE as hindering its efforts. After a time, Farmington decided to find ways to allow resources to be expended and regulations followed rather than to ask for explicit permission from the MDE. However, the less tangible result is that the legislation

allowed teachers and administrators feel like they had permission to experiment and that became a powerful motivator to help build momentum within the districts.

OUTCOMES

Quantifying results is challenging, as these districts truly are changing the measurement paradigm. They think not about ‘district’ results but about ‘individual student results’. Both districts believe that learning should be personalized; thus results are to be tracked on an individual student basis, not a large group basis.

The traditional view has been that results are measured as the percentage of students graduating and the proportion that are proficient at various grade levels. It looks at how the whole group of students scores on tests and then disaggregates the results based on gender, race, poverty, etc.

Instead, these districts emphasize how each particular student does in comparison to his/her individual aptitude, challenges and background. The outcomes should focus on the individual growth versus the measurement of whole groups of students. Both districts are more focused on developing critical thinkers who are powerful learners than on how they score on standardized tests.

In both districts teachers and administrators report that there are fewer behavior problems with students; that disciplinary problems have decreased to about one half the rate experienced previously. Further, individual failures in middle school and high school courses have also decreased significantly.

That said, each district does indicate positive results of the state-required tests during these past years. Farmington shows increasing graduation rates for most categories of students from 2015 to 2019 when the move toward personalized learning started coming to scale. Farmington also has NWEA scores trending above both the state and national averages.

Spring Lake Park has quantitative results that are steady and positive even though the demographics of the district have changed quite dramatically since they began this work, with increases in the percentages of limited-English learners and students experiencing poverty. However, scores on standardized tests were not the driver in this district. Rather, identifying the learning by each individual student, based on the student’s plan for growth, is of primary importance.

Spring Lake Park uses the NWEA tests of individual competency and doesn't believe the standardized MCA assessments are the right kind of measures for their students so does not make these its focus. In spite of de-emphasizing the importance of the standardized tests, the district has seen every cohort have more students proficient than the previous year on both the NWEAs and the MCAs. While overall their proficiency levels are not where they want them to be, more students are gaining proficiency every year.

Each district is working on developing new metrics to measure individual student work. That is why, in each district, they are working hard at the moment to develop competency-based learning and to measure the learning with competency-based measurements. This is a new dynamic that pushes hard against the traditional large-group standardized metrics on the past.

CONCLUSIONS

The level of pride, enthusiasm and excitement among those interviewed in both the Farmington and Spring Lake Park districts was amazing. Staff were engaged and wanted to tell the stories of their own journeys, the changes underway in their districts and the challenges ahead. Staff in both districts are well on their way toward personalizing their own teaching styles and providing students with the tools and permission to find their own comfort levels as learners. Teachers loved that they were considered to be professionals and allowed to develop the craft of teaching.

In his book, *The Split Screen Strategy*, Ted Kolderie suggests that education does not have to be re-formed in one sweeping change and indeed that change would not be successful with that approach. What is happening in these two school districts is a ‘split screen’ strategy on steroids. Their strategic plans are district-level documents that encourage and provide buildings, departments, grade levels and individual teachers the ‘agency’, the freedom, to personalize their teaching and to find ways to help students become self-directed learners. This is a split screen with many, not one or two, screens.

The journey of these districts now spans a full decade and demonstrates that substantial innovative change comes slowly. Initial forays were scattered and it was a period of several years, with coaching and encouragement, before a tipping point was reached. In each district the tipping point when there was wide-scale acceptance of innovation came after five to six years. Even now, after a decade, while numerous new and innovative programs and initiatives in place, the growth of the concepts laid out in the strategic plans needs continued nurturing.

It is important to note that the strategic direction for these districts did not come from the superintendents alone. While had the original vision, they sought the support of their school boards and then engaged many community members and staff in designing the strategic objectives. Thus there was significant ‘buy in’ about the new direction of each district from many people. Each school board then adopted the strategic plan and, more important, left it to the administration and staff to carry it out. In each district the strategic plans were updated over the years. The membership of the

school boards remained mostly steady and the board members were effective shields to protect the changes under way when there was the occasional parental pushback.

Significant investments in professional development and in the study of proven research were required. Both larger-scale professional development events for staff and the ability of small groups of staff to seek out these opportunities really helped provide the inspiration and confidence to make innovative changes.

Providing ‘agency’ to teachers leads to a positive culture over time. Agency, freedom, also means that teachers are not forced to make changes. With coaching and support, they are allowed to do so when they are ready, and to choose those with whom they wish to innovate. The districts have provided opportunities for teachers to participate in different initiatives and cohorts along the way. A part of the administration’s job is to provide support and protection as needed when new innovations are launched.

Student freedom to select where to study, what to study and with whom to study is an important element of encouraging students to become more self-directed on their paths to learning. The efforts in each district to remodel the learning spaces and to develop more flexibility with time were important steps in encouraging students. Teachers in both districts found that almost all students, from the very young to those nearing exit from the system, adjusted well to increased freedom and used it responsibly.

These districts had some similarities and some differences in their approach to where they are today. Both developed simple and understandable strategic plans that were (and are) known and understood by staff, parents and school boards. They both engaged in a full district makeover rather than doing limited pilot projects. They both adopted ‘1 to 1’ technology for use by all, not for the technology alone but to promote the individualization of learning. They provided significant professional development. They communicated often and well. They both were responsible and creative in their use of funding and both pushed against the larger entrenched bureaucracies at the state level.

In Farmington, the district level offices function on an ‘enterprise’ basis, selling their services to the buildings. If the building staff didn’t need the service, it wasn’t purchased. Especially in Farmington’s case this resulted in a downsizing of district-office-level personnel.

Spring Lake Park took a more deliberate approach in developing initiatives and programs, and invested rather heavily in ‘coaches’ and ‘coordinators’ to help guide teachers as they experimented with innovation. Farmington took a more ‘organic’

approach allowing teachers to experiment; to feel they could do so when ready, and not do so at all if not so inclined. The result is that Spring Lake Park identifies more programs while Farmington tends to have more experiential innovations underway.

The challenge for Farmington may be to resist the urgency to push more teachers into teaching/learning strategies that they feel unprepared for as they try to bring the whole district to scale with personalized learning. The challenge for Spring Lake Park may be to be relaxed enough in their approach so that teachers don't feel that they are giving up their agency to move forward at their own pace.

Time will tell if each district can keep its momentum going. If the two are able to maintain steady leadership, continue to have the majority of their teachers feeling a trust in the district's direction and see a continuing support from their communities, this strategy of innovation can hopefully continue. And students coming from these institutions will be better prepared to be life-long and enthused learners.

At the state level there were two "Innovation Zone" legislative adoptions. The first was passed in 2012 and had little practical impact in freeing these districts from the confines of the regulations of the Department of Education. However, the intangible result was that the teachers and administrators in these districts believed that the legislation gave them permission to experiment and they did so.

A second "Innovation Zone" legislation was passed in 2017, keeping the same provisions of the 2012 legislation, but made the language more purposeful. The Commissioner of Education encouraged more districts to apply for exemptions to regulations. However, the exemptions were not approved—to the anger of many superintendents. Another set of amendments was presented to the 2020 legislative session, but—opposed apparently by the MDE—did not pass.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This writer makes the following recommendations to districts and leaders who want to follow, to a degree, the Farmington and Spring Lake Park Schools.

- Articulate the vision.
- Engage the community widely to create a simple and direct strategic plan around the vision.
- Find a few early innovators and encourage them to try new approaches.
- Invest in professional development (PD) both on a large scale to staff and with personalized and self-directed PD for the innovators. Have them visit others for inspiration.
- Invest short-term funds to help new ideas and programs in the start-up mode and then have them operate 'cost neutrally' as they mature. This will prevent these innovations from budget reductions when those times inevitably come.
- Begin to redesign spaces and time allocations to encourage personalized learning opportunities.
- If morally and legally possible make changes and allow experiments to happen. Don't ask for permission from higher levels as likely you will be told 'no' or at best won't receive a very encouraging answer.
- Be patient! Change takes time.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Every researcher sees more work to be done.

Since this case study has been researched and written in this unprecedented time of the coronavirus pandemic, huge changes are underway in education at all levels and it is unknown how schooling may change going forward. This research was limited in that no human contact was made and rather all interviews were done using on-line technology or by telephone.

Thus, a number of areas for further research are suggested, including:

1. A further investigation into the attitudes of actual students in the two districts about what their experiences were in having greater agency and to the extent that they found opportunities for self-directed learning on a small or larger scale.
2. A post high-school-graduation study of students completing their educations at Farmington and Spring Lake Park, to seek the students' opinions of how much self-directed learning is now helping them in careers and in college.
3. A quantitative study of the level of educational proficiency that was gained, or lost, due to the sudden move by all schools in 2020 to a full on-line learning environment. Are children learning to read, are they progressing in math and are they even engaged? What is the result of a cessation of larger group activities in sports and music; how are they using their time as the result of not having to be transported back and forth to school, and to what degree has human interaction suffered or gained?
4. Beyond further research, there should be thinking and planning about what approaches might work best to encourage other districts to examine what Farmington and Spring Lake Park have been doing and to encourage others to move toward helping their staffs and students embrace innovation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Charles Kyte has taught physics, chemistry, and math, has been a coach, a secondary school principal in the Eden Valley-Watkins district (serving also as mayor of Eden Valley); later was superintendent of that district before becoming superintendent of the Northfield schools, in 1989. In 2000 he became executive director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA).

Kyte received his PhD in Educational Administration from the University of Minnesota in 1987. He holds a specialist's degree from Mankato State University, a master's degree from St. Cloud State University, and a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota at Duluth. He was a participant in the Bush School Executive Fellowship Program. In 2011 the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota presented him their "Distinguished Alumni Award".

The Northfield Schools were recognized in Money Magazine's list of the top 100 schools in the USA in 1997. Kyte initiated language-immersion and elementary choice programs for Northfield's Greenvale Park elementary school, which led to the school being named a "Blue Ribbon School of Excellence."

As the Executive Director of MASA Dr. Kyte was a leader in convincing the Minnesota legislature to create the Minnesota Board of School Administrators which now oversees all of the programs of preparation of school administrators in Minnesota.

He retired from the MASA position at the end of August 2011. Currently he serves as an educational consultant, advising school districts and the businesses that serve schools. He is a past board member of the Northfield Hospital and Clinics, is a board member of and investor with several companies and conducts executive searches for school districts.

APPENDIX

The Purpose of Giving Teachers ‘Agency’

The section on Outcomes (on page 40) explains the decision by these two districts to set a definition of achievement far broader than the definition set in state law and common in the conventional discussion about student achievement.

This new definition is a key element of the strategic plan adopted by the boards in the two districts. Essentially the boards are explaining to the schools and their teachers the skills, capabilities and characteristics the board wants to see in the young people graduating. A discussion of those strategic plans appears on page 30 (for Farmington) and on page 32 (for Spring Lake Park).

In reading this case study it is critical to understand that ‘agency’ is provided to the teachers to help them develop in their students the competencies set out in the strategic plans.

In what follows you see that the goals set out for student achievement by the Farmington board have to do mainly with the development of critical thinking, collaboration, communication, self-management, character-development, problem-solving and personal leadership.

Starting with these objectives in mind, it is easier for the teachers to know how to vary their instruction and how to adapt to the characteristics of the individual student.

All learners possess the capacity and resiliency to create opportunities and master challenges through

Collaboration

Self-Direction and Resiliency

Creative and Critical Thinking

Effective Communication



Collaboration

- Respectfully working with others in meaningful and productive ways
- Flexible, open minded, confident and adaptable when working with and receiving feedback from others
- Ability to understand oneself and others in a way that will allow for growth

Self-Direction and Resiliency

- Accept feedback; both positive and constructive. Use of feedback to reflect and chart a new course of where you are going.
- Self-directed learner with effective time management skills
- Overcome adversity through persistence, perseverance, self-advocacy and a growth mindset
- See failure as an opportunity to grow
- Ownership of choices and the resulting outcomes

Creative and Critical Thinking

- Develop and implement solutions to unique challenges
- Reflect on past learning experiences when faced with new situations and challenges
- Questions, reasons and weighs evidence to reach conclusions
- Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work and understand the real world limits to adopting new ideas

Effective Communication

- Remains open to communicating with a variety of people, familiar and unfamiliar
- Articulate thoughts and ideas effectively using verbal, written, electronic, and visual skills in a variety of forms and contexts

All Learners Continuously Achieve Their Academic and Personal Goals through

Agency

Flexibility and Adaptability

Self-Direction and Resiliency

Balance



Agency

- Create advantageous goals
- Initiate action towards goals
- Utilize self-assessment and reflection as part of the learning process
- Understand the locus of control is inside them

Flexibility and Adaptability

- Accept feedback; both positive and constructive. Use of feedback to reflect and chart a new course of where you are going.
- Self-directed learner with effective time management skills
- Overcome adversity through persistence, perseverance, self-advocacy and a growth mindset
- See failure as an opportunity to grow
- Ownership of choices and the resulting outcomes

Self-Direction and Resiliency

- Accept feedback; both positive and constructive. Use of feedback to reflect and chart a new course of where you are going.
- Self-directed learner with effective time management skills
- Overcome adversity through persistence, perseverance, self-advocacy and a growth mindset
- See failure as an opportunity to grow
- Ownership of choices and the resulting outcomes

Balance

- Create time to engage in activities that spark interest
- Proactively manage energy
- Seek happiness and joy
- Prioritize healthy nutrition and appropriate rest

Each learner leads beneficial change locally and globally through

Authentic Application

Collaboration

Service

Problem Solving

Authentic Application

- Apply their skills/passions/interests to serve others
- Awareness of the world around them
- Ability to respond empathetically
- Strong sense of self worth
- Understands their intrinsic motivations

Collaboration

- Respectfully working with others in meaningful and productive ways
- Flexible, open minded, confident and adaptable when working with and receiving feedback from others
- Ability to understand oneself and others in a way that will allow for growth

Service

- Embrace the civic responsibility as a member of their communities
- Recognize where things can be better and take action
- Ability to respond empathetically
- Awareness of the world around you
- Problem solving skills infused with optimism

Problem Solving

- Develop and implement solutions to unique challenges
- Reflect on past learning experiences when faced with new situations and challenges
- Questions, reasons and weighs evidence to reach conclusions
- Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work and understand the real-world limits to adopting new ideas



The Center for Policy Design is pleased to have been able to assist Charles Kyte in his case study of this significant educational innovation, and in its publication.

Should you wish to forward it to others, the case study is available also as a pdf on the website of the Center.

The link is: <https://bit.ly/kytereport>.

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