



## RESPONSIVENESS IS KEY TO NEW JERSEY DISTRICT'S LEARNING DESIGN

BY BRUCE "B.C." PRESTON

**T**here are few, if any, who would say that teaching is the same as it was even a decade ago. Many teachers will attest to the fact that more is expected of them and their students. As the teacher's role has changed, so has the school leader's.

After all, if the school leader position — arguably one of the most influential positions in a school district — is not evolving, how could those filling this role successfully establish a reimagined vision for teaching, successfully support teachers in a transition toward realizing that vision, and establish a sense of teacher collective efficacy that the very roles by which many teachers have defined their lives still matter?

Howell Township Public Schools in Monmouth County, New Jersey, has reimagined the roles of teachers, school leaders, and all educational professionals around the concept of a team of learning engineers who, through their students, make the world a better place.

While education has long required teachers to work in groups, professional learning communities (PLCs), teams, and communities of practice to improve their practice, teams of learning engineers go beyond these structures to reimagine the role of leaders, the way they draw on teacher expertise, and the way resources and supports are leveraged so that professional learning meets everyone's needs.

To support this evolution of

learning environments, Howell Township has dramatically reorganized its professional learning around a school-focused, collective, continual sensitivity to learner agency. To best understand how we have reorganized professional learning, it is helpful to look at our shifts alongside what organizational psychology refers to as collective mindfulness in high-reliability organizations (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).

The five key elements of collective mindfulness within high-reliability organizations are:

- Commitment to resilience;
- Deference to expertise;
- Sensitivity to operations;
- Reluctance to simplify; and
- Preoccupation with failure.

## 1 COMMITMENT TO RESILIENCE

While we have a sound and established vision for our learning environments, we have found that we make more progress toward that vision when our goals and plans are not rigid or highly definitive.

The authors of *Gamestorming* have written, “In knowledge work, we need our goals to be fuzzy” (Gray, Brown, & Macanuso, 2013). Jim Knight and Doug Reeves suggest that “fat plans don’t roll” (2011) and Karl Weick has said, “Most plans are too specific. . . . As a result, when you have a plan, you tend not to look for things that disconfirm it” (Coutu, 2003).

In Howell Township, we are not absent of plans. Rather, our plans are small, light, and resilient enough to allow us to constantly assess progress and make midcourse corrections based on what is working and what is not. By moving beyond adherence to deeply detailed district action plans, school leaders are empowered to shift their own plans as best benefits the school’s needs. Structures are in place so the voices of principals advocating for their schools can find the support needed and even influence the direction of the district.

## 2 DEFERENCE TO EXPERTISE

We organize our work around the idea that modern school leadership is not a soloist’s pursuit. Distributive leadership is critical to the way we reimagine the role of school leaders. Just assembling the team of learning engineers is hardly enough;

deferring to their expertise is critical to invigorating a thriving community of learners.

One way to identify and build the capacity of expert teacher leaders is through a structure like a school improvement panel. By state regulations, every school in New Jersey must have a school improvement panel that includes two school administrators and one teacher. Structured to invite a variety of perspectives, each of our schools has a school improvement panel whose core participants represent learning engineers from each grade within the school, special education, Response to Intervention, an instructional coach, and one school administrator.

While other roles and staff will participate as the needs demand, the school improvement panel as a whole is responsible for observing and determining the staff’s professional learning needs and monitoring the fidelity of the observation process. In Howell Township, we saw school improvement panels as an operational boon for our efforts to reorganize professional learning.

Moving far beyond compliance with state law, the school improvement panels have become the lead learning community in each school in our district. Using observation and evaluation data and input from teachers, school improvement panels look for patterns of student performance and instructional practice.

In addition, classroom teachers share their needs and innovative

ideas at their PLCs, which then share them with the school improvement panel. Then the school improvement panels determine the professional learning designs that can best meet each student’s learning needs and each teacher’s instructional needs.

Once we begin the professional learning, we observe changes in classroom practices with an eye for improved student outcomes. This structure empowers teachers — who are the experts of their own needs and innovations — to organize, design, and deliver the best, most appropriate, most relevant professional learning possible. Traditionally, principals research those patterns on their own, but with teams of learning engineers in each school, the principals’ confident deference to teacher expertise makes room for a much more agile and responsive school system.

To find the right teacher leaders with the needed expertise for the school improvement panels, principals must have an intimate knowledge of best instructional practices. Inspired by a leadership book study of Jim Knight’s *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction* (2011), our superintendent, Joseph Isola, established a curriculum study series for all principals and vice principals.

Math/science and literacy supervisors facilitate the series, along with guest facilitators selected through participant input. Through this series, which carves out three hours every month for principal professional

learning, principals better understand what constitutes best practices in each subject area, which teacher leaders are using them, and how to support those who are not yet using them consistently.

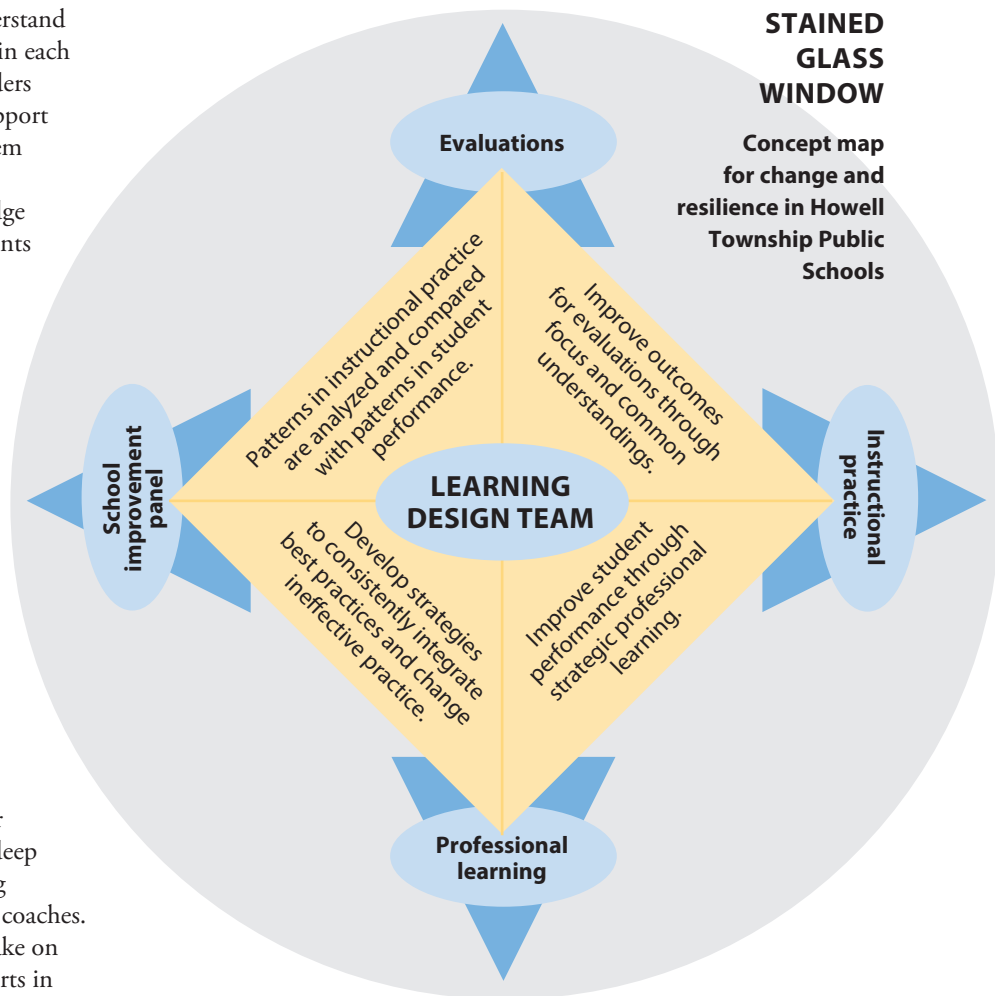
Increasing leaders' knowledge of critical curriculum components increases their ability to better support the expertise represented in districtwide, cross-departmentally developed curriculum.

It is not possible, however, for a principal to be the instructional expert in all areas while meeting all of the competing demands of the role. Having enough knowledge to know what expertise looks like, and how to partner with those who have it, allows principals to strike a mindful balance across those competing demands.

To ensure that expertise for instructional practices is both deep and wide, our teams of learning engineers include instructional coaches. Twelve instructional coaches take on the responsibility of being experts in both instructional practices and adult learning. While they are docked at specific schools and serve on specific school improvement panels, these individuals are considered to be districtwide coaches.

They each possess unique skills or needed content-area expertise. Should a particular skill be in demand at a different school than where a coach is docked, the coach will pick up anchor and set sail. They do so with clear and specific intentions but also great latitude in partnering with each principal to address identified needs and any others unearthed along the way. Creating such flexibility in where the expertise lives provides school leaders with exactly what they need, when they need it, for the specific issues arising in classrooms.

The coaches meet in monthly PLC and coaches meetings. Through



**STAINED GLASS WINDOW**  
 Concept map for change and resilience in Howell Township Public Schools

participation in this community of practice, the coaching team is aware of the needs of all 12 schools, and therefore coaches hold unique perspectives on patterns of needs and successes across the district.

While meeting, the coaches cross-pollinate ideas and discuss which skill sets best address which needs. This collaboration helps to sustain a deep and continuously renewed pool of coaching expertise, in turn creating a sense of resilience and efficacy for principals in the belief that they have the right resources, people, and expertise to meet the shifting demands within their schools.

### **3 AWARENESS OF OPERATIONS**

An awareness of operations may not be often associated with providing reliably high-quality

professional learning, but the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) point out the need for allocating appropriate resources, including financial, logistical, human, and other.

To support such professional learning, the operations teams and district leaders must clearly connect all the needed resources and moving parts. If the district doesn't do so, it leaves the principal to connect those parts by himself or herself. This is a near-impossible task and increases the risk of creating conflicting priorities between a school and a district.

A keystone element of success for our district is the way the school improvement panels connect to district leadership. We have depicted this in a concept map we call the Stained Glass Window (see figure above). It visually

outlines the district's support for each school's efforts.

In the figure, notice that learning design team sits in the middle of the map.

We developed the learning design team through collaboration with Rider University and Learning Forward New Jersey, the state affiliate of the national organization, because we realized we needed a districtwide committee to mirror the same decision-making process used by the school improvement panels. The learning design team is therefore the district-level equivalent of the school improvement panel.

This group gathers school patterns of need from each of the school improvement panels and organizes professional learning for the entire district based on the school needs shared from individual classrooms. We have learned that this process gathers the innovations the district needs from individual classrooms, iterates them within schools, and expands them across the district. By restructuring operations this way, all levels of the system work in concert with one another to more efficiently meet learners' goals.

#### 4 RELUCTANCE TO SIMPLIFY

If we oversimplify the complexity and dynamics of a school environment and all that goes into making it successful, school leaders will miss the weak signals of presently small issues, leaving them open to grow into future catastrophes.

Without the proper operational resources and structures in place, beleaguered school leaders are forced to engage in this cycle of simplifying their understandings of the issues they face and the solutions designed to address them and therefore facing more challenges.

In contrast, teams of learning engineers are able to be collectively mindful in their understanding of the dynamics of the learning environments they support, as long as the other

elements outlined above are firmly in place.

Collective mindfulness occurs when staff are able to focus "the scarce commodity of individual attention" on the most pressing needs in any given moment (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999). Leaders can defer to the expertise of teams empowering them to respond to those weak signals, unpack and resolve their complexity, then quickly pivot back to success.

In schools with the longest and strongest fidelity of the reimagined roles of learning engineers, we see the greatest growth of collective teacher efficacy, student success, and overall health of the school. Our reflections and data suggest that collectively mindful schools have high levels of collective teacher efficacy and, in keeping with John Hattie's (Visible Learning, n.d.) research, those schools are also experiencing the greatest gains in learner success, both adult and child.

#### 5 PREOCCUPATION WITH FAILURE

Collective mindfulness literature describes a preoccupation with failure as actively and mindfully looking for the weakest present signals of catastrophic future failures. This may seem strange or counterintuitive and somewhat depressing for thriving schools. The reality is, we educators are always looking for failure and remediating it.

In Howell Township, our preoccupation with failure means assuming that failure is inevitable, assuming that failure is a system issue and not a person issue, being confident that we can spot failure early through our teams of learning engineers, and being even more confident that failure can be solved through our system of reliably high-quality professional learning.

In having this preoccupation with failure, we fail forward. Our systems, operations, and learning designs are not designed to avoid mistakes, but to know better how to make them and

learn from them.

The best innovations come from classrooms and teachers, when they are given the opportunity. Having structures in place so classroom-level innovations can support school and district strategies has supported our school leaders in being far more agile in their ability to meet the demands they face and improve student outcomes. There is still work to do, but we are confident that our collective efforts will benefit every student.

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