



# WHEN IMPROVEMENTS PLATEAU

*How a high-performing suburban district  
looked to local business for a fresh approach  
to innovation planning*

**Minnetonka Public Schools**  
Minneapolis, St. Paul



## ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

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Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K–12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

## INTRODUCTION

What do you do when the systems and structures you've used to innovate and make meaningful student learning improvements no longer work? Even those that for years *did* work? This was the question that leadership in the Minnetonka Public Schools district found themselves confronting in 2009. Ideas and programs that had propelled their schools to great success had plateaued. And thanks to a culture of high expectations and a growth mindset, there was still more improvement to be achieved. To tackle a new problem, they asked a new question: where can we turn for a fresh perspective and a fresh approach to innovation?

## THE CHALLENGE

The Minnetonka Public Schools (MPS) serves just over 10,500 students in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area with six elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, a virtual high school program, and a VANTAGE program developed in collaboration with companies. For years, they had used a standard top-down and standard strategic planning process to generate ideas, set goals, and execute plans to improve student achievement. And for years, this approach worked. By 2008, MPS' four-year graduation rate had reached 98%. In 2009, 25% of juniors and seniors were enrolled in at least one IB course, and over 50% were enrolled in at least one AP course. From 2000 to 2009, the district's ACT composite average had grown from 23.1 to 26.1, and the top 100 students had an average of 32 out of 36 points.

By many accounts, MPS' process of setting a cascading set of objectives and initiatives worked—until it didn't and progress stalled. Traditional strategies were no longer engaging students and staff and were beginning to prove a deficient match for a rapidly changing world. In 2009, MPS realized they needed a new approach if they were to continue to see achievement gains. MPS' leaders had always and still believed that their teams and communities—those who knew their students most—had the best ideas for serving them. Yet the superintendent also knew that a fresh perspective on how to stoke new ideas from within was needed. Put another way, he knew the district was not in need of an idea but that the culture at large was in need of an evolution so it could unlock more innovation. To search for an idea would have been to search for a Band-Aid; instead, the superintendent set out to search for a system that would empower frontline staff to generate strong ideas on an ongoing basis.

Under the superintendent's leadership, two teams were formed: an Urgency Team, which was charged with communicating urgency around the need for innovation; and a Guiding Team, which shepherded the emerging innovation and established any necessary internal structures to see it to fruition. As a result of the teams' brainstorming, MPS turned to a powerful asset—the Minneapolis/St. Paul business community. They partnered with leaders from the local office of ignite! Innovation, an Optum Service, to better understand the dynamics of innovation within systems.

## THE INNOVATION

Core to MPS' innovation was the recognition and admission that the structures they had been using ceased yielding returns. They did not view this as a failure but part of a natural evolution. This awareness allowed leadership to keep an open, not defensive, mind as they learned from ignite!'s team.

MPS chose to partner with ignite! because they were known for utilizing an innovative process to bring forth new ideas. With ignite! as a guide, MPS had an ah-ha moment: the innovation was the process. The ignite! team coached the MPS team as they designed a system for innovation using ignite!'s model, which is predicated on the principles of crowdsourcing, Human-Centered Design (focusing on empathy and customer experience to inform design), and Lean Start-Up (micro-testing of ideas using minimal resources).

### *Human-Centered Design and Lean Start-Up*

ignite! has established a structured and predictable approach to employee engagement in innovation, and MPS followed suit.

Human-Centered Design is a framework to incorporate a human perspective—specifically, the needs of the group of people in question—into every stage of the problem-solving process. At MPS, frontline staff and teachers begin by identifying a problem or opportunity that directly affects students and/or the MPS community. Then, they propose solutions based on user needs. From there, the stages of problem-solving include 1) developing a concept, 2) developing a plan, 3) testing a hypothesis, 4) soft launch, and 5) bringing solutions to scale, with human perspectives driving each step.

The Lean Start-Up model comes into strongest play during the third stage, testing a hypothesis. Per this model, the idea is to use as few resources as possible to get a product/initiative off the ground. Once in limited launch, the product/initiative can be iterated upon, slowly scaled, improved, and rolled out broadly only once proof of concept has been established. For MPS, this means teams micro-test an idea to determine viability, capacity to deliver indented results, and any necessary changes or improvements if it qualifies for a full launch.

### *Use of Spigit and Crowdsourcing*

Per ignite!'s recommendation and with their guidance, MPS implemented the use of Spigit, a crowdsourcing software program that ignite! uses at the corporate level. Spigit is a platform where employees share, describe, and discuss their ideas (innovations). The environment is designed to cultivate trust, safety, and candor, as it is open only to staff and closed to the public. Once ideas are formally submitted in Spigit, they are crowdsourced—the “crowd,” or staff, determine which small, medium, and big ideas are most viable and important, and, from there, they prioritize them.

### *Innovation Process*

Every school year begins with the *Big Hunt for Ideas*—which kicks off the three-round innovation process. To facilitate all three rounds, each building principal selects an Innovation Coach. These coaches receive a small stipend to be the school “cheerleader” for the Idea Hunt and supports employees as they submit ideas and move through the rounds. They also serve as the communication point person for district leadership with regards to the process.

### Round 1: Big Hunt for Ideas (Crowdsourcing)

- In October/November, anyone is invited to input ideas into Spigit. Those who submit are called “Idea Champions.”

- There are three grade level categories for submission: elementary-5<sup>th</sup> grade, middle school, and high school. For each grade level category, people can submit small (under \$1,000 to implement), medium (\$1,000-\$5,000), or big (\$5,000+) ideas.
- On average, MPS receives 200 idea submissions during the Big Hunt for Ideas.

### Round 2: Voting (Crowdsourcing)

- Ideas are paired with other entered ideas that address the same problem in the same category (e.g. High School, Small Ideas). They are then crowdsourced (force ranked based on crowd support) to determine and prioritize winning ideas.
- Winning ideas deemed small go immediately to the building for implementation.
- Winning medium and big ideas are workshopped to prepare them for the final pairwise showdown.  
(See Appendix 1 for the typical Human-Centered Design workshop process.)
- Medium and big ideas are again paired with similar ideas and crowdsourced.
- Winning medium and big ideas go onto round 3.

In round 2, several ideas are not selected to move forward. It is the responsibility of the Innovation Coaches to communicate to Idea Champions when their projects were not selected as a priority. They do this by sending a reassuring message encouraging them to resubmit ideas next year and to remain engaged in this year's process. (For an example of this note, see Appendix 2.)

### Round 3: Micro-testing

- Winning medium and big ideas are workshopped and then micro-tested (using the Lean Start-Up model).
- Big ideas that are a priority are moved to the school board and superintendent level for discussion and approval. A plan to scale testing will be devised based on input from the school board. Testing goes through a series of stage-gates where testing increases in size and scope in support of broader implementation.

Ultimately, winning ideas are selected and implemented in the school year. The Idea Champions whose ideas are used often take on leadership roles throughout their development and sustained practice. The process is popular in MPS and typically sees over half the staff submitting ideas and engaged each year; companies that use this process see an average participation rate of 15-20%. MPS credits the high participation rate to the accurate perception that the process generates ideas that have a meaningful and tangible impact on student learning *and* staff morale.

### *Insights and Lessons Learned*

The launch year of the process yielded MPS' VANTAGE program, which features profession-based immersive learning and integrated content delivered at a high level (both AP and IB curricula are included in content integration). Teachers engage participating juniors and seniors as they solve real-world problems submitted by local businesses.

VANTAGE has been a great success, and MPS has coached other schools through adoption of a similar program of their own. VANTAGE is just one of scores of excellent initiatives to result from MPS' innovation process. Yet, as with any new program, launching the process was not without setbacks and lessons learned. Initially, many employees were skeptical that true innovation could or would come from within. Contributing to this feeling was a sense of isolation that arose from relying solely on Spigit to move through the process. This led MPS to combine Spigit with one Innovation Coach in every school. The coaches provide expertise and face-to-face support to staff as they develop their ideas, which reversed the sense of isolation.

These hands-on coaches also helped solve another issue that bubbled up; in its early years, the Guiding Team was heavily involved in idea selection, causing some staff to view selection as lacking transparency. The Innovation Coaches increased regular communication, which naturally led to greater transparency. Ultimately, staff grew comfortable with the process and highly motivated throughout.

Critical to success was ensuring leadership understood and embraced the process and, importantly, relinquished a level of control. Leadership clearly understood that the “control” was in the process and not a function of only their decisions.

Overall, much credit is given to the courageous superintendent and school board, who were willing to entrust district-wide changes to employees. With only small setbacks and expected growing pains, most changes were made to increase inclusivity and strengthen, not redirect, the process. No major obstacles were encountered, and the teacher's union was directly involved throughout.

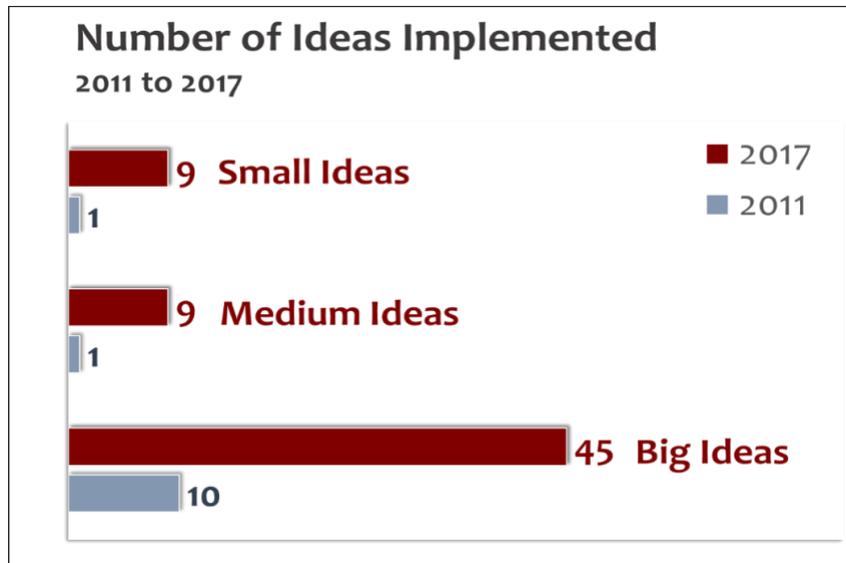
## **The Impact**

From the Human-Centered Design innovation process, MPS' educators and staff—and now even students, as you'll see later in this section—have produced and continue to produce a host of needle-moving ideas. Coupled with the overall side effect of a deeper sense of responsibility and value-adding capacity to create meaningful learning opportunities for all students, the positive impacts of this innovation are showing up in numerous qualitative and quantitative ways across MPS.

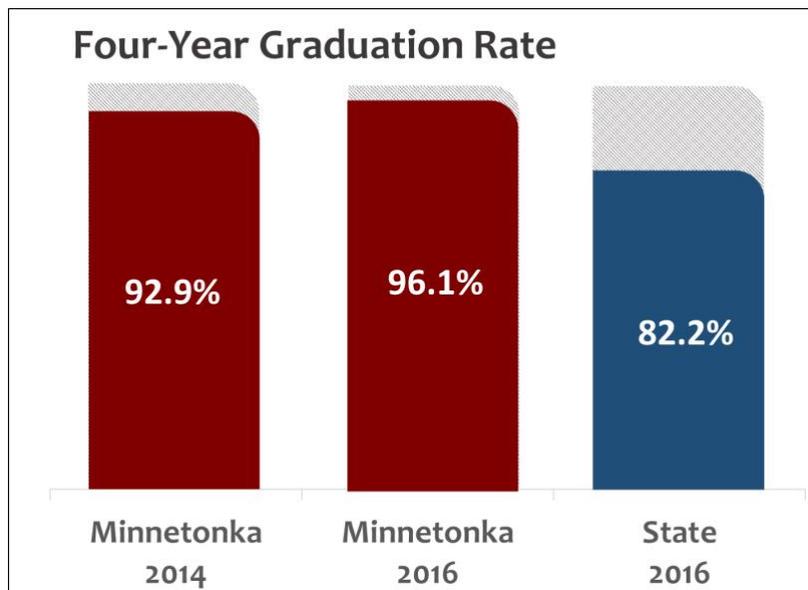
*Percentage of Staff Members Engaged in Ideation Process:* In 2011, 32% of all staff members logged into the innovation website during the fall event. In 2014, participation reached 55% and has stayed above 50% since then. The standard measure of successful crowd-based innovation program engagement in most industries is 25%.

*Number of Small Ideas Implemented:* In 2011, MPS recorded successful testing and scaling of 10 small ideas. By 2017, the number of small ideas successfully implemented exceeded 45.

*Number of Medium and Big Ideas Implemented:* In 2011, the district moved only one big idea and one medium idea into the testing phase. By 2015, those numbers had increased to three big ideas and seven medium ideas. In the 2016-17 school year, the district moved to a system of managing medium and big ideas that supports nine winners in each of the two categories for a total of 18.



*State Statistics:* Prior to the launch of the innovation process, in general, state testing results remained well above the state average and showed minor, statistically insignificant fluctuations from year to year. In every year since the first Big Hunt for Ideas, math and/or reading scores have increased across MPS. The graduation rate, though high from the onset, increased from a low of 92.9% in 2014 to 96.1% in 2016, which is 13.9% higher than the state average.



*AP and IB Scores and Enrollments:* During the six years since the launch of the innovation process, the number of students who took IB exams more than doubled, going from 270 to 660, and the number of AP exams went from 1,431 to 2,536.

*Employee Satisfaction:* Employees report that through this innovation, they were given voice to a degree they had never before experienced—at MPS or elsewhere. They felt valued and excited about their work.

The district enjoys a very stable teacher population and believes their innovation process attracts some of the best teachers and thinkers in the field.

*Teaching Pool:* With innovation at the center of the system, the district has enjoyed an increase in talented employee candidates, from within and outside of the system, to support the succession of their teachers, staff, and leaders.

*Attracting Choice Students and Stabilizing Finances:* The district now attracts over 3,000 students through the open-enrollment process, thereby stabilizing their enrollment at just over 10,500 students. In addition, their presence has provided financial stability for the district to leverage resources toward innovations and maintain successful programs.

*Developing Leaders:* Through the innovation process and with the varying roles of teachers and staff, leadership and decision making are flatter. Several teachers are now pursuing formal leadership programs because of their experience. Decision making at every level has empowered those in all capacities to become leaders.

*Student Voice (Learner Agency):* Though in its infancy, MPS is using the Human-Centered Design process with teams of students, who are trained in the process, to nurture their ideas and realize selected ones. Students report feeling valued; they enjoy their role in making change and believe it is career-relevant experience.

Students made statements such as:

- “It is amazing to be part of a group of students who are representative of innovation at our high school.”
- “If I were to describe the entire innovation in one word, it would be ‘authentic.’”
- “The student innovation team helps bring an entirely new perspective to the table.”
- “I have learned all the hard work and effort that must be put in to actually change something for the better. I have enjoyed learning the steps to take to improve something in my community.”
- “I liked how we were able to critically think. It was really cool that we also had the resources to make changes really occur because some of the ideas were amazing.”

*Parent Satisfaction on Surveys:* In overall satisfaction measures, parents of MPS students continue to report record-high satisfaction rates with programming at all levels. In community-wide surveys collected in advance of ballot initiatives, the 2011 “big idea” VANTAGE received more favorable votes from surveys than did traditionally popular programs like performing arts and athletics. The website Niche.com continually rates MPS schools as the best in Minnesota.

*Accountability:* Regular reports are made to the school board on big initiatives to ensure success, support, and alignment.

*Sharing and Scaling a Powerful Process:* The district has coached several other districts on implementing the innovation process, and many districts are now using the innovation process to replace traditional strategic planning. MPS welcomes any opportunity to share their experiences, wisdom, and materials across the country—because they know the process works. And they know, while complex, it is replicable using core principles and relatively simple procedures.

To broaden their reach and capacity, MPS has recently spun their innovation process off into a non-profit called InnovateK12. The InnovateK12 team is committed to helping interested districts across the country adopt the innovation process to empower their own teams to generate game-changing ideas from within their own system—ultimately to improve student outcomes. Visit [www.innovatek12.org](http://www.innovatek12.org) to learn more.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Have any metrics that measure student achievement or progress towards goals flat lined or regressed? Are we accepting plateaued results as ok, or are we challenging ourselves to find new ways to continue to push student and staff performance forward?
2. What local business or community assets might be available to us that we haven't considered and could offer valuable insight?
3. What other non-traditional resources or non-education-related industry resources have we encountered that could inspire new ways of thinking and doing in our district?
4. Does our culture encourage and take seriously ideas from teachers and administrators? Do they feel they have a voice to make suggestions and help innovate?

## APPENDIX 1: ROUND 3 HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN IDEA WORKSHOP

Medium and big ideas selected to advance to round 3 are workshopped at the district level through the HumanCentered Design framework. A typical workshop, led by MPS' newly appointed District Innovation Coordinator, is as follows:

*Step 1 (40 min): Empathy (Flare). What does this problem feel like to those affected by it?*

Who has the problem/unmet need? How does it feel to be in their shoes? What are the pain points? In this step, it is important to ask as many questions as possible about the problem to gain a better understanding of its roots and impact. (Note: since those with the problem will usually not be present in the workshop, prior to the workshop, Innovation Coaches engage with those affected by the problem to gain insights into what it's like to cope with this issue and to inform discussion.)

The idea in this step is to take a position of empathy and imagine what it is like to have the problem. Ultimately, you will list all facets of the problem and the different stakeholders (staff, students, parents, administrators, etc.) impacted by each. This could yield a list of ten to twenty "problem statements." Take care to be as clear as possible in writing your problem statements.

*Step 2 (20 min): Define the Problem (Focus). Prioritize the parts of the problem and strategically start by solving one part.*

Organize problem statements by stakeholder group. From there, discuss which stakeholder group is most impacted by the problem and whose needs warrant the highest urgency. With this information as a guide, choose one part of the problem *you believe you can solve* that will meet priority needs as early as possible. In many cases, this requires agreement that you cannot solve the problem in its entirety, but you believe solving one part of the problem may lead to solving the rest of the problem.

*Step 3 (20 min): Ideate (Flare). Brainstorm possible solutions with an open mind.*

Once you have clearly defined the part of the larger problem you are ready to solve, it is time to brainstorm solutions. At this stage of the process, it is important to view the part of problem you are trying to solve from a wide range of perspectives. Encourage your team to open its thinking and imagine creative solutions that add a spark of excitement and engagement to your solution. You should try to surface at least ten different ways you could solve this aspect of the problem.

*Step 4 (20 min): Prototype (Focus). Design the leanest prototype possible to get proof of concept.*

Review your brainstorm results to determine which solution you think has the greatest chance of success. Once you've chosen the best solution, convert the idea into a prototype—a lean and distilled initial execution plan—that can be tested. Then begin to narrow your focus: How will this prototype be designed? What resources will be required (budget, time, people, etc.)? What logistical elements must be considered? What are the metrics by which the prototype will be measured? This will naturally transition into the final step.

*Step 5 (20 min): Test*

Now that the prototype has been designed, it is time to think about the details of its testing stage: Who will lead this test? Who will monitor the metrics and lead any necessary changes? Have all logistical details been finalized? What needs to happen prior to launch? Work out the final details so that this test could be ready to begin the next day.

## **APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE COMMUNICATION FROM INNOVATION COACHES**

When an Idea Champion's idea is not selected, the Innovation Coach sends them a motivating and encouraging message, which looks like this:

*It's important to view this only as a temporary setback...PERSEVERE. Some of the most successful ideas in challenge events do not receive enough support to move forward the first year they are submitted. Please continue to think about your idea and how it might be improved and/or tested in other ways so that it can be submitted again next year.*

*One of the most important characteristics of an innovator is PERSISTENCE. During the weeks and months ahead, keep an eye out for other districts that are doing something similar to what you proposed. This data will help strengthen your posting next year. Idea Champions who are passionate about their idea rarely give up at the first sign of resistance.*

*Stay engaged in the PROCESS. As we move forward, we'll need help from innovative thinkers like you. Even though it may not be your idea that we're working on, you can help someone else's idea gain traction and eventually succeed. Great innovators are as dedicated to the process as they are the actual ideas. This is how culture begins to change.*

