

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project

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Gateway Academy: A New Design for Education

What if students and teachers could design the ideal school? We did!

This Action Learning Project was developed with the purpose of full implementation and evaluation of the district mission and strategic intent of Farmington Area Public Schools. The Superintendent's vision of 'Personalized Learning for All' embraced within the District Strategic Plan set a bold direction for completely redesigned learning paths and reimagining opportunities in which students experience school. The reform, 'A New Design for Education', and the ability for the district to ask 'What if students and teachers could design the ideal school?' was a collaborative endeavor by students, staff, community members, and district administration. Researching schools around the nation and utilizing the Stanford Design Thinking Model, 'A New Design for Education' set out to design personalized learning opportunities within the context of a new school, Gateway Academy, and breaking away from the traditional, grade-based, factory model of school.

Vision: Personalized Learning for All

Background/Context: This change from the traditional factory model of education to a non-grade level, continuous progress program was initiated by teachers, administration, and community members seeking an alternate choice and experience to personalize learning for students within the context of a public school district. With this change we were seeking a personalized learning opportunity where students become agents of their own learning, teachers become activators of knowledge, and deeper, meaningful relationships within a school community are built by assigning students to a teacher for three consecutive years. Student demographics for the first year: Enrollment August 2014 – 75 Students; 34 female; 41 male; 14.7% SpEd; 3% 504 Plans; 1% Asian; 4% Hispanic; 7% Black; 88% White.

Why a change? Employers are seeking and demanding employees that bring skills that will propel their organization forward. Such skills are critical thinking, collaboration, problem solving, communication, creativity, and emotional IQ. Demonstrated by the number of students that live within the district boundaries and go elsewhere for their educational experience; online, private, charter, or homeschool, families are seeking and demanding opportunities that provide rigor within their child's learning preparing them to be college and career ready. With this in mind, the traditional, factory model school must consider opportunities where learning is personalized, whereby students progress with their learning at their own rate and pace, securing the skills, aptitudes and attitudes of a life long learner, and to be successful global agents of change. ISD 192 set a bold vision to provide customized, individualized learning plans for all students that includes student voice and choice to increase motivation, engagement, and ownership of their learning.

What we did: Articulated throughout the strategic planning process, the strategic mission of a district cannot be achieved by the same district that created it. A district must experience change to close the strategic gap between where it is and where it wants to be. To this end, our schools engaged in the process of creating strategic plans to redesign their work and to modify their current structures. Their efforts have been highlighted and will continue to be shared throughout the district. But it has been recognized that more can be done to provide truly authentic, redesigned and customized learning experiences for our students.

By repurposing the original Farmington High School, the oldest building now called the Instructional Services Center to create a new school, Gateway Academy, we created, from the ground up, a learning experience for students designed completely around the district strategic plan. With this plan we were not limited by traditional structures or by the challenges of change within an existing system. We had the rare opportunity to truly design anew.

Gateway Academy serves the district by providing unique learning options and experiences for our students and to inspire teachers throughout the district and cultivate additional new ideas of what learning can look like for students. The school is open for teacher visits as well as co-teaching and guest teaching opportunities.

The purpose and identity of Gateway Academy is such that non-grade level, multiage classrooms of learners will engage in authentic collaboration, experiences rooted in community action and problem-solving, and creative experiences in which to solve real-world problems in both local and global contexts. Students are organized in multiage grade cohorts,

three cohorts of 4th – 6th for the 2014-15 school year and one cohort of 3rd – 5th and two cohorts of 5th – 7th grade in the 2015-16 school year. The intent is for the school to grow purposefully over the coming years creating cohorts of K – 2, 3 – 5, and 6 – 8 graders. Within the cohorts students will have the ability to flexibly move from one to another based on their individual learning plans and needs.

A series of core elements make this school unique. It will:

- design learning around a project-based (problem/inquiry/challenge) model customized to connect individual student sparks with rigorous academic standards and community needs,
- apply a one-to-the world approach in which students work alongside other students, mentors, and experts in the field and see how the application of their learning impacts the growth of a wide community,
- make use of innovative practices such as open lab, culmination projects and learning archives, experiential learning, community mentors, innovative student assessments, continuous progress through mastery learning and individual learning plans,
- be intentional in creating a stimulating learning environment,
- blur age and grade-based placement by offering school-wide and multiage instruction and collaboration,
- provide a continuous progress and alternative instructional delivery models allowing student access to higher levels of content and/or courses with a focus on mastery beyond standards,
- make use of alternative school schedules and calendar options,
- require all learning community members, including students, staff and parents, to add their voices as a community of leaders, and
- feature a professional learning community model that daily reorganizes to adjust around the needs and learning projects of students.

What we learned during the first year:

- Engage stakeholders in the process of strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of a project to this magnitude.
- Ground all conversations, professional development, and programmatic changes within the strategic intent and vision of the school.
- People have an affect on learning, not prescriptive programs. Relationships, attitude and aptitude are key to the success. Internal staff and those who apply make a choice to teach within this type of program.
- Students choosing to attend shared they like the small community. Students expressed by having ‘voice and choice’ they have taken more ownership for their learning. Both students and staff shared deeper relationships have been built with one another. Most parents shared they have seen their child become an independent learner and excited about going to school every day. Every student shared they feel safe at Gateway Academy. One student response during a conversation, ‘Gateway Academy does not have bullies at the school. We learn to solve our problems like a family.’

Implications for continued practice:

- 1. Program Evaluation:** The following questions would be addressed through focus groups, surveys, and student achievement data in future years. The first year of the school provides benchmark data.
 - a) Does personalized learning increase social engagement in school? If yes, why? If not, why not?
 - b) Does personalized learning increase self-efficacy among students? If yes, why? If not, why not?
 - c) Does personalized learning increase student academic learning? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- 2. Additional Considerations:**
 - a) **Sense of Urgency:** School choice and personalized learning opportunities for students.
 - b) **Hiring:** Consider philosophy, attitude, and aptitude of candidates. Increasing enrollment and programmatic changes drive staffing needs.
 - c) **Support:** Administrative supports for a teacher lead school, resources (financial, staff, curriculum), and professional development.
 - d) **Communication:** Vision, mission, and strategic intent of the school communicated transparently.
 - e) **Collaboration:** Time for staff collaboration is critical. District created a collegial group for staff who teach multiage to learn together and from one another.
 - f) **Space:** Location of the school as it grows to serve the needs of the students and the strategic intent of the program.