

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

How does **existing policy** influence efforts to **remake learning**?



INNOVATIVE
ED POLICY
collaborative

powered by
**remake
learning**

Josie Innamorato, Summer 2018



AN INVITATION TO READERS

Education is a promise to our youngest members of society and a commitment to our collective future. Learning cultivates a compassionate community, an engaged populace, and a productive workforce. The skills and habits needed to achieve those outcomes rapidly change as technology generates more diverse and collaborative spaces. However, risk is inherent in any departure from traditional learning. Because the intended outcomes are so precious, education systems are risk-averse.

The current policy framework reinforces traditional learning in ways that make innovation challenging. Superintendents, district administrators, school administrators, and teachers, collectively referred to as school leaders, describe how existing policy influences efforts to remake learning in the Pittsburgh region.

SEE PAGE 2 They note the necessity of developing a shared vision with their school board and the necessity of a sustained partnership through potential board transitions.

School leaders also recognize the importance of accountability measures, but lament that those used are incomplete; current standardized state assessments drive teaching and learning toward narrow standards **at the expense of more**

SEE PAGE 5 holistic programming. Additionally, school leaders identify **grant funding as** **SEE PAGE 14**
a critical resource for learning innovation not only because it bolsters stretched budgets, but also because it provides **external validity of the merits of the**

SEE PAGE 8 proposed innovation. Further, external funding catalyzes collaboration across school districts.

Operating inside the existing policy framework, forward-thinking school leaders in the Pittsburgh region are bridging from tradition to innovation. We are inspired by their efforts to remake learning, and invite you to celebrate the successes shared here and to learn more about how their work fosters the skills and habits critical in developing a compassionate community, an engaged populace, and a productive workforce.

How might we create a policy framework that accepts risks to support a more systemic paradigm shift? *Voices from the Field* elevates the lived experiences of school leaders navigating the policy framework to generate change. When faced with persistent obstacles, we point to policies from our neighbors across the country that may shed light on our path forward.

*We made intentional efforts to elevate a diverse cross-section of voices from the Pittsburgh region such that observations provide meaningful insight for community members, school leaders, and policy makers. Interviewees work in communities spanning in urbanicity, size, socioeconomic makeup, and race/ethnicity. For more information on the sources and limitations of this work, see **Appendix A.** Interviewees participated in one-hour conversations framed by the interview protocol in **Appendix B.***



THE NECESSITY OF A SHARED VISION

Transformative change relies on harmony of school leaders, school boards, and community stakeholders.

As the locally elected authority that manages education resources, the school board is a critical gatekeeper in all efforts to remake learning.

A school board acts as the district's steward by:

- Setting the district's direction with performance-based goals,
- Ensuring alignment of strategies, resources, policies, programs and processes with those goals, and
- Assessing and accounting for student achievement against those goals

The school board defines the ends, while school leaders focus on identifying and mobilizing the means to attain those ends. Beyond the formally outlined tasks above, school board members act as intermediaries, publicly marrying and communicating school district and community interests.

Transformative visions that remake learning necessitate symbiosis between school boards and school leaders. Every interviewee expressed the importance of an open and trusting relationship between the two parties. How do you foster that critical relationship to develop and advance a shared vision?

One school district recently engaged community members in a year-long strategic planning process steeped in design thinking. Efforts began last September with three visioning sessions open to the public. More than a third of all faculty attended, alongside other community members, to evaluate the current state of student learning and to identify desired learning outcomes. Questions spanned a broad range of topics, and included:

- What should our curriculum be aligned to - state standards, workforce priorities, or student interests?
- How are we advancing socio-emotional learning? How are we developing each

student as a whole person?

- Should our priorities include - interdisciplinary learning, story telling, or art-based expression?
- (Pictures provided) What do you see happening in these classrooms?

The visioning sessions revealed an opportunity area in professional development. Attendees aligned on desired outcomes but teachers had a dearth of exposure to classrooms successfully advancing them. This school leader then applied for and received a small grant, enabling him to provide transportation and substitutes such that teachers could participate in one of eight full-day site visits. Teachers reported back on classroom observations at diverse schools across the region and self-selected working groups to advance those previously identified outcomes. **Community members, school leaders, and the school board co-create each step forward. This shared vision affords school leaders the trust of the school board most critical in advancing innovative transformation.** Only with their approval can school leaders reallocate existing resources to new initiatives.

Interviewees with supportive school boards used “fortunate” and “blessed” to describe their symbiotic relationship. Such descriptors indicate the transient and, at times, unpredictable nature of school boards. Communities elect nine members, each to hold office for a four-year term. Elections take place every two years, with four seats open and then five seats open in alternating municipal cycles. At best, this system ensures continuity of a shared vision. At worst, this results in school leaders churning as new directives are provided with each election cycle. **Because institutionalizing innovative transformation takes time, school board turnover can have a detrimental impact on efforts to remake learning.** What has that meant in the Pittsburgh region?

Over the course of the last decade, another school district made significant strides in remaking learning by intentionally integrating traditional coursework with career and technical skill development. All students were exposed to foundational skills and then made informed choices about learning pathways. This school district thoughtfully reallocated constrained resources by electing not to replace retiring faculty members



and instead, expanded opportunities for student engagement with technology. The most recent school board turnover stymied these efforts. School leaders report that new board members do not see the value in these transformative innovations or that, unfamiliar with this model, board members reinforce the traditional model of schooling. Of note, the board declined to renew contracts for instructional coaches, paid for via Title I and Title II funding. The board also rescinded prior approvals for off-site professional development well within departmental budgets. The collective bargaining agreement includes very few contracted days for professional development. School leaders look to instructional coaches and off-site learning

as the most effective resources for classroom teachers in reimagining their practice. These specific directives, while detrimental in isolation, create a culture in which school leaders fear proposing new initiatives and question which existing one will be dismantled next. **School leaders in this district lament that nine people, some of whom with no background in education, drive decisions from a place so far removed from student learning.**

How are our neighbors across the country institutionalizing learning innovations under transient leadership?

Through either state law or district policy, numerous cities in Colorado, Indiana, and Tennessee created pathways for schools to establish autonomy as Innovation Zones. Such a distinction provides authority to school leaders that outlives any potential change in

district oversight. The contractual guarantee may include control over the structure and length of the school day, staffing salaries and placements, professional development, curriculum and the allocation of financial resources. These zones can be managed in numerous ways, though decidedly, autonomy is granted in exchange for higher expectations and accountability for performance. Innovation Zones support efforts to improve teaching and learning over multiple years, a necessity in institutionalizing change, by insulating school leaders from any changes in the political climate. Though originally conceived as a school turnaround model, Innovation Zones could be an opportunity area as the Pittsburgh region considers how best to support long-term efforts to remake learning.



BUILDING A “QUALITY EDUCATION”

Schools can leverage a flexible policy framework to define their approach to preparing students for life.

Chapter 4 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code affords school leaders flexibility in designing their education program. This flexibility creates fertile ground for efforts to remake learning.

Every interviewee cited dynamic, collaborative efforts to answer the questions:

- Who do we hope our students are as citizens when they graduate, and
- What do they need to know and be able to do to pursue their own successful career and life paths?


Answers to these questions, though not uniform across the region, provide the foundation in district efforts to remake learning. With learning environments that have these goals in mind, inspiring leaders work backwards to reimagine the learning environments that meet students where they are, and support students for where they want to go.

Section 4.4, General Policies, begins with the affirmation that “local school entities have the greatest possible flexibility in curriculum planning consistent with providing quality education.” With this freedom, school leaders design learning experiences to develop students abilities to learn how to learn, to work alongside diverse peers, and to persevere in creative problem solving - the skills and mindsets critical for career and life success. School leaders promote opportunities for students to internalize the interconnectedness of knowledge, setting aside the silos of traditional coursework. Operating inside of the Chapter 4 framework, what do these efforts look like in the Pittsburgh region?

One school district believes that strong student-teacher relationships accelerate student development. They designed their programming such that teachers loop with students through clustered grade levels. For example, a student has the same pair of

cultural literacy teachers in grades six, seven, and eight. Beyond building consistency and trust, this innovative structure makes it possible for standards to be grouped and reorganized across grade levels and traditional silos of course content. Co-teachers have flexibility in sequencing standards as long as, by the end of the loop, all critical standards are covered. This integrated approach to instruction makes it possible, as in the cultural literacy example above, for critical reading standards (ELA) to be wrapped up in the context of ancient civilizations (social science). Such a model supports iterative learning reinforced over time in a way that mirrors research on cognitive development. This school district plans to open a high school, continuing to remake learning by imagining sequences of cross-curricular coursework that marry science and economics, or statistics and civics.

School leaders in another school district prioritized mastery-based learning, celebrating personalization and the individual pace of child development. These educators removed grade level distinctions in their elementary literacy program to appropriately challenge all learners in mixed age groupings. First, teachers examined the PA Core to collaboratively define learning progressions and benchmarks for mastery. The administrative team then created an elementary schedule such that all students had literacy at the same time each day. The aligned schedule makes it possible for students to transition between educators who facilitate specific pieces of a learning progression. Once students demonstrate mastery within a progression, they advance. This school district plans to implement learning progressions in ELA and math across all grade levels in an effort to expand their mastery-based approach.



local school entities have the greatest possible flexibility in curriculum planning consistent with providing quality education.

PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC SCHOOL CODE, CHAPTER 4

However, the flexibility afforded in Chapter 4 is limited by state data systems that reinforce outdated school structures. As a data management tool, the Pennsylvania Department of Education mandates that student-level data be tracked using the Pennsylvania Information Management System (PIMS). At the start of the year, school administrators assign students to specific courses, standards, teachers, and texts. These assignments determine which PSSA a student takes at year-end. The traditional course integration and resequenced standards as well as the innovative learning progressions in the two examples above require a much more fluid data management tool.

Looking more closely at learning progressions, school leaders regret that students take the ELA standardized state assessment assigned to their given grade level that may not align with their place in the literacy learning progressions. Students who excel are not appropriately challenged and students who

have not mastered a progression yet receive feedback that their learning is “below basic,” a message detrimental to any student’s mindset. School leaders also lament the herculean effort at year-end to assign portions of student test scores to educators based on how much time each educator facilitated literacy learning for each student. Learning progressions become increasingly harder to implement in a high school setting, where age and grade level assignments determine graduation cohorts. **A comprehensive transition to mastery-based learning demands a departure from data systems that define student learning expectations by student age.**

What policies and systems are our neighbors across the country using to support transitions to mastery-based learning?

New Hampshire made focused efforts, over time, to prioritize what students can do over what students know. In 2005, the state transitioned away from awarding credits based on seat-time, and toward earning credits based on competency. In 2013, they cemented mastery-based learning by attaching student promotion requirements to proficiency, such that students could be appropriately challenged at all ages, and not advance without addressing critical skill gaps. This overhaul further prioritized personalization by including provisions for students to demonstrate proficiency through extended learning opportunities, career, and technical education courses and distance education. The state worked alongside school districts to co-design a foundation of competency frameworks as graduation requirements, though districts maintain the authority to develop their own. New Hampshire also made concerted efforts to develop a calibrated

system of performance-based assessments, challenging the notion that such assessments cannot be evaluated in any valid, reliable way to drive accountability measures. Their comprehensive approach to supporting mastery-based learning provides a thoughtful guide for those hoping to do the same.

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) established the Mastery Collaborative, a network of more than 40 schools voluntarily pursuing mastery-based learning, to coordinate and catalyze local efforts. As in Pennsylvania, NYCDOE policy already grants schools significant autonomy in determining site programming. The Mastery Collaborative acts as a knowledge hub and key partner by:

- Maintaining a resource bank and communication network;
- Providing tools to help schools evaluate learning management systems that produce student-centered reports to reflect progress over time across several domains;
- Building a cohesive Framework for Mastery Implementation that builds common understandings and language for partners; and
- Acting as the liaison to the NYCDOE’s Central Office of Academic Policy to develop high quality, innovative grading policies and accurate messaging for teachers, students, and families

The Mastery Collaborative includes eight Living Lab schools that have fully integrated mastery-based learning. As the Pittsburgh region considers the future of mastery-based learning, NYC’s Living Lab schools are worthy of our attention.



MEASURING A “QUALITY EDUCATION”

Community members value comprehensive skills and mindsets, but current standards assess narrower learning outcomes.

The flexibility afforded in Chapter 4 is also checked by the accountability measures used to evaluate the “quality education” provided. Currently, standardized state assessments act as the one public measure of student performance, and are our one summative measure of whether students have access to a “quality education.” Pennsylvania students, educators, schools, and districts continue to be evaluated by their performance on standardized state assessments, though school leaders uniformly recognize that they narrowly define and assess student learning. Efforts to develop a graduate profile reveal community members’ beliefs that schools must develop students’ abilities to learn how to learn, to work alongside diverse peers, and to persevere in creative problem-solving. **The mismatch between the comprehensive skills and mindsets community members value and the standards currently assessed impedes efforts to remake learning.**

The extent to which this mismatch influences efforts to remake learning varies across the Pittsburgh region. At best, school boards acknowledge that standardized state assessments do not provide a holistic picture of student learning. Results are considered for what they are: valuable, content-specific information on how students perform against standards at one snapshot in time. School boards look beyond the data and continue to afford school leaders flexibility in reimagining an educational program that may not, as a primary objective, increase student test scores. This mindset is a privilege afforded to school districts with progressive school boards that understand the limitations of standardized state assessments, and that perform well enough against these measures to avoid public scrutiny and state interference.

At worst, standardized state assessments conflict with efforts to remake learning in destructive ways. Test scores dictate,

for example, the distribution of financial resources, the objectives of instructional coaches, the measures for team meetings, and the decisions to create or eliminate roles. The influence of standardized state assessments for these school leaders is systemic and inescapable, limiting efforts to remake learning.

For all, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams act as an output, lacking any meaningful integration with student learning. One school leader lamented that “sometimes all the things that count can’t be counted.” A fifth grade student summarized these shortcomings best when he expressed frustration during an assessment last spring: “Every day you teach me to, if I don’t know the answer, go out and find it. Every day you teach me to think. I don’t know the answer, but I know how to go out and find it, but I’m not allowed on this test.”

School leaders report that the PSSA and the Keystone Exams fail students and school districts in three interconnected ways:

1. They cover an immense library of standards that do not align with the skills and mindsets communities value in education. As a result, teachers hastily cover content at the expense of creating opportunities for more meaningful learning experiences and interpersonal skill development.
2. They persist in acting as the public’s summative measure of school performance. School sites that fall short report that poor results foster shame and flight instead of access to critical resources needed to improve learning outcomes.
3. They dictate charter renewals, effectively countermanding the true purpose of charter schools.

How does each failure influence efforts to remake learning?

► **Standardized state assessments cover an immense library of standards that do not align with the skills and mindsets communities value in education.** As a result, this system forces teachers to hastily cover content at the expense of creating opportunities for more meaningful learning experiences and interpersonal skill development. One elementary principal criticized the expansive standards, explaining that if teachers delivered all eligible content via lecture format, known to be expedient though notorious for curbing engagement, there would still not be enough time in the academic year to cover everything included in standardized state assessments. The mile wide and inch deep directive pushes teachers to sacrifice longer activities that cultivate authentic student engagement.

Another district administrator reported that teachers express frustration over cross-curricular, project-based learning activities designed to generate engagement, develop transferable skills, and introduce students to computational thinking. Teachers painfully pinpoint the mismatch, arguing that these deeper learning experiences do not prepare students for standardized state assessments.

A third elementary principal explained that fifth and sixth grade science blocks present “huge opportunities” for innovative, hands-on learning because students sit for science assessments in fourth grade. Only without the weight of standardized state assessments do school leaders feel the freedom to remake learning.

► **Standardized state assessments persist in acting as the public’s summative measure of school performance.** Districts and school sites that fall short in test performance are most beholden to this one measure of accountability. The state annually updates School Performance Profiles, issuing a building-level academic score based entirely on assessment performance. Per these metrics, the state identifies the lowest 15% of traditional public schools. The release of this list drives a media storm that perpetuates the public perception that standardized state assessments are the one, summative measure of school and teacher performance and that these low performing schools should be blamed for failing students. Some “school boards react to these rankings,” sabotaging the trust essential to remaking learning and exacerbating the perpetual risk-aversion of education systems.

Poor performance fosters shame and flight instead of access to critical resources needed to improve learning outcomes. The identified schools send mandated letters to families reporting their status and options to apply for the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program. This program maintains a pool of funds, donated from businesses in exchange for tax credits, to pay student tuitions in non-public or adjacent public schools. However, it does not guarantee seats to all who apply, nor does it consider the distances rural students must travel to attend adjacent schools. Importantly, school leaders note that “priority status does not entitle you to any benefits, just more oversight.” School leaders believe that poor performance should sound alarm for help, however efforts to increase performance should rely less on public shaming and more on intentional staffing and resource sharing.



Every day you teach me to, if I don't know the answer, go out and find it. Every day you teach me to think. I don't know the answer, but I know how to go out and find it, but I'm not allowed on this test.

FIFTH GRADE STUDENT

► **Standardized state assessments dictate the charter renewal process, effectively countermanning the true purpose of charter schools.** The Pennsylvania Department of Education explains that charter schools were created, among other reasons, to “encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods.” Integrating standards across grade levels and content areas is one such method the law was designed to celebrate. However, charter schools face renewal on a cyclical basis. Renewal hinges on proof that students meet measurable academic standards evidenced by PSSA and Keystone performance. Every innovation is measured by standardized state assessments though educators know them to be an incomplete measure of student learning. More than media scrutiny and additional oversight, charter schools face losing the right to operate altogether. Charter schools were designed to take the most risks in exploring innovative teaching methods, and yet accountability measures are most critical

when those innovations do not translate into test scores. The two directives intersect in destructive ways that create anxiety for educators and school leaders. Charter schools acutely feel the friction created by this mismatch of community values and standardized assessments.

How are our neighbors across the country addressing the shortcomings of high stakes standardized assessments?

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to assess students in grades three through eight, and at least once in high school. However, there is flexibility in the assessments used as long as they provide reliable and transparent data on student achievement and growth. Section 1204 of ESSA created an opt-in program, the Innovation Assessment Accountability Demonstration Authority, for states to design their own assessments that are relevant, connected to classroom learning, and align with community values. States pilot these new kinds of tests in a representative sample of districts in lieu of the traditional statewide exams with the ultimate objective of replacing a state's existing measures. The program's flexible framework allows for a wide range of options including combinations of locally developed performance-based assessments, interdisciplinary project-based tasks, portfolios, and local summative assessments. KnowledgeWorks recently released a visioning toolkit to help stakeholders understand the design possibilities within the Section 1204 framework.

Louisiana is seizing this opportunity to address literacy challenges among secondary students. School leaders recognize that the types of assessments given influence the styles of instruction used. In the 2018-2019

academic year, 21,000 students in ELA and social science will be assessed at regular intervals using passages from full-length texts explored in daily classroom instruction. This design replaces the statewide model of assessing students on randomly selected texts once during the school year. School leaders hope that these authentic assessments will foster a richer learning environment for students, become an effective tool for driving literacy gains, and eventually replace the defunct, snapshot model of assessment. New Hampshire and Puerto Rico also applied for this pilot program with their own innovative assessment designs. As the Pittsburgh region considers how assessment might more effectively build and measure student learning, all three plans are worthy of our attention.

In fact, one school district in our region reimaged curriculum and assessments with this exact idea in mind. This past year, faculty members replaced traditional diagnostic tools with one "cornerstone task" per nine-week period for all grade levels. Cornerstone tasks, based on the work of Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, are authentic, project-based assessments grounded in the enduring understandings and essential questions of a learning segment. They build and evaluate the critical standards, skills, and mindsets salient across grade levels that set students up for future coursework. They are the key foundational elements of a learning sequence. Cornerstone tasks push students to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in each learning segment to a real-world problem. This school district continues to remake learning by thoughtfully shaping assessment around critical standards, skills, and mindsets.

How might we create more holistic measures of school performance?

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) took promising strides in developing the Future Ready PA Index to be launched in the 2018-2019 academic year. The Index provides communities with a more comprehensive view of school performance by including measures for career exposure,



success after graduation, and more thorough academic achievement measures that may include local assessments. However, PDE will still continue to calculate and publish School Performance Profiles, the output of a summative academic performance scoring system developed in 2013. General Assembly members debate the role and place of the two parallel systems in school evaluation moving forward. As the Pittsburgh region considers how best to evaluate schools and school districts, the potential impact of the Index is worthy of our attention.

How are our neighbors across the country providing comprehensive support to “low performing” schools?

ESSA affords states autonomy not only to define a system of accountability, but also to identify and direct efforts to improve underperforming schools. Indiana outlined the most comprehensive plan for providing targeted support to chronically underperforming subgroups of students, schools and school districts. Once identified, local school leaders receive a planning grant to: conduct a needs assessment, develop an improvement plan, and ensure that requisite staffing positions are filled and student programming is in place. These pieces make up the state-wide framework for school improvement. Schools then apply for an implementation grant to pursue their locally developed plan. During implementation, recipients are monitored on a cyclical basis. School districts with multiple underperforming schools are eligible for larger grants such that districts can design and implement system-wide school improvement initiatives. Identification and support under these guidelines begin in the 2018-2019 academic year. As the Pittsburgh region considers how best to provide comprehensive support to students and schools who need it most, Indiana is worthy of our attention.

Beyond school site accountability, standardized state assessments contribute to teacher evaluations. School leaders ask teachers to pursue a bifurcated mission: prepare students for standardized state assessments and support students in developing critical skills and mindsets. Act 82 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code mandates that teacher evaluations consist of, weighted in equal parts, observation and practice as measured against the Danielson Framework and student performance as

measured by standardized state assessments. School leaders rely on the Danielson Framework as the evaluation measure to recognize teachers' efforts to remake learning. Educators are rated in four domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. To earn a distinguished rating, educators must, for example, support varied learning styles, ask higher order questions, cultivate student agency, and celebrate multiple means of representation. A distinguished rating in any domain indicates transformational teaching that builds the skills and mindsets communities value. However, one school leader noted that the inconsistent and arbitrary application of the framework across schools and school districts makes it an imperfect measure to recognize such efforts.

Further, the use of standardized state assessments as the one measure of student performance challenges educator shifts toward remaking learning. Faculty note that their Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) score follows them professionally. The PVAAS transforms student test scores into measures of achievement against standards and growth against prior years. Through some ambiguous calculation, these measures produce a teacher performance rating that

lives independently in PVAAS and makes up half of their annual evaluation. School leaders reiterate the message that teachers are valued for their innovative practices. They encourage risk taking to pursue those valued, more holistic objectives. However, one school leader noted that "to have the teacher take that risk - that's an enormous ask. I don't think enough of us are acknowledging that."

How might we reimagine teacher evaluations to support innovative teaching that remakes learning?

ESSA affords states latitude in designing and implementing new teacher evaluation systems including the weight, if any, of students' standardized assessment results. Generally speaking, any new design effort starts by asking all stakeholders what purpose these evaluations serve. Might they prompt more personalized professional development? Might they shape teacher preparation programs? Might they inform personnel decisions? Developing a new system also necessitates consideration of implementation. How often might these evaluations be conducted? By whom? Teacher evaluations spark heated debate across the country as our neighbors wrestle with these same questions.



GRANT FUNDING SEEDS TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATION

Philanthropic support enables school leaders to invest in the human and materials resources they need to drive change.

School leaders strive to invest in: sustained professional development, purposeful staffing adjustments, curricular and resource overhauls, and reimagined physical spaces.

However, after covering fixed and essential expenditures, nearly all school leaders have minimal, if any, funding in their annual budgets for such efforts. School leaders cite the ballooning costs of the Public School Employees' Retirement System (PSERS), stagnant or declining revenue from local property taxes, untenable maintenance costs associated with aging facilities, and outsized disbursements to charter and cyber charter schools. Leaders opine that “we are continually asked to do more with less.”

Operating within these budget constraints, school systems are risk-averse, struggling to make the case to school boards for investments

in innovation with potentially intangible outcomes as measured by standardized state assessments. School leaders also highlight the political risks associated with redirecting funds to new initiatives. “Politically, we cannot furlough teachers due to budget constraints and then invest in a makerspace, for example.”

School leaders rely on grants from the state, the intermediate units, foundations, and dedicated, community-specific fundraising efforts to provide seed funding to catalyze transformative innovation. **Beyond bolstering stretched budgets, grant funding provides external validation that the proposed change is a worthy investment.** In observing effective and sustained efforts, seed funding is matched by district dollars. It is then phased out as the impact of the innovation is proven and the shift is institutionalized. What do these efforts look like in the Pittsburgh region?

One school district faced an apathetic and disengaged student body increasingly tempted to enroll in cyber charter schools or dropout. School leaders identified reimagined physical spaces with modern technology as an opportunity to address this challenge; the community did not view traditional libraries as collaborative spaces that drive learning. The school board agreed to match a seed grant to transform the high school library into a media center modeled after the YOUmedia center in Chicago. The overhaul, collaboratively planned by community members, included sound and video recording studios, a makerspace, and a cafe staffed by students. The community celebrated this investment as students flooded the new space and student-teachers integrated it into course projects. Inspired by the positive momentum and reinforced by smaller grants, the school district continued to reallocate funding to new spaces, reimagining classrooms and all but one of the district's libraries. External seed funding helped this school district propel itself onto a new trajectory of remaking learning.

Further, external funding can accelerate collaboration across the region. Five years ago, another school district made purposeful staffing adjustments to create a new administrative role focused on professional development. A classroom teacher proposed and developed the role as the regional programming leader for Project Zero, a Harvard-based research initiative within Agency by Design. The adjustment meant that, on a full-time basis, this school leader would engage educators in reexamining the relationship between thinking and learning. Most administrative teams do not have the bandwidth to support such a dedicated effort. Grant funding served school leaders by both providing external validation of its merits and supplementing the costs to fill the now vacant classroom position. Grant funding also accelerated collaboration by

stipulating that this leader create relevant opportunities accessible to the broader region. This school district has since become a hub for professional development, bringing free instructional strategy workshops to educators in a number of school districts across the region. Over the past five years, the home district has taken on larger pieces of funding this staffing adjustment and the role is now institutionalized. School leaders anticipate that this leader will continue to do grant-funded, externally facing work to share best practices and collaborate with regional and national stakeholders.

Dictated by the impermanence and fleeting nature of grant funding, some promising efforts to remake learning may be temporary or interrupted. Though changes may be implemented quickly, school leaders recognize that transformative innovation is slowly institutionalized. For example, external funding supported STEAM teachers and instructional coaches at three school sites in one district. These vital staff members championed relevant learning experiences and authentic professional development; they were acknowledged as a worthy investment by teachers and building administrators alike. When initial grant funding expired after two years, however, these positions were not absorbed by the district's budget. Building administrators were forced to abandon these promising advances or to fabricate faux traditional teaching positions that would satisfy district waiver requirements for additional faculty. Unfortunately, this narrative is not unique. School leaders uniformly identify teachers as the most important piece in remaking learning - educators provoke transformative innovation. However, external funding utilized for new roles is precarious. **There will always be some question as to whether purposeful staffing adjustments can be institutionalized before external funding expires.**

How are our neighbors across the country creating accessible funding for innovative change that remakes learning?

The Office of Innovation in Education encourages Arkansas school leaders to drive learning innovation by supporting local efforts to “increase students’ readiness for success in a continually changing college and career landscape.” The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) established and funds this third-party agency though it operates out of the University of Arkansas. The Office’s unique position, distinct from ADE, allows for Innovation Liaisons to develop non-evaluative relationships with schools and districts. Their partnership with the University ensures that Liaisons also stay connected to current research on cognitive development

and teaching practices. Liaisons support voluntary participants in the Districts and Schools Innovation Program in developing a plan tailored to each school’s specific needs and context. Importantly, the Office provides no incentive money to participants. Approved innovation plans include latitude in state regulations and statutory requirements to enable Liaisons and schools to identify and reallocate existing funding sources to support their initiatives. Arkansas’ model exemplifies sustainable practices to remake learning because it celebrates school leaders autonomy in developing their own approach to learning innovation, and it relies on existing funding sources to generate new opportunity. As the Pittsburgh region considers sustainable efforts to supplement our critical grant funding, Arkansas’ framework is worthy of our attention.

TAKEN TOGETHER

School leaders need autonomy and trust to reimagine an education system that meets students where they are, and takes them where they want to go. Education systems must also be nimble; not every promising, new endeavor will deliver. A resilient system fails forward. How might we develop a policy framework that celebrates creativity in efforts to remake learning?

We are well into the 21st century. The collapse of time between industrial revolutions demands not that we remake learning once, but that we continually reevaluate thinking and learning such that students leave schools prepared to meet the demands of an unknown future. How might we develop a policy framework that advances a systemic paradigm shift toward learning innovation?

The Pittsburgh region boasts promising initiatives to remake learning from dedicated school leaders steeped in our diverse communities. How might we sustain and fuel that momentum? How might we learn from our neighbors across the country ways to reimagine the relationships between school boards and school leaders, to internalize the limitations of our current accountability measures, and to take risks despite challenging budget realities?

Voices from the Field aims to spark thoughtful conversations between school leaders and policy makers about how we might answer these questions to co-create the future of learning in the Pittsburgh region.

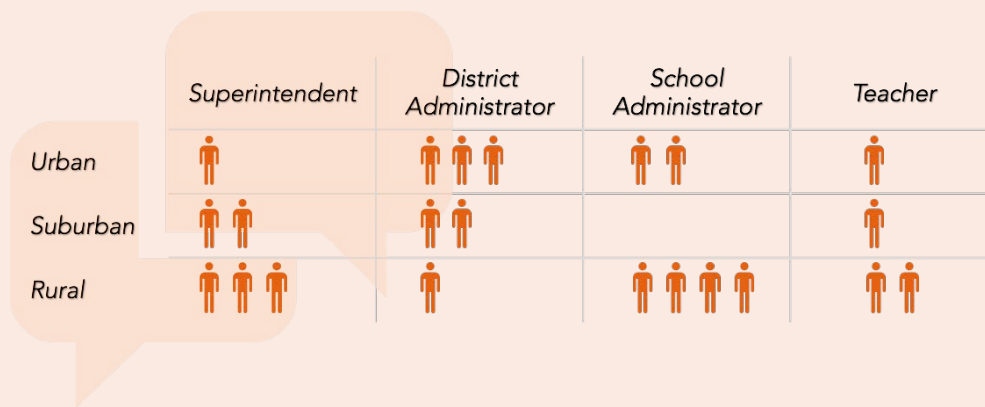




APPENDIX A

Voices Heard

This work is informed by thoughtful and extensive interviews with superintendents, district administrators, school administrators, and teachers, collectively referred to as school leaders, from across the Pittsburgh region. Per the Pennsylvania Department of Education, these school leaders work in districts with as few as 350 and as many as 25,000 students, and with as few as 13% and as many as 80% of those identified as economically disadvantaged. School leaders represent populations that range from 90% students of color to 95% white. The graphic below plots the urbanicity, as identified by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, and position of the 22 school leaders who participated in one-hour, formal interviews. A special thank you to our interview participants for volunteering their time, energy and perspectives.



We made intentional efforts to hear a diverse sample of voices such that observations could provide meaningful insight to community members, school leaders, and policy makers. Every school context is unique; these observations and anecdotes are not an attempt to simplify or distill what we know to be a complex system. The challenges identified are not the only challenges faced in our communities, nor are the policies elevated the only policies worth pursuit. Our aim is that this work continues to fuel conversations about what we hope to be true for all students and how we might create the future of learning in the Pittsburgh region.

School district names were uniformly omitted such that readers might consider the merits of each idea independent of preconceived notions about any one community and that anonymity of individuals who elevated challenges might be protected. To connect with the forward-thinking school leaders elevated here, please contact the author, Josie Innamorato, at johanna_innamorato@berkeley.edu.

APPENDIX B

Questions Asked

The following questions framed interviews, though conversations were fluid and tailored to school leaders' statements.

1. So that I can better understand your context, how would you describe your classroom/school/district?
2. What is your vision for your district/school/classroom/students?
3. What are the largest challenges that you and your students face?
4. Do you feel like you have the flexibility and the autonomy to pursue innovative change? Why or why not?
5. What is one strategy that you wish you could implement at your school site that you think could create dramatic gains for your students? Why do you believe this could be successful for your students?
6. What challenges prevent you from re-assigning your current resources to pursue this idea?
7. What types of programming have you pursued to remake learning? What does that look like?
8. Focus on the one that you feel has had the greatest impact and/or was the most challenging to implement - which would that be?
9. Why do you feel that this has been an effective change?
10. How do you evaluate success in this initiative/ effort?
11. Imagine you were writing an instruction manual for a peer (knowing and acknowledging that every context is different). What would you tell him or her to do? What would you tell him or her to expect?
12. How much time would you say you and your community of educators have to think about innovative programs?
13. Do you believe this could be replicated? Do you believe it should be replicated?

About the Author

Josie Innamorato served as a Summer Policy Associate for the Remake Learning Network. She is a Master's Candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, Goldman School of Public Policy. As a policy analyst, an educator and an engineer, Josie listens and thinks deeply about learners and school systems. To connect about this or other initiatives that unite policy with lived experience, Josie can be reached at johanna_innamorato@berkeley.edu.

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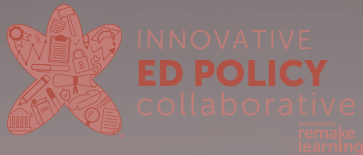
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Remake Learning is a network that ignites engaging, relevant, and equitable learning practices in support of young people navigating rapid social and technological change. Learn more at remakelearning.org.

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