



## ***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 K12 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.

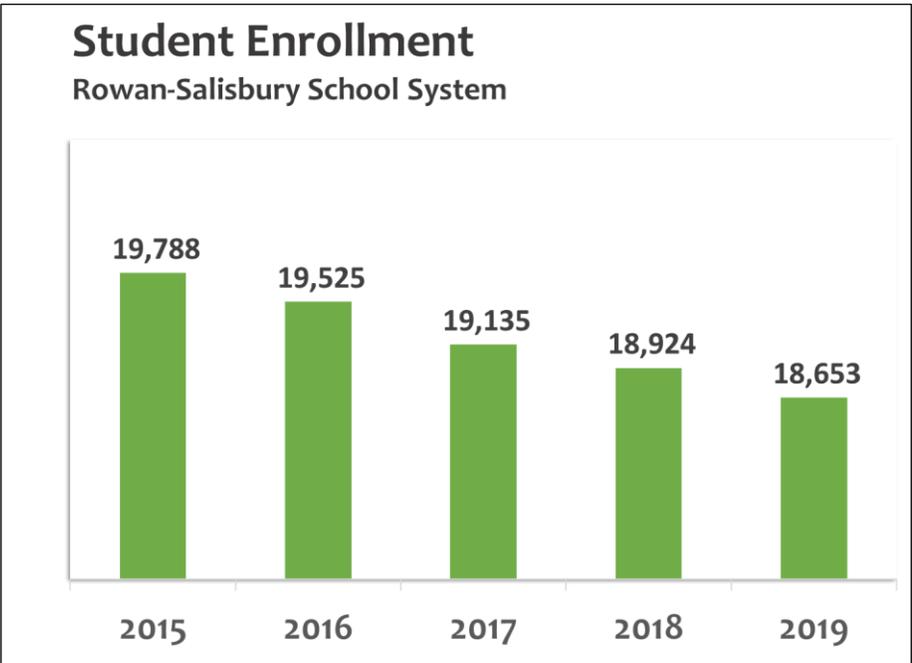
“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning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

## Introduction

In 2015, North Carolina State declared the Rowan-Salisbury School System a “low performing district.” By 2016, the state had removed the status from the district. Today, the majority all of Rowan-Salisbury’s thirty-four schools no longer have this designation. The incredible turnaround of this large district, which serves a primarily under-privileged student population, began six years ago, when a new leadership team made a key, early decision: to shift the district to a one-to-one technology program. With this single decision, the entire district was primed to be fearless as they transitioned to a culture of innovation. Despite budgetary constraints and the realities of state mandates, the district was able to dream big and act with ingenuity to overcome limitations and innovate in the best interests of students. So much so that the state government took note. The district’s leaders would go onto collaborate with state lawmakers to enact policy that would allow for even bolder change across the Rowan-Salisbury School System and, in time, will hopefully allow for other North Carolina school districts to follow suit.

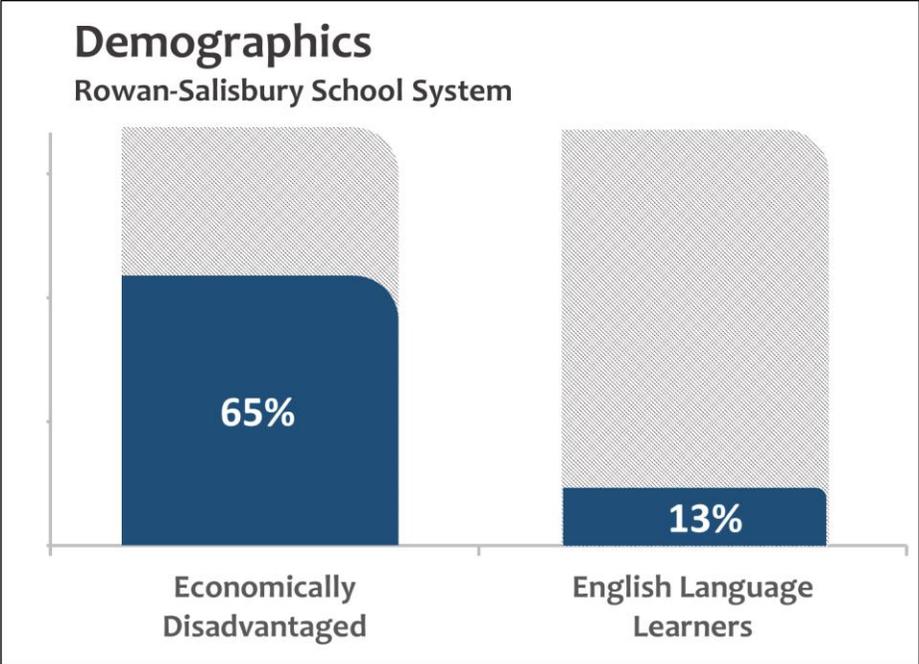
## The Challenge

The Rowan-Salisbury School System (RSS) in Salisbury, North Carolina serves 18,653 students across 35 schools—19 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 8 high schools. The Rowan-Salisbury area dates back to the colonial era. Initially established as a county seat in April 1753 as Rowan Courthouse, the town provided early settlers with courthouse services.



The Town of Salisbury, as it was officially named in 1755, rose in economic prominence with the arrival of the North Carolina Rail Road in 1855. The area prospered as the railways brought commerce and development—and it has declined with the demise of railway commerce.

Today, the Rowan-Salisbury area is engaged in various economic rejuvenation efforts despite continued challenges. The RSS is seeing a drop in enrollment as local economic opportunity remains stagnant. Nearly 65% of the district’s students live in poverty. While its English Language Learners population is relatively small (13% across the district, with larger populations in some schools), many ELL students enter the district with limited English and language acquisitions skills, and some have little to no prior education.



Despite socioeconomic challenges, RSS is an impressive district that has been recognized across North Carolina and the country for its innovations. Beginning in 2013 and under a new superintendent and leadership team, RSS committed to total transformation, rather than focusing on changes here and there. The new leadership team was ready to take bold action in the best interests of students. Within months, the district took a giant leap forward and began implementing an aggressive one-to-one technology plan, complete with the full support of county commissioners.

By August 2014 and with no extra funding, every student and teacher in the district had a device. This ambitious and swift initiative served two purposes. First, it was intended to prime

everyone for the coming shift towards personalized learning. Second, it primed everyone in the system for a new district-wide culture of innovation.

The district adopted the theme of “have no fear” to motivate educators and put them at ease. Leadership wanted to acknowledge that the switch to one-to-one was significant and also reassure teachers that failure was not only ok, it was also welcome and viewed as an indicator of teachers courageously trying something new. Since most RSS teachers had not previously used technology to personalize learning, the district provided myriad professional development opportunities. Students, too, were provided training so that they would understand the purpose of one-to-one. Leadership was relentlessly supportive, responding to needs as they arose and continuously encouraging teachers to take risks, experiment, act with boldness, and learn from failures. Leadership also understood that teachers would need to move at their own pace; what leadership cared about was that everyone was at least moving forward.

And the district was off to the innovation races. Led by a passionate superintendent and her devoted team, RSS redefined itself in terms of doing all they can for students. They adopted “Where every day, everyone discovers and achieves the extraordinary” as their vision and “To inspire innovative and engaging learning” as their mission. That status quo was no longer acceptable to RSS. Instead, all schools were welcomed to innovate however they could and within the bounds of state mandates and a limited budget.

## **The Innovation**

In just a few years, nearly every school in the district adopted at least one dramatic and game-changing innovation. Across the board, the district saw increases in student engagement and indicator after indicator of steadily improved student outcomes. The district at large was taken off the “low performing” list in 2016, and the majority of the district’s schools has come off the list. Teachers and staff were also reporting more job satisfaction, finding the challenge of innovation and the freedom to do so gratifying and rewarding.

The range of changes at RSS is broad, and the list of results of these efforts across all thirty-four schools is long and impressive. Four core beliefs and their consequent actions were integral in releasing the floodgates of innovation.

### *Policy Changes Can Change the Game (but Aren't Always Necessary to Unlock Innovation)*

The state of North Carolina took notice of the remarkable evolution within and across RSS. That the district had moved the majority of schools off the “low performing” list with no additional state funding and in a short time piqued the curiosity of several legislators. State lawmakers and district leaders began engaging in a conversation about potential policy changes. Namely, they discussed if the state could adopt legislation that would make it easier for RSS and, in time, other North Carolina school districts to innovate education delivery to improve student outcomes and create more opportunities for under-served, under-privileged students.

Over the course of a few weeks, RSS officials provided information and context to lawmakers as they crafted a major piece of state legislation. North Carolina House Bill 986 was passed in June 2018 and subsequently approved by the local Board of Education. In the bill was a section that created and codified the “Renewal School System.” Thanks to RSS’s contributions and commitment, this part of the bill was crafted to empower districts and schools—with their on-the-ground knowledge of students and their circumstances—to take action and make decisions in students’ best interests through exemptions from onerous statutory mandates. With the passage of the legislation, RSS was named the state’s first Renewal School System. In 2023, RSS will be expected to submit reports to the North Carolina State Superintendent’s office, which will in turn review the district’s renewal status. Based on this renewal review process, the state will determine if granting the renewal status to other districts in the state is a viable option.

As the Renewal School System, RSS has been given “charter-like flexibility.” Namely, the district has gained local control and flexibility over budget, curriculum, hiring and personnel, calendar and scheduling, and accountability. Renewal status was neither the impetus nor the beginning of innovations in the district; it is, however, allowing the district to take existing innovations to the next level and begin to lay the groundwork for new ones. Select shifts enabled through the renewal status are:

- **Budget:** The district now receives their annual state funds as one large lump sum of money. Where funding had previously come with stipulations, requirements, and pre-defined allocations for certain uses, the district now has more freedom to use their funds as they see best for students. This has allowed some schools to, for example, amend their pay structures or develop a bonus program. Other schools have chosen to allocate more funds towards providing additional professional development opportunities for teachers.
- **Hiring:** The district has gained freedoms in whom they can hire. Where all hires previously had to have specific licensure, the district can now hire people based on skill, experience, and cultural fit alone. This, by definition, has allowed schools to increase the

level, breadth, and frequency of instruction students access in all their school hours. For example, a police officer was hired to teach karate at one of the schools; a graphic designer was hired to teach graphic design to elementary students; a local artist was hired to teach art classes, etc. For core subjects, the district can now hire people with a subject-area degree, such as a math degree to teach math, even if the person doesn't have a teaching license. In these cases, the district will simply offer only a one-year contract with possible renewal each year, as laid out in the legislation.

- **Calendar:** All high schools have chosen to adjust their calendar to align with local community colleges. In doing so, it has become far easier for students to take college-level classes. In one high school, participation in college courses grew by 300% as a result. Other schools have also tweaked their calendars to better meet the needs of staff and the students, parents, and communities they serve. For example, some schools have tweaked their schedules to accommodate one early release day per week so that teachers can use that time for professional learning opportunities. Another school has chosen to start one school day per week later to allow for professional development time.
- **Curriculum:** Renewal status has allowed RSS to put curriculum empowerment back where it belongs—in the hands of the teachers who know their students and their needs best. Curriculum has been redesigned to enable teachers to engage students in three areas of learning: 1) **Academic Skills:** students master fundamental standards in English, math, science, and social studies while analyzing and solving real-life problems; 2) **Unique Life Goals:** the learner will set goals based in his or her unique strengths, career aspirations, and personal passions; 3) **Interpersonal Skills:** the learner will develop skills through creativity, leadership, teamwork, civility, work ethic, communication, and problem solving.
- **Standards & Standardized Tests:** Starting in the 2019-2020 school year, RSS is no longer required to teach all of the standards. Instead, the district's teachers determine the fundamental standards that every child should know and understand at a deep level, with the remainder serving as supporting standards. The state is supporting RSS by providing data on the Fundamental Standards North Carolina Check-ins, which is a quarterly assessment given by the State Benchmark Assessment. RSS will use this data to ascertain mastery level for various standards. This report is unique to RSS because they are the only district in the state that has identified fundamental standards. Thanks to the renewal status, the state has allowed RSS to eliminate all required North Carolina final exams and kindergarten entry assessments. The students do still have to participate in the End of Grade and End of Course Assessments.

### *An Innovator's Mindset Matters Above All*

The district has been so thankful for the opportunity to work closely with state legislators. They feel enormous gratitude to have lawmakers who are passionate about advancing opportunities and a twenty-first-century education for North Carolina's children. Per the bill, the 2018-19 school year was the designated planning year, where each school had to submit their renewal plans through 2023. Through this process, RSS's leaders and teachers realized something important that they are eager to share with all educators, namely those in relatively low-funded districts like theirs: constraints and a limited budget can fuel creative thinking and innovation when people are empowered to think and act differently.

Prior to the legislation, the district had no choice but to work within a limited budget and stricter mandates. Constraints, it turns out, were catalysts to creativity; they forced RSS's educators to think beyond the box, beyond the typical, and beyond what was already known. It forced them to dream up seemingly wild ideas and ask if they were feasible or what they could do to make them so.

Unequivocally, the house bill has allowed RSS to push the envelope of innovation even more. Yet its educators have come to see and appreciate that, looser statutes or not, a bold innovator's mindset matters above all. Even lax laws can go wasted if people don't dare to think originally, imagine boldly, and ask profound questions. Their practice of redefining learning with creativity and courage was, after all, what got legislators' attention.

Prior to the house bill, several RSS schools had become committed to closing the "opportunity and equity gap," and numerous innovations were born from this commitment. Since so many RSS students come from poverty, many were and are unable to access the kind of extracurricular opportunities and enrichment experiences that are ever more the norm for their peers in wealthier districts. If families weren't able to pay for these kinds of experiences for their kids, RSS teachers felt determined to find a way to deliver them for them.

At Knollwood Elementary School, for example, educators are motivated by the belief that rich life experiences create a foundation for learning at school. If those experiences do not exist for students, the school must strive to create them in order to scaffold learning. In conjunction with high yield instructional practices, Knollwood's teachers also provide their students "exploration, experiences, and exposure" opportunities.

The school has built an instructional plan arranged around “learning expeditions,” where teachers take students to sites near and far to explore the world around them and enhance the learning that takes place in the classroom. Kids in grades K - 2 take one day-trip expedition each quarter. These students have gone on camping trips with their families; gone fishing at Baden Lake, visited the Sea Life Aquarium and Asheboro Zoo; and seen plays at the ImaginOn Theatre. Kids in grades 3 - 5 take one multi-day, overnight expedition per quarter. These students have taken trips to the North Carolina Outer Banks; Grandfather Mountain in Linville, NC; Biltmore House in Asheville, NC; Whitewater Center in Charlotte, NC; and New York City, to name some.

Each expedition is designed with content units and standards in mind. While on an expedition, students complete learning tasks to practice specific academic skills and language in a real-world, relevant setting. Students are also asked to keep reflection journals while on their expeditions.

The expeditions have been a great success. Students are gaining experiences in and exposure to places they likely never would have at this stage in their lives. Their experiences have been so eye-opening and exhilarating that they are eager to suggest expeditions to teachers. So much so that students are now a regular part of the expedition planning process, for their classes and for others.

Knollwood’s educators can see in retrospect that the expeditions, perhaps in a lesser form, could have been done without the Renewal School System status. However, the status was vital in opening up the Knollwood team’s thinking about what was possible. The sanctioned flexibility made it easier to see potential, increase opportunities, apply the budget differently, and utilize teacher and curriculum alignment to support the creation and implementation of expeditions.

Knollwood has also developed a robust program of “enhancements” available to students during the school day and throughout each school year. Enhancements are mini courses akin to extracurricular activities. Where, in many districts, families will elect to put their kids into such extracurriculars outside of the school system, most RSS families cannot afford to do so. So Knollwood has found a way to provide this by making use of hiring flexibility and tapping experts in the community to teach various classes, such as dance, karate, scrapbooking, media production, STEM enhancement, and creative writing course. Students take a survey and results dictate which enhancements will be added to the roster for a new school year. Recently, students have requested, Spanish, yoga, graphic design, music genres from a historical perspective, Lego and robotics, and Olympic sports such as table tennis, golf, and hockey.

Thanks to the legislation, Knollwood has gained enormous freedom in whom they can hire to teach enhancements. Consequently, plans are underway to broaden their enhancements offerings. Since teachers no longer need specific licensure, the pool of candidates and class ideas automatically expands. As a school whose student population is almost 100% free and reduced lunch and that has 65% English Language Learners, the opportunities Knollwood has decided to provide its students are truly life changing. The freedom to hire based on skill and experience only serves to make this program that much stronger.

Over at South Rowan High School, which has about one thousand students, the staff is taking a leading edge approach to personalization. The adoption of one-to-one technology was a big inspiration to South's teachers. It pushed them to rethink everything they do and consider what else could be adapted to accommodate personalized learning. Today, South looks quite different from how it did six years ago when it put a MacBook Air into each students' hands for the first time. The curriculum is now divided into four areas: integrated curriculum, community focus, experiential learning, and personalized pathways for every student. The school day is arranged in a flexible modular schedule that is different every day and includes "brain breaks," which is time set aside for students to utilize to meet their needs. Some students will work on homework or group projects. Some receive tutoring. Some might read or work on art. Some will get a snack, lift weights in the exercise room, or just visit with friends. The school has recently launched plans that will see to it that every student at South will have a job experience of some kind prior to graduation, be it an apprenticeship, internship, or job shadowing program. This school is working in partnership with local businesses to operationalize this program and create a breadth of opportunities for students.

Thanks to the renewal legislation, South has been able to try something radically new in the name of next-level personalization. As a new initiative, select South staff members personally interview every single incoming freshman. The interview exists solely to get to know each student—who she is, what experiences she's had, what interests and fascinates her, what she wants to do with her life, who she wants to be in her life, etc. Once all interviews are complete, the interviewers gather to synthesize what they learned about the entering class. Then and only then do they begin to design the freshmen courses—because they are designed specifically to cater to the interests and needs of the incoming class. As an example, the most recent entering freshmen shared an interest in photography. Staff then designed a freshmen photography class as a vehicle for incorporating standards from core academic areas. They also expressed an interest in entrepreneurship and a desire to make learning more relevant and rich with real-world applications; as a result, a math class where students learn math entirely through designing and running a business is being offered. Another math class where students build tiny

houses to master standards (and then sell them to the community or donate them to Habitat for Humanity or other community agencies) was crafted to meet an interest in applying mathematical concepts to real-world experiences. This approach means that freshmen course offerings will differ from year to year as they will be totally tailored to each new entering class. It's work that the staff finds energizing and enormously gratifying.

### *Hire for Energy, Action, and Diversity in All Senses for Maximal Creativity and Innovation*

When the new superintendent took to the helm, she brought with her a totally new vision of hiring and personnel. Namely, she sought to hire for very specific characteristics that often supersede the classic educator or administrator resume. More than a long history in administrative roles in education or direct teaching experience, she looked for energy, ability to execute, and diversity in all senses, with high value given to diversity of experience. She wanted self-starters who could bring a range of viewpoints and perspectives and demonstrated a willingness to speak up, share ideas, and take action.

The result is a fascinating senior level cabinet of ten members. They include: the Superintendent; an Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning; an Assistant Superintendent of Operations; the Chief Financial Officer; the Chief Strategy Officer; the Chief Technology Officer; the Chief of Human Resources; the Chief Legal Counsel; the Executive Director for Elementary Schools; and the Executive Director for Secondary Schools.

The backgrounds of cabinet members are broad and rich. The Human Resources Chief is a retired marine who did conflict management training for fellow marines. The Assistant Superintendent of Operations has a background in business and construction. The Chief Financial Officer, who has no prior experience in education, came from a large grocery chain, where she served as CFO. The Chief Legal Counsel started her career in education then practiced law after earning a law degree.

The cabinet meets every Monday to advance the district's vision. They make sure every last plan in the works across all thirty-four RSS schools aligns to the strategic plan. When plans align, the cabinet asks how they can better support schools to achieve goals. When plans don't align, they work with appropriate educators to adapt plans or work towards new ones that do align.

Cabinet meetings are substantive and thoughtful. The range of expertise and experience that its members bring to the table—literally and figuratively—constantly push the entire team to think differently. Those with atypical resumes help those with entirely education backgrounds break

out of stuck thinking so that as a collective they can connect new dots to create new ideas and new solutions to old problems.

The superintendent's philosophy of hiring now drives hiring for every role at RSS. And, of course, House Bill 986 has made hiring for diversity of background that much easier. When interviewing candidates, RSS looks for three key characteristics:

- 1) **Energy:** Candidates must show that they have the energy to do hard work. Numerous educators across RSS comment that working in such an innovative district is the hardest work they've ever done—and the most gratifying. New hires are those who've shown the vigor and vitality to do whatever it takes to create life-changing and future-focused experiences for all RSS students.
- 2) **Ability to execute:** Talking and thinking are, simply put, not enough for RSS. The district seeks people who have a track record of not only conceiving ideas but also executing on them. Early in the interview process, candidates are provided data to address a central question in a presentation. Candidates are given precisely ten minutes to present; if they haven't finished in ten minutes, they will be interrupted so that interviewers can ask follow-up questions. Questions are designed to reveal a candidate's energy level and capacity to implement. Those who advance then meet with certain cabinet members in an informal setting so that leadership can get to know a candidate; these interviewers provide their assessment to the superintendent. Lastly, the superintendent will meet with a candidate; relying on her assessment and information provided by all those who engaged with a candidate, the superintendent makes a final decision.
- 3) **Diversity:** RSS prizes diversity in all senses. They are not looking for new hires to go with the flow or contribute the status quo. They want people who will bring new ideas; challenge current practices; and make the whole stronger, better, and more effective in their mission.

### *Zero-Based Budgeting is Strategic, Future-Focused Budgeting*

When the new superintendent arrived, she brought zero-based budgeting with her. By definition, zero-based budgeting is future-focused budgeting. Zero-based budgeting naturally requires that educators ask big questions about what their students will need not only in the near term while in school, but also in the far term once in careers. With projected student needs in mind, educators can ascertain what needs funding and how much to meet those needs. When educators hold an innovator's mindset, the budget will usually change every year as the needs of students—both present needs and future, career-relevant needs—change.

Zero-based budgeting was adopted to help ensure every school budgeted according to the strategic plan, not to the past. Where RSS schools used to order the same things year after year, they now rigorously vet every budget line item against the strategic plan and students' evolving needs. Each RSS schools submits a budget to the district every year. In the early years, leadership poured over the minutiae and had schools inspecting and questioning every last purchase, from glue sticks to paper clips. Schools were expected to defend every line item and make clear how it would advance the strategic plan. The result was the freeing up of money on things that were found not to serve goals, which could then be redirected to strategically aligned initiatives.

Today, RSS's schools have grown habituated and more comfortable with the zero-based budgeting process. They automatically vet every last budget item against strategic plans and eliminate extraneous expenditures with ease. Schools are granted a high level of autonomy; each school, after all, knows its students and their circumstances best. They are entrusted to make strategic budget decisions that make the most sense for their specific students. Yet they are always prepared to defend every item and how it will advance rigor and relevance and continue to close the opportunity and equity gap for every last RSS student.

### **The Impact**

Over the past six years of new leadership and a new culture of innovation, multiple indicators have shown meaningful improvements in student outcomes. Over the past five years, the district's graduation rate has increased five percent as the drop-out rate has gone down. Each year over the past four years, the district has seen two to three times the expected growth in students' Lexile scores. Consistent annual Lexile gains mean that cohorts are entering a grade level each year at a higher Lexile than previous cohorts. Scholarships have increased over the past six years from \$7,844,484 to \$33,170,630 in the 2019-20 school year.

As a result of innovative practices and increased student engagement, several schools are seeing in student attendance increase. Many schools have also seen a reduction in disciplinary issues and referrals, particularly those schools that have chosen to focus on disciplinary issues through restorative practices. Staff engagement has also improved, and parents and guardians report more satisfaction with their children's educational experience.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) Where do we feel hamstrung and confined by statutes or budget? How can we think originally and creatively to work within confines but still innovate? Where we are too confined, is it possible to collaborate with state legislators to enact policy favorable to innovating in the best interests of students?
- 2) How is the experience and equity gap impacting our students, today and in the future? Are we doing enough to close the gap for our students? If not, what can we do to provide them enriching life experiences that their peers in wealthier districts often get?
- 3) Where can we begin to hire people with non-traditional backgrounds who can challenge us, help us see things from a different perspective, and help push us to new ideas and new solutions?
- 4) Are our budgetary practices keeping us stuck in the past and automating next year's plans based on last year's? Can we adopt zero-based budgeting to force more future-focused planning?

