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Redesign: A Case Study of Change in a Kansas School District


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Redesign: A Case Study of Change in a Kansas School District

Fred Van Ranken and Lori Goodson

Setting the Stage

For decades, the nation—including educators, community members, and scholars—have been grappling with the idea of school reform. Various entities have developed a variety of policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to its most recent version, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Schneider and Keesler, 2007) and debated the value of accountability and assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2004). While they have taken various approaches, one point has been clear—they have been seeking change.

Approximately three years ago, Kansas Education Commissioner Randy Watson and the Kansas State Department of Education determined the time was right for change in the state's education system. The path toward that change was unveiled as the Kansas Can School Redesign Project, an ongoing program that would involve multiple cohorts of districts developing their own pathways toward improvement. Each round of selected districts was named after the U.S. space program: Mercury 7, followed by Gemini I, Gemini II, and, finally, Apollo.



After inviting all Kansas school districts to apply for the initial cohort, Mercury 7, seven districts were selected from 29 applications (KSDE website). USD 240 Twin Valley School District, consisting of Bennington Grade School and Bennington Junior High/High School in Bennington and Tescott Grade School and Tescott Junior High/High School, was one of those seven initially selected in August 2017. Bennington High School and Tescott Elementary School were the two schools actually selected by KSDE, but the USD 240 district determined that they would implement redesign at all levels in both buildings.

Much like a theatrical play, the district's efforts can be seen in various stages or acts. This article tells of Twin Valley's journey in redesign, through the records of a researcher who has documented that trajectory for more than a year, as well as through the eyes of the district's superintendent, whose lived experiences provide a personal perspective of the past three years and a look toward the future.

Act I: First Steps

As USD 240 signed on to Kansas Redesign, the administrators, faculty, and staff were stepping into a brave new world of education. While KSDE signaled that change was needed—and welcomed—through this approach, no specific path was given. The districts, such as USD 240, were provided the freedom to develop their own plans to meet their students' specific needs.

That's even more complicated with Twin Valley because that district features separate schools in Tescott and Bennington, combined into the one district. To be more reflective of the needs of each school's specific student body, they have taken somewhat different paths. However, the two schools do work together with redesign efforts, as noted by Tyler Trout, Bennington Junior High and High School science teacher.

"The communication and collaboration between staff is tremendous, [as well as] between the two schools in the district. The terminology, similar processes...teachers get together and discuss how things are going, strategies. We get together sometimes it's time to vent, but communication in the workplace has changed" (Trout, 2018).

Initially—and not unexpectedly, some teachers were skeptical of the approach.

No one can accuse Andrea Pickering, a fifth-grade teacher who primarily teaches math and co-teaches social studies and science at Bennington Elementary, of immediately jumping on the redesign bandwagon. Pickering also has children in the schools. It was her role as a parent that actually got her more involved in the project.

"When it first started, I was very much opposed...vocally opposed. As a parent, I didn't have a lot of information. I didn't feel informed. They were not being able to answer my questions and concerns. I needed to be involved" (Pickering, 2018).

So she joined Bennington Elementary School's leadership team and is now a part of the committee that focuses on parent and community involvement.

Act I: First Steps: Superintendent's View. In deciding whether to apply for the Redesign project, we considered some key points regarding why we should change.

First and foremost, our students deserve better than to work in an outdated system they have to endure until they graduate from a public school. Their time spent in our schools should not only prepare them for the world of work, but it also should adequately prepare them for life.

We also relied on Twin Valley data on assessment, post-secondary success, and anecdotal student/parent/teacher data gathered the year prior to redesign, which was my first year as superintendent with the district.

Our faculty and administrators also determined that plans must have the capacity built within strategies and tactics to:

- Be malleable in relation interventions
- Be solid from a research-based perspective

Additionally, it is critical that the plan consider the context of application vs. the intent of the plan regarding a variety of factors.

A key element involves that implicit guidance and control from a personal operating perspective must allow for flexibility while still remaining within the intent of the plan.

People need to not only feel empowered to do good work, but they also must be required to do independent, good work related to student success. All of us involved need to willingly provide feedback up and down the chain of command to ensure our students' success. It's also key that our teachers have no fear of reprisal regarding this process, as we are all aware of the intent to positively impact our approaches. Communication must flow throughout the system, allowing for strategic adjustments to tactics.

Other critical elements include:

- Inclusive and SYSTEM-driven (not one faction).
- Strategic with critical thinking components embedded within the planning system

Measurements of success needs to be a balance of process and outcome. When measuring process, set goals must contain interventions that do not have an emotional tie to the goal itself. Proximal and distal measures, as well as qualitative and quantitative measures, should be considered. When measuring outcomes, this is where one should place their emotional connection to the goal itself. BUT it needs to be one that is not a comparison-related goal (i.e. not in comparison with another school, district, individual, etc.), and it should be a non-competitive outcome performance.

Through this process, accountability and support are vital to its success and should be built into the planning, as should systemic review opportunities (that are legitimate).

Hierarchy is such that failure is not seen as a condemnation for personnel, rather an opportunity for growth (unless repeated based upon lack of capacity of an individual).

And, it is imperative that implicit guidance and control are the norm throughout the redesign process.

Act II: Moving Forward

Various aspects of redesign have brought about growth—for students, faculty, and the community.



“The redesign changes have meant students are starting to manage time and have gotten better at managing themselves and goal setting. They are finding strategies that work for them, whether it's notes or flash cards or other approaches. And they're working toward building a collaborative approach in working with other students to learn the content (Pickering, 2018).

Pickering pointed out that the educators are still defining what redesign looks like.

“The changes we make are what works best for Bennington—our kids and our community. Redesign is not one size fits all” (Pickering, 2018).

For some teachers, it's flexible seating, where students have choices on the seating for their class—from rockers to standing desks—multiple options to choose from as they decide what kind of learning environment best fits them. For others, it's the focus on helping students become more self-reliant in an effort to prepare them for life beyond the school system.

Teacher Darren Rodine isn't on any of the redesign committees but attends the redesign meetings from time to time; likewise, he said, the committees are good about sharing updates with the rest of the faculty.

“One of the things I liked is the terminology—it's fluent and consistent between subject matters. Terms such as “evidence” and “claims” cross content boundaries, from English/language arts to math (Rodine, 2018).

Students are working to set quality goals and being more pro-active regarding their educational needs because of the redesign efforts. Likewise, students at the college level can feel overwhelmed and could benefit from goal-setting support such as that in Summit (Rodine, 2018). Summit is a program the district's faculty selected to provide a basis for their content. It is computer-based and allows for students to be self-paced, with related hands-on projects.

“With Summit, you have the data in front of you. It's intentional and informed. You're still teaching whole-class lessons, but you can trust the numbers a bit. There are checkpoints—the feedback piece—to see if they should move on [in the curriculum]” (Rodine, 2018).

Act II: Moving Forward: Superintendent's View. This past winter, four members of the USD 240 BOE presented at the December 2019 Kansas Association of School Boards Annual Conference in Wichita, Kansas. As we were preparing for that presentation, one thing that we wanted to show is that Redesign is not one thing, rather a collection of strategies, tactics, and tools to improve student outcomes. In the process, we developed a list of 36 things (see Table 1) that have been done or attempted since beginning our involvement in this initiative.

One thing to keep in mind as it relates to the list is that the things done were not as important as the reasons for doing them. Twin Valley has a list of tenets that serve to guide all aspects of redesign, essentially the filter through which all decisions are made. There are four student, two parent, and three staff tenets. During all deliberations at any level, we have asked (required) that the things we do align with those guiding tenets. If they do not, we should not engage.

A perfect example of being guided by the tenets is one of the more tools we are using in grades 4-12 for the core content areas, that being Summit Learning. Summit has gotten a TON of negative press, much of it undeserved in my opinion. Initially, I was not in favor of going that direction as I struggle with canned programs. Most teachers are creators/adapters in relation to content to make it more personalized to their style. Canned programs generally don't offer as much flexibility in this area.

After inspecting Summit on a pretty intense level, I found that it fits our student tenets very well (not perfectly...another story). It also fits well into cognitive load research as it relates to project-based learning and student success. Another thing I had to keep in mind was that this was

selected BY the staff after a lot of research, visits, and looking into other electronic curricular options. On their field trips, they also took parents to get their opinions and impressions.

Summit is not a perfect tool, but since it aligns well with the tenets, fits into what research says regarding student learning, the staff wanted to move forward, and it allowed us to finally have a bit more standardization within our curriculum, there was no way I could stand in its way. My ego was not going to be an obstacle. I fully support the platform while understanding the issues associated with implementation (that too is another story).

This is just an example of how we have tried to do things at Twin Valley. We are NOT perfect in any way, but are striving for excellence in how we support students, parents, families, and our staff. It is not about one person, adult area (admin, teacher, etc.), or financial constraints. We are doing what we are doing based upon guiding tenets that force us to really examine the things were put in place for Twin Valley people.

Act III: Along the Way

As part of the initial cohort of Kansas Can Redesign, USD 240 has been under the microscope as the state watches to see the effects of the project. KSDE officials visit periodically to provide support to the educators and to view the progress. Likewise, individuals from other school districts—curious about the project or seeking ideas to implement in their own schools—drop in and visit various classes. Teachers in both buildings are not surprised when a visitor is at their door, wanting to observe the real-time, real-classroom effects. As part of this researcher's efforts to document their journey, she found faculty and administrators welcoming and willing to share the positives as well as the difficulties they've faced along the way. Media has also been interested in covering the statewide project, and researchers are interested, as well.

On the other side of that, faculty and administrators have been going outside the walls of their buildings for additional professional development regarding various aspects of their redesign efforts. They have also presented at various conferences to share their redesign story.

Act III: Along the Way: Superintendent's View. As of early December 2019, the principals and leadership teams have presented at more than 25 venues. Thirty-one schools have visited USD 240 since the beginning of their redesign efforts in 2017, with some making repeated visits to learn more about the process and outcomes.

Act IV: Progress Report

Today, USD 240 continues blazing a new trail in education. Teachers are voicing their concerns and their interests in meeting the students' needs. As a district, they have focused on communication—with parents and community members, as well as with faculty. They want to make sure the community is aware of where they are today in this journey, so the district has provided parent camps—where parents can visit with the leadership to learn more about redesign and to provide feedback.

The superintendent has also held several sessions where students are invited to visit with him regarding some of the aspects of redesign.

Table 1: Strategy Intervention Program

STRATEGY INTERVENTION PROGRAM	Personalized learning	Student Success Skills/Social-emotional	Partnerships	Real-world application	OUTSIDE OF REDSIGN PRINCIPLES
Added more dual credit offerings					X
Added vocational offerings/staff based upon student data (Career Cruising)					X
Addition of full-time secondary-level At-Risk academic position for student support					X
Addition of middle-level study skills course designed to teach self-regulation (academic and otherwise) skills and research-based learning strategies for ALL students.	X	X		X	
Addition of staff (vocational and other)					X
BF4TV (Better Futures for Twin Valley)			X	X	
Book studies (optional)	X	X			
Boy Scouts of America Exploring program (NOT SUCCESSFUL)			X		
Career Cruising Career Cluster ID	X	X	X	X	
Career panels for students in grades 7-12	X	X	X	X	
CCR Programming that includes trips to universities, vocational colleges, trade-school opportunities, etc.	X	X	X	X	
Collaborative Problem Solving* (On the front-end of this)	X	X	X	X	
Families/Cousins with locally created social-emotional curricular components		X	X		
Flexibility in daily schedule in both schools (ongoing iterations)	X	X			
Flexible seating (Totally teacher-driven AND for the most part, put together)	X	X			
Friday Lunch Bunch Zoom Meetings			X		
Implementation of the Student Risk Screening Scale		X			
Increased presence on social media platforms			X		
IPS (Individual Plans of Study)-KSDE requirement	X	X	X	X	X
Local public library life skills course in Bennington (NOT SUCCESSFUL)			X		
Mental Health grant partnership and prior to that, MOU with CKMHC for on-site services		X	X	X	
Mentoring/Advisory	X	X	X	X	
Monday Advisory Special Schedule-Monday afternoons	X	X	X	X	
Monthly Book Reading by the GS Principal for the Students of BGS			X		
No bells in middle and/or high school	X	X			
Parent Camps	X	X	X		
Parent visit days (schedule to attend whole day)			X		
Partnerships with other therapists to come into schools to serve kids (outside of grant)		X	X		
PowerHour in one school, SDL in another (Many iterations-ongoing)	X	X		X	
Project-based learning	X	X		X	
Restorative Practices* (On the front-middle end of this)	X	X	X	X	
Self-Regulation training AND incorporation into class/school structures	X	X		X	
Student-led conferences	X	X	X		
Summit (Mastery Learning + Project-Based Learning)	X	X		X	
Tiny House (Part of the "Ness City" collective)	X	X	X	X	
Zearn (Mastery Learning)	X	X			

Tescott Elementary School Principal Steven Kimmi cited flexible seating as one of the changes gaining momentum through Redesign (Goodson, 2018, p. 1). According to Kimmi, “Flexible seating is the one redesign element that grew most quickly and organically (Goodson, 2018, p. 1). “A few teachers started, then a couple more jumped in, next it was every teacher trying something. It was exciting to see teachers' personality reflected in their classrooms through the different ways they approached flexible seating options. ... At this point, we couldn't even go back to traditional seating in the classroom” (Goodson, 2018, p. 1).

Jenny Abell, a fifth-grade teacher at Tescott Elementary School, was one of several who implemented flexible seating as part of Redesign. Abell states, “Flexible seating was designed to give students choice, physical health, comfort, collaboration, and commitment to learn” (Goodson, 2018, p. 5). “Flexible seating allows students to choose their best learning space for the day and allow them comfort to collaborate with others if needed to have the best learning experience in our school.”

Act IV: Progress Report: Superintendent’s View. We are not unhappy with where we are as it relates to most of the aspects of redesign at this point in time. There are obstacles that we have to continually focus on to make adjustments, but we are confident about the overall process and the interventions as they are making a positive impact on student life. There is much work left to do, however, and we continually revisit what we have done in a systemic manner to make those adjustments.

Communication and parent engagement remain among the major obstacles we deal with on a continual basis. We have hosted parent camps at the building and district level, initiated building and district newsletter communications, monthly administrative “Lunch Bunch Webinars,” and social media to try to engage parents and students.

Site Councils continue to work at the building level and this year we also have initiated a parent redesign advisory group to work through issues and to act as a force-multiplier in the communities we serve as it relates not only to a positive message, but also a transparent one. We have nothing to hide nor do we try to pretend everything is perfect as we know that is not the case. We also try to remind parents that was not the case in the past either.

I continue to also hold two different levels of student superintendent advisory groups, one being elected student leadership and the other non-elected. Through both of these groups we have been able to gather trends, especially at the secondary level, to help to drive improvement. One thing that is clear is that the main issues deal with consistency and/or efficacy of implementation at the classroom level. According to our students, that is where our major issues lie.

The bottom line as it relates to communication is that one must understand it is never enough, never at the right time,

KANSAS CAN SCHOOL REDESIGN
MERCURY 7
VIRGIL "GUS" GRISSOM

TWIN VALLEY USD 240
 107 N. Nelson St.
 Bennington, Kansas
 Superintendent: Fred Van Ranken

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:
 Tescott Grade School
 305 N. Minnesota
 Tescott, Kansas
 Principal: Steven Kimmi

SECONDARY SCHOOL:
 Bennington Junior-Senior High School
 301 N. Putnam
 Bennington, Kansas
 Principal: Curtis Nightingale

Gus Grissom piloted the Liberty Bell 7 spacecraft - the second and final suborbital Mercury test flight - on July 21, 1961. This flight lasted 15 minutes and 23 seconds, attained an altitude of 118 statute miles, and traveled 302 miles downrange from the launch point at Cape Kennedy. On March 23, 1966, he served as command pilot on the first manned Gemini flight, a three-orbit mission during which the crew accomplished the first orbital trajectory modifications and the first lifting reentry of a manned spacecraft. Subsequent to this assignment, he served as backup command pilot for Gemini 4. Grissom was named as command pilot for the AS-204 mission, the first three-man Apollo flight. Lt. Colonel Grissom died Jan. 27, 1987, in the Apollo spacecraft crash during a launch pad test at Kennedy Space Center, Florida.

If we die, we want people to accept it. We're in a risk business, and we hope that if anything happens to us we not delay the program. The concept of space has worth the risk of life."
 - Gus Grissom (John Barber et al., *Cooperation on the Moon* (The Associated Press, 1968), p. 102)

Gus Grissom's full name was Virgil Ivan Grissom.

- He grew up in the small Midwestern town of Mitchell, Indiana.
- He was too short to participate in high school sports. However, he found a niche for himself as a local Boy Scout troop, where he eventually became a leader.
- To earn spending money as a child, Grissom delivered newspapers twice a day throughout the year.

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never in the right format, or using the right tone to please everyone. Personalized communication is just as important as personalized learning IF we want to really become partners with our parents in this journey.

Act V: Not the Final Act

In the past two and a half years since officially being chosen to participate in the first wave of Redesign, USD 240 has experienced its share of change...of reteaching, relearning, and redirection—for students and educators alike. A stroll through their buildings provides visuals of Smart Goals for focused learning objectives, positive messages posted along the halls to encourage social and emotional well-being.

One sign, “Your attitude determines your direction,” posted in a Tescott hallway, seems to have even greater meaning in a Redesign school than in others.

The teachers and the students seem to know there’s something different going on in these schools. And there’s a sense that it’s only the beginning as they determine their own direction.

Act V: Not the Final Act: Superintendent’s View. We are in Year 2 of Redesign implementation. The buildings are working hard to make adjustments to things being done in order to really make the things “stick” AND help students and families. It is a continual improvement process. There is never an end to getting better nor should there be. When any sort of organization becomes comfortable with where they are and refuses to look to get better, all they get is behind.

The thing that I like to think we are doing different within our redesign is that we are working hard to make sure to connect the dots with what we are doing in relation to the tenets, previous work, and provide what is necessary to move forward for our people. Too many times change is considered “flavor of the month” or “the supt./principal went to a conference and...”. You know the drill. We do NOT want our people to think we are adding to the plate. We want them to feel like we are finding efficiencies within programming aligned with tenets to improve capacity. One would have to ask the staff and I am sure their answers would vary, but I hope this is how it is being interpreted. I know it is never perfect, however.

Some of the tweaks include working, especially at the elementary level, to increase the strength of school-family partnerships. This is difficult with parent schedules, previous lines of separation (stay in your lanes!), and frankly, somewhat of a distrust that perhaps goes both ways. Our building leadership teams and their respective staffs are working tirelessly to find ways to address some of those issues. It is cool to see how hard they are trying to make that intentional connection.

Another thing that I personally feel is important that we need to work in is that we have spent a lot of times on relationships, academic rigor, improving futures through IPS and related activities. But, perhaps we have failed to schedule in opportunities to celebrate successes, recognize excellence in different realms and, frankly, have some fun. That last thing in particular is hard for many adults, especially me, as I consider work to be fun.... I am terrible at

celebrating.... My ideas of fun are not that fun to 99.9% of the population. I do not think I am alone. This is something we are talking more about, and we will develop mechanisms for this to happen in an authentic manner.

Epilogue: Empowering schools

What may get lost in the changes occurring in these small rural schools is the wave of change their efforts could bring to so many schools across the state of Kansas, including rural schools much like those in USD 240. They are helping create a definition of education that provides more individualized approaches based on the specific needs of students in those schools. They are being allowed to explore the possibilities of what is necessary for each child to be successful.

And, much like children experience as they move toward adulthood, these redesign schools have been provided a freedom that some may find uncomfortable at first. They may stumble along the way. They make need to back track and find another route. But they are finding their own way in an effort to best meet the needs of their students.

Epilogue: Empowering schools: Superintendent's View. When considering the plight of rural schools, one must consider how we can change to not only stay open (which should not be the primary concern), but the opportunities we provide for students and families give them the capacity to be competitive with those from larger schools in more urban areas that have access to a more varied course list, potential access to dual-credit offerings, including vocational schools, and the economy of scale that comes with larger systems. Our students and families deserve access in our rural areas just as much as those in the urban centers. But, as a famous once said, "deserves got nothing to do with it" (or something along those lines).

We have to look to leverage technology, personnel, and our limited facilities to really meet the needs of students. I had mentioned Summit Learning earlier. Although not a perfect system by any means, what it does provide is a rigorous, consistent curriculum across the schools that our teachers utilize to be more effective. It has built in assessment aligned to the standards that at least has the potential to push our students and teachers in terms of desired rigor.

In a larger system, the district might take on the actual writing of the curriculum by hiring internally, outsourcing, or a combination of the two. In smaller districts we generally do not have the financial capacity to outsource and definitely do not have the ability to tax our teachers requiring they write curriculum with aligned assessments. Many of our staff at the secondary level already have 3-7 preps. The cognitive load for those people is already generally maxed out. In terms of facilities, we really need to consider how we can utilize current space differently to meet the needs of students. Our people have done an amazing job in Twin Valley of trying to do this with flexible seating, etc. Our tax base and our taxpayers would find it difficult to build new facilities for a population that is either flat or perhaps even declining. We need to focus on building students and adapt facilities to meet their needs rather than being concerned about a having that brand new building.

Honestly, among the biggest things to focus on with all in small and large settings is the change in mindset. Many of our students, parents, and patrons (and in some cases, teachers) have to be

open to looking at the problems from a new perspective. We have to mold old with new to create solutions to complex problems we are now facing. With redesign, there is no defined path. We drive it but must do so from a process perspective that allows for bona fide student improvement rather than totally repackaging and old system with a new cover.

I remember hearing in the early 1990s when Bill Daggat said something to the effect that the fax machine would be gone within the decade. It is still here, but rarely used. The major uses are from doctor's and other offices where HIPPA is a concern with Internet transmission of material. There still is a need, but that need is refined to a narrow, but necessary path.

I also remember when MOOCs were going to change education. It has had literally no impact.

We are still in a profession that requires a live person in the form of a teacher/coach that not only has expertise in the areas they teach, they must have a higher knowledge of how student learn, the impact of social-emotional issues, and have the ability to engage others in a manner more aligned with a defined organizational purpose with the student at the center rather than the focus being on them.

This is hard work. This is meaningful work. This is great work. We need to continue to focus on how best to continue to do this work well in the rural areas to allow them to be viable and those students that come from their systems to be competitive in the world they will face. It is a great time to be in education!

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