

AS MANY NEEDS AS THERE ARE STUDENTS

*How a district transformed to protect
and fulfill all of its students' right to a
rigorous, future-ready education*

Wilder School District

Wilder, Idaho



Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
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ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

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.

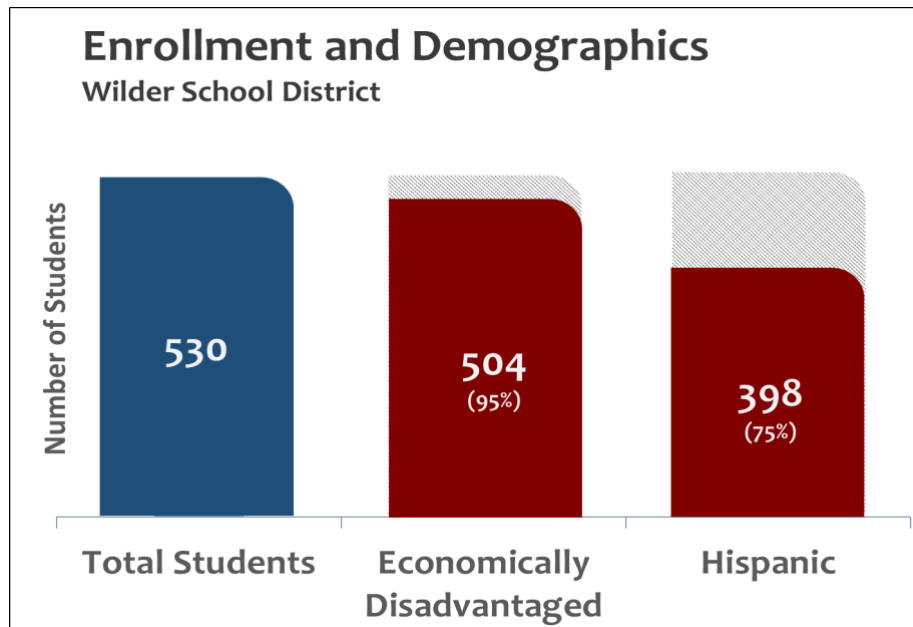
“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning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

INTRODUCTION

What do you do when your students' needs lack any uniformity or consistency? As a migrant/high mobility farming community, students in Wilder School District often enroll and depart throughout the year. At any given time, Wilder's students are all over the map in academic readiness and English language skills. For these students, the traditional, test-based learning model was never going to work. Thanks to a maverick leader, who views his role as a student advocate first, and the hard work of all district employees, Wilder defied odds and resisted pressures to overhaul the system to one of true competency-based, individualized instruction.

THE CHALLENGE

Wilder is a small, rural farming community in western Idaho. As a migrant town, families follow the work, lending the Wilder School District to high student mobility and a vast range in student readiness and English language skills. Of its 530 students, 95% are economically disadvantaged and 75% are Hispanic. The district includes two school buildings, one for the K-5 students and one for the middle school and high school students.



Despite its small size, the district's instructional challenges had grown large. In 2007, the elementary school had seen seven principals in twice as many years. By the 2008-2009 school year, the school was among the worst performing in the state. Teachers had grown jaded by the lack of leadership stability and ever lowering expectations placed on them and their students.

Interestingly, amid a sense of hopelessness, the middle and high school building stood as a beacon of hope. In 2001, the then superintendent replaced the dilapidated building built in 1920 with a modern campus. In a high poverty community with many buildings and homes in disrepair, the newness of the middle and high school had served to restore some pride.

A new principal took the helm of the elementary school in 2007. While many teachers remained skeptical of yet another principal, this one proved different. The building he was now in charge of had been built in the 1950s and was crumbling. With the board's support, he supervised the construction of a new one so that both of the district's campuses could be sources of pride to the community. And so the elementary students could come to a positive, productive learning environment where leaks and rotting pipes no longer disrupted instructional time. The principal also oversaw a series of key, significant instructional and staff changes that led to an increase in math, reading, and language scores within three years.

Yet as a district, they were still struggling to meet the needs of a student body so diverse in those needs. In 2012, the elementary school principal also assumed the superintendent role, serving a dual post in the district. The next year, the board put together a visionary plan to bring technology to its students. By that point, it was clear to the new superintendent that a truly individualized instructional model was the only way they could meet all student needs *and* provide them with the 21st-century education they deserved.

Thanks to this vision, in 2015 the district was invited to apply for the Apple Grant. By the 2015-2016 school year, Wilder was an Apple Connected school with an iPad for every student. Finally, the district was able to put in place plans to transform the entire system towards a competency-based, personalized instructional model.

THE INNOVATION

Students have a right to a future-ready, high-quality education. Period. This is the cornerstone belief at Wilder. It has served to galvanize a district that was for so long splintered and dysfunctional. Behind this guiding principle are five mindsets that have allowed the district to make sweeping changes in relatively little time.

Without trust, there is no change

When the superintendent joined the district as the elementary principal, he found a school weighed down by years of dysfunction and broken promises. The teachers had, fairly so, lost trust in leadership, faith in the district, and hope for the school. He knew that if there was any chance he'd be able to do what he wanted to do—restore hope and achievement in the school—he was going to have to earn everyone's trust.

To kindle trust, he missed no opportunity to share his belief that he saw all the teachers and students as capable of meeting high expectations. He worked steadily to reverse the long-held perception that Wilder Elementary was a low performing school. From there, he looked for and celebrated any and every little win he could that would prove this new notion true. Slowly but surely, a shift took place and trust took root. He knew that once trust reached critical mass, teachers would be buying into his leadership.

Thanks to this methodical and deliberate approach to building trust, the principal was able to, in due time, share with teachers his vision—one that would require significant change and work on their parts—and still get them on board. As a result of this milestone, he was tapped also to take the superintendent post and replicate his success at the district level.

At Wilder, establishing trust in the process is seen as just as important as establishing trust in each other. Transitioning to a competency model always brings a distinct challenge: initial improvements usually show up only in qualitative measures—metrics such as student engagement, student ownership, teacher morale, etc. Meaningful test score improvements tend to lag, as they are not the focus of change. As the Wilder team moves through the early years of the competency model, leadership takes care to offer frequent encouragement, champion all qualitative wins, remind the team that quantitative improvements are coming, and keep focus on a vision that is so much bigger than any test.

Advocate for students: If educators don't, who will?

Wilder's leadership believes first and foremost that students have a right. They have a right to a hopeful future—and the high-quality education that is their path to it. It is seen as the duty of the district to protect and deliver on this right to a future-focused education for all students. Wilder's team sees themselves as doing more than providing an education to students; they see themselves as fulfilling their fundamental right.

Part of protecting and delivering on this right and all its component parts means advocating on students' behalf. Leadership holds the view that if students don't have access to everything they need, then they must do whatever reasonably possible to get it for them. If an ineffective practice is standing in students' way, then leadership will use all possible resources to remove the roadblock. If any party is pressing the district to do something leadership believes is in conflict with students' educational right, then leadership will resist that pressure.

In the 2008-2009 school year, Wilder Elementary was listed as one of the lowest performing schools in the state. Per law, the Idaho State Department of Education applied for a school improvement grant for the school. However, the funds came with several strings, none of which leadership saw as supporting students' right to a future-focused education. Instead, funds were to focus almost entirely on test scores. The then new principal (now also superintendent) boldly declined the money and instead continued to make decisions that supported the school's new vision of education, one that would do far more than prepare students to pass tests.

The transition to a competency-based, personalized instructional model was also born from fulfilling that right to education. Under this model and enabled through the use of flexible learning apps and iPads, students are expected to master content. This has provided great hope to its students who might spend half the year away due to migrant farming patterns or move in and out of the community due to challenges of poverty and low-income rental homes. These students now feel that much more motivated and welcomed to re-enroll in Wilder when they return—again and again. Instead of being expected to somehow catch up to students, they pick up exactly where they left off. They are in no way dinged or punished because of family labor needs.

This does mean that some students simply cannot meet one year's standards in one year's time. Currently, the superintendent is lobbying state legislators to make it acceptable for kids to finish high school in four and a half years—with no stigma or consequence. To him, this is an unmistakable case of students needing an advocate so that they can take full advantage of their right to a future-ready education.

Wilder is adapting its calendar to make room for students to continue their learning throughout the summer. The next wave of the personalized learning model is to keep kids engaged in periods when they might not have otherwise considered it possible. The district wants to help students in migrant families continue to learn while not physically present. They also want students to be able to make use of summer months to continue to master standards and keep pace to their peers. Leadership successfully advocated for various funding streams to hire staff and create structure to ensure students can continue learning during the summer months.

If the Wilder team won't protect its students' right to a quality education, who will? This is the question that keeps everyone in the Wilder system committed to that right every day.

Structured time impedes student learning; fluid, flexible time unleashes it

Personalized learning can be milked when freed from the traditional bounds of the structured, segmented bell schedule. To leadership, it's very simple. On the subject-segmented bell schedule, the first five minutes of a class are lost to students settling in and quieting down. The last are lost to students packing up. Then there is a five-minute break in between every class. That amounts to 15 minutes of lost learning time six times a day. At one-and-a-half hours daily across the school year, this is over forty days of lost instructional time. In a high school, this is almost a full year lost to quieting down, packing up, and commuting to the next classroom.

To the superintendent, this is learning time that the traditional structure robs from students. Thus, the traditional bell schedule is seen as at odds with students' right to a future-ready education. In Wilder, the objective is to prepare all students for no bells, no segmented classes, and the freedom to wholly own their learning and manage their time once they reach high school.

At the elementary school, students are grouped into grade-level classrooms by age. But within any classroom, students are working at their own pace depending on level of ability. Teachers are always reviewing data and spend their days personalizing support based on need. In terms of preparing students for agency and time management, the teacher will post daily to dos. Every student is expected to complete all, but they are free to choose how they want to tackle them.

In middle school, students operate on what Wilder calls a "soft schedule." While there are no bells, there are certain times where students will move in groups. The idea is to prepare these students for what they will confront in high school—total agency over their time.

At the high school level, there are no bells and students control of their time outright. They are expected to meet requirements and they are empowered to manage their time along the way. If a student wants to spend all day working on math in the library, he is welcome to do that. If another student wants to spend a third of a day working on history, another third on science, and the last third on English language arts, she is free to do that. If a group wants to devote a week to completing a project, they are allowed to do that. All the while, all teachers are available throughout the day to guide and assist as needed. Teachers monitor all standards mastery progress closely and know when any student needs intervention and direct support.

To Wilder, a huge part of being future ready is being able to manage time. They see helping students develop time management skills as integral to instruction. At the high school level, this increases capacity for dual enrollment and the ability for students who want to work towards an associate's degree. Leadership sees an added and significant benefit. Many students in their community are expected to graduate high school and immediately get a job to help support the family. But as these students learn how to budget time strategically and efficiently, they are coming to believe that they can take online college courses and hold a job. Time management skills are unlocking the possibility of college for students who previously might never have considered any education beyond high school.

Wilder doesn't operate on the traditional semester system where this class ends on this day and a new one begins on that day. Time is not used to chunk and segment instruction and learning, but to keep all students moving forward—always. Merging the fluid school day with support for students—no matter their geographic location—for all twelve months of the year, Wilder is striving to be a truly 24/7, 365-day school.

Evolve the role of the teacher

To give students progressively more freedom in directing their school days and in handing over ownership of their learning to them, Wilder teachers had to view themselves differently. They had to let go of the traditional definition of a teacher. The model of imparting information to students so that they can complete a task was now seen as at odds with a future-ready education. Instead, students were handed the responsibility of finding and absorbing information. The role of the teacher, then, transitioned into one of ongoing support.

Teachers at Wilder see themselves as mentors. In fact, they call themselves mentors. Five instructional goals create their ethos of mentorship: 1) understand students and their needs; 2) commit to the success of all students; 3) have a growth mindset; 4) mentor intentionally; 5) be data driven.

Taking the time to build relationships is foundational to reaching all five instructional goals. In knowing their students' strengths, they can champion them. In knowing their interests, they can help craft a more relevant education. In knowing their weaknesses, they can offer customized guidance to turn them into competencies. And in closely monitoring all student data, they know where all of their students are towards mastery at all times.

The shift from teacher to mentor and from bell schedule to fluid school day was no small accomplishment. Nerves were settled on the promise and follow-through of extensive, frequent professional development. Originally, two hours of professional development were tacked onto the school day every Wednesday. Teachers voiced that this schedule was exhausting them, which leadership saw as not ultimately serving teachers or students. So the district won approval for a two-hour early release every Wednesday.

Now teachers get two hours of professional development weekly without extending their workweek. There is no long-term professional development plan. Teachers tell leadership what they need, and leadership does what it can to provide exactly that. If teachers are to develop the capacity to provide for all students personalized learning, leadership recognizes that they have to provide for their teachers personalized professional development.

Evolve the role of the student

From day one, Wilder students own their learning. The degree of teacher handholding eases throughout the grade levels. But all students are expected to have voice and choice in how they learn. Students are respected and empowered to make decisions, just as they will one day be expected to do in their careers.

Students are well aware of their teachers' five instructional goals (stated in the prior section). To the student, these goals are their learning bill of rights. If they feel a teacher is failing to provide any component of those goals, they are encouraged to voice this to the teacher. While this is a significant paradigm shift to students, leadership wants them to know that everyone at Wilder is committed to fulfilling their right to a future-ready education. This entails students familiarizing themselves with the act of speaking up when they are in need of support.

On the other side of the same coin, students are held to five learning goals that create the ethos of student responsibility at Wilder: 1) demonstrate significant academic growth; 2) think critically; 3) take ownership of learning; 4) engage and commit to learning; 5) have a growth mindset and embrace the 16 Habits of the Mind. These goals shape expectations about what successful learning looks like at Wilder. They are seen on signage throughout campuses and are explicitly and frequently discussed with students.

Social-emotional skill development, by way of the 16 Habits of the Mind, is integral to learning. Teachers want students to think deeply about their learning and behavioral patterns. By routinely engaging with students about how they approach learning and interaction with peers, conversations about perseverance, respect, managing impulsivity, and other underpinnings of owning learning and self-responsibility are common at Wilder.

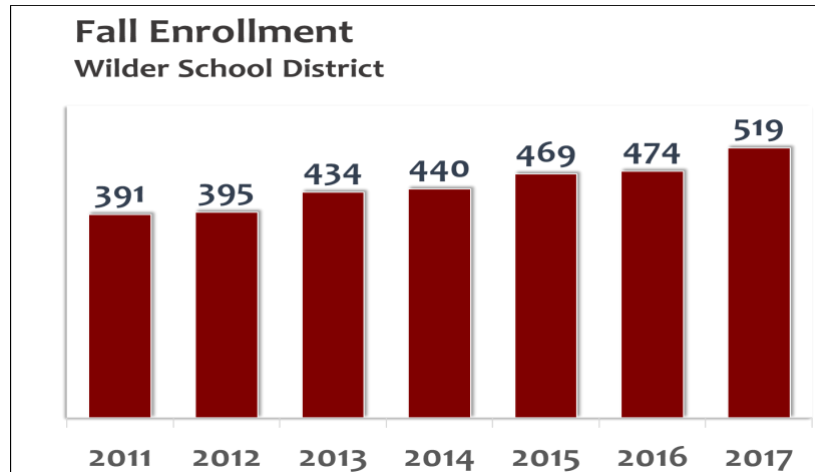
THE IMPACT

Growing enrollment

Just ten years ago, Wilder was a dysfunctional district with a rotating door of leadership, staff, *and* students. For the families who could afford it, they had stopped sending their kids to Wilder. Today, Wilder is on the leading edge of rigorous, future-focused learning. It is giving hope to students who are so often written off as unreachable due to their family migratory patterns. And mobility rates are dropping, as more families are once again choosing to enroll their kids in Wilder schools. Where Wilder was once seen as unprepared to meet even some student needs, it is now seen as capable of meeting the specific needs of every student who walks through its doors—any time of year.

Increased engagement and improved academic results

Across the board, students are more engaged in their learning. The district no longer allows students to get poor grades. Students know they are going to get the support they need to challenge themselves and achieve at high levels. One such indicator of this attitude is that fully 40% of high school students are now taking dual credit courses. The district has also brought technology tools to campus—such as a student-managed 3D printing art studio, a state of the art animation studio, and virtual reality STEM software and hardware—to provide more engaging and relevant learning experiences to students.



Steep decline in discipline issues

When kids are engaged, discipline issues go down. When they are also encouraged to discuss behavioral issues—rather than being shamed for them—so they can understand and learn from them, discipline issues become almost nonexistent. Thanks to the expectation that all students will embrace the 16 Habits of the Mind and the commitment from teachers to use them daily in instruction, students are learning to understand themselves and choose behaviors that contribute to a respectful environment for all.

Steep incline in teacher morale

Before Wilder transformed its instructional model, teachers were held to low expectations and meeting them. Many had given up and were simply trying to get through their days without big problems. Today, teachers feel rejuvenated. Many readily offer that teaching at Wilder is now rich with those moments—those student ah-ha moments—that made them want to teach in the first place. They have also been unburdened from the relentless monotony of lesson planning and grading work. Instead, they get to spend their days getting to know all their students. They get to mentor them towards those gratifying light bulb moments. They get to make a real difference in their students' lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do we assert leadership when advocating on behalf of our students? Are there opportunities where we could diplomatically assert more leadership to do what we know is best for our students instead of deferring to what others say is best?
2. What do we believe our students have a right to in terms of their education? Are we protecting and fulfilling these rights? Might we inadvertently be blocking the fulfillment of these rights?
3. What thoughts or ideas keep us from believing we are capable of transitioning to a fully individualized, competency-based instructional model? What other thoughts could we consider that challenge these potentially limiting beliefs?
4. Where in our school day, month, and year might we be inefficiently using time or structuring schedules such that we rob students of additional learning time? Where and how can we “find” lost time?

