



# Kansas Schools Build Resilience amid Redesign

*Schools opt to change their approaches to learning and see gains in adaptability.*

Since the launch of a school redesign project in 2017, more than 160 Kansas schools have volunteered to reimagine their learning models in a state-led, multiyear process. The pandemic tested the mettle of early adopters, but many say their redesign work prepared them well for the transition to distance and hybrid learning in 2020.

Approved by the Kansas State Board of Education, the project has gathered applications from schools across Kansas, with annual cohorts named for NASA lunar missions. The fourteen schools in seven districts that formed the initial Mercury cohort engaged in intensive planning and professional development a year ahead of the launch of their redesign plans. Gemini and Apollo project cohorts have followed, with opportunities for staff to visit schools in earlier cohorts and for school leaders to engage in a professional learning community.

## Weathering a Pandemic

In spring and summer 2020, staff at the Kansas State Department of Education asked teachers and leaders in the redesign cohorts how their schools handled

building closures. They found that these schools made a smooth transition to distance learning. School staff cited the importance of the design thinking process and a growth mind-set, which helped staff and students learn to adapt flexibly. “Making quick and in some cases radical changes based on data and success factors, and implementing those changes immediately, has been a staple of our process,” said one principal. It also prepared students to better manage their own learning in remote settings, said Jay Scott, secondary redesign specialist on the department’s redesign team.<sup>1</sup>

While the pandemic delayed launches of redesign plans in the last group of schools and impeded the intensive staff professional learning and in-person coaching with department staff, the experience of the early cohort during the pandemic impressed schools not formally engaged in redesign, Scott added. In particular, he said, schools outside the cohorts noted redesign schools’ ability to implement new strategies within a semester or a year and see rapid improvement.

Scott acknowledged that the pandemic did force some schools to abandon some strategies. “That was really hard for them,”

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**Valerie Norville**

he said, adding, “The strategy may change, but the vision and goals are rock solid.” School staff receive intensive professional development in design thinking, which requires changes in strategy as conditions change. This adaptability stood them in good stead during the pandemic. In addition, nearly two-thirds of respondents to a regional service center survey reported that redesign had prepared them to implement competency-based learning, according to Tamra Mitchell, elementary school redesign specialist.

## Genesis in Community Conversations

The redesign project emerged from conversations that the Kansas Department of Education led in communities across the state in 2015–16. Department leaders gathered stakeholder input to inform a state vision for public education that included defining the attributes of a successful 24-year-old in Kansas, said Dr. Randy Watson, Kansas’s commissioner of education.<sup>2</sup> State leaders also asked participants to imagine the school qualities that would produce those successful adults. Parents and business leaders alike stressed the importance of nonacademic factors such as interpersonal and real-world skills and community service.

The principles and goals that undergird the project are based on those comments. “We’re doing exactly what Kansans say they wanted us to do,” Watson said.

The backdrop for the listening sessions was compelling workforce projection data for Kansas that said 71 percent of its jobs by 2020 would require postsecondary education, divided evenly between those requiring bachelor’s or master’s degrees and those requiring associate degrees or certificates.<sup>3</sup> Yet the success rate for Kansas students who met those requirements in 2017 was 44 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Data collected during the sessions fueled development of the state’s profile of a successful high school graduate—one who has the academic and cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary education, attain an industry-recognized certification, or gain a marketable skill without need for remediation. State education leaders aim for a 70–75 percent effective rate by 2026.<sup>5</sup>

It became apparent that school systems had to be redesigned if Kansas was going to achieve its vision, Scott said. “The current reality—and how

dissatisfying that is—really compelled schools to want to do this work,” he said.

Mitchell recognized that the postsecondary effectiveness measures, a key element of the state’s vision for education, might seem far removed from elementary schools’ work, and so it was important to make the case. “If we have a student in our state education system from preschool through high school and they graduate high school and aren’t able to earn a successful living, don’t have any postsecondary education, don’t have a marketable skill or a certification, then what have they been in our system for?”

## Schools Aim for the Moon

Although the redesign team read the research on school transformation and visited redesigned schools, they had no template based on a state-led program elsewhere. Kansas schools or districts volunteer without an expectation of extra resources. “When we tell other states that we have this school redesign project, it’s voluntary, there’s no extra money, and there’s no waivers from state policy, they look at us [and wonder], ‘How is anybody signing up?’” Scott said.

“We don’t want to incentivize and do something that’s not sustainable,” Watson said. At least during the project’s modeling and learning phase, he added, “We want people who want to do the work.”

Flipping the script on school improvement is key, according to Mitchell. Previously part of the department’s school improvement and monitoring division, she was accustomed to an unenthusiastic reception to compliance-driven school improvement. “The biggest lesson I took away was that when people are forced to change, they don’t want to do it,” she said.

When redesign was presented as an opportunity for teachers to do what they believe is best for students, the tone of meetings with department staff improved and enthusiasm for redesign rose. “Markers of trust, openness, transparency—those are really hard to measure, but they’re really palpable,” Mitchell said.

Applying schools secured approval from at least 80 percent of their staff, as well as letters of support from local school boards and chapters of teacher unions. The schools committed to crafting plans that responded to four redesign principles distilled from the community conversations held in 2015–16: personalized learning,

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real-world applications for student learning, student success skills, and family, business, and community engagement.

The program is open to all Kansas schools. “We have some schools that want to be on the cutting edge, be really innovative,” Scott said. “We also have some schools that really struggle.” The goal is to have schools in every Kansas district participating and to learn lessons from the experiences of project cohorts in the early years that can be shared across the system, Watson said.

Approaches to redesign vary across communities, but elementary schools engaged in redesign tend to shift away from traditional separations by grade level and toward content-area integration and collaboration, project-based learning, and prescriptive use of data to inform personalized learning, Mitchell said.

Secondary schools have focused on those things as well but have also devoted more time to social and emotional learning and career development, Scott said. Students may spend the first part of a day on character development or developing required Individual Education Plans or portfolios, for instance. Flexible schedules are a typical part of redesign. “We have several schools that just do away with bells,” Scott said.

Community engagement is key to the process. School leaders had to communicate to parents and community leaders, many of whom believed their schools were already stellar, on why they were undertaking the work, and they had to respond quickly to community questions and pushback during implementation, Mitchell said.<sup>6</sup>

## Project Outcomes

Mitchell notes mostly qualitative markers of success at this point in the project. “When I used to visit schools as school improvement coordinator, they weren’t really happy to see me,” she said. But now, “when I go out to redesign schools, they can’t wait for us to come...even if we have to have a hard conversation.”

She also noted the propensity of elementary students in redesign schools to ask more questions and uncover answers independently. “We’re trying to make changes that are hard to measure,” she said, but are observable in student engagement. Students in a redesign school visited a more traditional school nearby and commented, “Wow, we thought that schools were like that only in the pioneer times.”

“If we’re meeting our state goals, specifically our benchmark of 70 to 75 percent students postsecondary ready [by 2026]...that is proof that redesign works,” Scott said, adding that they were on track to do so before the pandemic. In the short term, he said, students’ belief that their schools know them and are responsive to their needs is a signal that schools are on track. Scott said he hoped to see increased innovation in how high schools are ensuring that students want to be there.

State goals will also figure into the accreditation process, which is required for Kansas schools and updated to align to the Kansas Can strategic plan. “We needed some schools to go out and model what that [new vision] may look like versus trying to force a school accreditation process with those new outcomes and goals on people immediately,” Watson said. Regardless of whether Kansas schools engage in formal redesign processes or not, Scott added, “all roads lead to school accreditation.”<sup>7</sup>

## State Board Role in Redesign

Kansas state board members have actively engaged at each stage of the Kansas Can strategic plan, community engagement, and the redesign project. In addition to formally approving schools’ plans, members sit on a project advisory committee and on occasion attend training for school staff. “They’re not hands on, but they’re very present and encouraging,” Mitchell said.

“They add a certain level of accountability at every [state board] meeting,” Scott added. “They’re always asking the right questions about what’s next. Our board has found the right mix of support, accountability, and then compliance in moving toward this vision that they’ve set.”

“The challenge to a 10-year moonshot is that anything worth doing takes time,” Watson added, “and our political cycle often doesn’t allow for it.” He added that Kansas may have an easier time shepherding a long-term vision for education than other states because of its elected state board that has constitutional authority for managing schools and his relative longevity as state commissioner.

Redesign projects in other states will vary based on state needs, Watson said. But he suggested that all states tie their goals closely to stakeholders’ input, validated by research. “Go out and conduct enough listening tours, surveys, conversations from your state on what they

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want from their education system, then go out and design it, and constantly go back and ask if you've gotten it right," Watson advised. "Every state can do this; it's just hard work." ■

<sup>1</sup>Jay Scott, "Redesign Resiliency: Kansas Secondary Redesign Schools Navigating COVID-19," *Educational Considerations* 46, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Nguyen, "Kansas Loops Stakeholders in on Conversation about K-12 Policy," *State Innovation* 21, no. 3 (October 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020" State Report (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Kansas State Department of Education, "Kansas Report Card 2019–2020: Postsecondary Progress," figure, [https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/ccr.aspx?org\\_no=State&rptType=3](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/ccr.aspx?org_no=State&rptType=3).

<sup>5</sup>The department calculates a five-year effective rate by multiplying its four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate by the percentage of students meeting one of four postsecondary success markers.

<sup>6</sup>Tamra Mitchell, "School and Community Relations in the Kansas Can School Redesign Project," *Educational Considerations* 46, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>7</sup>The Kansas state board is statutorily charged with managing accreditation of districts and schools, a process that provides official recognition of a school as having met a defined set of standards. The Kansas Education Systems Accreditation requires districts to document outcomes outlined in Kansas's strategic plan: local measures of social-emotional growth, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, high school graduation, and postsecondary success. Some schools saw a pause in the process during the past school year due to the pandemic.

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*cont'd from page 38...Moving toward  
Competency-Based Professional Learning*

■ Ensure high-need LEAs have the supports necessary to adopt and implement microcredentials effectively, so all students and teachers can benefit equitably.

■ Collect and review data on initial efforts to redesign PD, license renewal, and advancement systems, including via feedback from educators, in order to understand their influence on teaching quality, teacher retention, and student achievement, and continue to iterate and improve upon those efforts. ■

<sup>1</sup>Boston Consulting Group, "Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development" (Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Combs and Sarah Silverman, "Bridging the Gap: Paving the Pathway from Current Practice to Exemplary Professional Learning" (Malvern, PA: Frontline Research & Learning Institute, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Grunwald Associates LLC and Digital Promise, "Making Professional Learning Count: Recognizing Educators' Skills with Microcredentials" (San Mateo, CA: Digital Promise, 2015), 5.

<sup>4</sup>Jason Bailey, "Governor's Budget Cuts Education, Eliminates Some Programs," report (Berea, KY: Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, January 17, 2018), <https://kypolicy.org/governors-budget-cuts-education-eliminates-programs/>.

<sup>5</sup>Stephanie Hirsh, "Choosing between What Matters and What Counts," opinion, *Education Week*, March 4, 2015.

<sup>6</sup>David Burkus, "Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation at Work,"

*Psychology Today*, April 11, 2020.

<sup>7</sup>Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E. Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner, "Effective Teacher Professional Development" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, June 5, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, "U.S. Schools Struggle to Hire and Retain Teachers," report (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>Melissa Tooley and Kaylan Connally, "No Panacea: Diagnosing What Ails Teacher Professional Development before Reaching for Remedies" (Washington, DC: New America, 2016), 19–20.

<sup>10</sup>Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices" (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).

<sup>11</sup>For a visual representation of the microcredential earning process, see "Understanding Educator Microcredentials," in Tooley and Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices" (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).

<sup>12</sup>Grunwald Associates and Digital Promise, "Making Professional Learning Count."

<sup>13</sup>John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 1 (2007): 81–112, <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>.

<sup>14</sup>Center for Teaching Quality and Digital Promise, "Microcredentials: Driving Teacher Learning & Leadership" (Carrboro, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, 2016).

<sup>15</sup>State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, "The Potential of Microcredentials in Washington State" (Olympia, WA: author, 2019), <https://www.pesb.wa.gov/resources-and-reports/reports/the-potential-of-microcredentials-in-washington-state-report/>.

<sup>16</sup>Melissa Tooley and Sabia Prescott, "Professional Learning in Appalachia," *State Education Standard* 21, no. 1 (2021), 18–24, 37.

<sup>17</sup>National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, "Beyond 'Job-Embedded: Ensuring That Good Professional Development Gets Results'" (Santa Monica, CA: author, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Teacher Leadership and Licensure Advancement, Does the State Define the Role (Prescribe Certain Duties) of the Teacher Leader in Statute or Regulation?" table (Denver: author, October 2018), <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?rep=TCL1806>.

<sup>19</sup>Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Teacher Leadership and Licensure Advancement, What Tasks and/or Evidence of Effectiveness Are Required for Teachers to Obtain a Teacher Leader License/Endorsement?" table (Denver: author, October 2018), <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?rep=TCL1804>.

<sup>20</sup>Authors' interview with Burak Yilmaz and Robert Thornton, Harmony Public Schools, July 27, 2020.

<sup>21</sup>Authors' interview with Evan O'Donnell of Teaching Matters, September 9, 2020.

<sup>22</sup>Authors' interview with Lilla Toal-Mandsager and Libby Ortmann, Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development, South Carolina Department of Education, September 29, 2020.

<sup>23</sup>Authors' interview with Latishia Sparks and Charles Rutledge of the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation, November 13, 2020.

<sup>24</sup>Teaching Matters is one exception. Authors' interview with O'Donnell.

<sup>25</sup>Tooley and Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials."

<sup>26</sup>Tooley and Connally, "No Panacea."

<sup>27</sup>For more detailed recommendations on designing and implementing more effective teacher development and advancement policies, with microcredentials as a component, see Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, *Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide* (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).