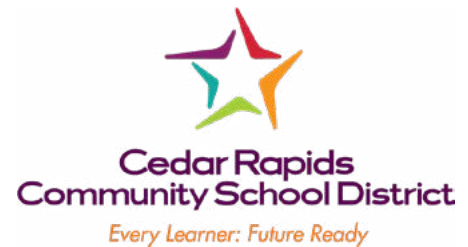


Cedar Rapids Community School District



Real-Time Redesign Case Study

Overview

Cedar Rapids Community School District (CRSCD) is Iowa's second-largest district, serving over 16,000 students, 56 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch and 39 percent of whom identify as students of color.

Through stakeholder engagement, external inspiration, and critical internal research, Cedar Rapids identified a central problem of practice connected to their long-term vision for competency-based learning: **"How might we provide relevant, standards-aligned feedback to students so that every student reaches mastery?"**

To address their problem of practice, Cedar Rapids piloted a **student reflection and goal-setting process** with a middle school social studies class.

“ *This process highlighted for us that bringing in more voices to a problem of practice widens the considerations and potential solutions, especially for those who are directly affected by the problem. Pausing our problem-solving long enough to conduct empathy interviews has helped bring better solutions to several other projects since work on this pilot and it's something we need to work at institutionalizing as we face future problems.”*

- John Rice, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, Cedar Rapids Community School District

Introduction

In summer 2020, leaders at Cedar Rapids Community School District (CRSCD) were in the challenging position of preparing to reopen school amid the COVID-19 pandemic; at the same time, leaders wanted to continue progress toward their district's long-term vision of preparing all learners for the future.

They joined the [Always Ready for Learning Strategy Lab](#), a nine-month, pro bono, cohort-based learning experience. The Strategy Lab supported CRSCD and six other districts to launch the new school year with a strong start and to implement a real-time, targeted improvement process that would accelerate progress toward a more equitable, resilient system for teaching and learning.

As part of the Strategy Lab, CRSCD used the [Real-Time Redesign](#) process to make progress on their vision – even amid a challenging year.

Come Together

Step 1: Organize an Inclusive Team

Cedar Rapids [built a design team](#) of leaders from its central office Learning and Leadership team but eventually **broadened the group of stakeholders** involved in the process.

- CRCSd leaders are all strongly committed to the district's vision for equity – to “develop a system that assures all students have equity of voices, resources, opportunities, and expectations.” However, as team members [reflected on their identities](#), they realized they would **need to include other voices at the table**, especially given the incomplete set of perspectives represented by their predominantly white, male group of district-level administrators.
- This led the group to **engage a larger set of students and teachers**, which elevated more diverse voices and helped the team better understand the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning from those who live that reality every day.

The design team built a [shared commitment to change](#) based on the district's existing vision for teaching and learning.

- **CRCSd has a well-defined vision and strategy for competency-based learning.** The vision includes equity as a core belief. Other core beliefs, such as student ownership and student learning, emphasize student empowerment and focus on ALL students' needs. The vision also paints a picture of what resiliency looks like in practice; the core belief around innovation challenges the district to be creative, to continuously evolve to stay relevant in the context of the broader world, and to adapt to different students' needs and interests.
- The district already had several years of progress working towards this vision. However, the design team knew that the work was not yet finished and that the Strategy Lab presented a great opportunity to continue the work. Specifically, the original strategic focus of the 2020-21 school year was supposed to be **standards-based grading**. While the COVID crisis meant that near-term district priorities had changed, the design team still sought to make progress in that area during the school year. And, the challenge of managing remote learning made the team feel that **standards-based grading was even more important than ever in that it gave students clear, flexible pathways to mastery**.

Step 2: Look Backward Before Going Forward

The design team [reviewed district data](#) and sought input from a broad set of stakeholders to know how to focus its design work.

- Examining student data, the design team saw that there were **stark academic outcome gaps across demographic groups**. Reviewing this data underscored the district's continued focus on equity.
- To explore the root causes of these outcomes, CRCSd interviewed students and teachers for whom the system is not working and [designed an interview guide](#) that would **evoke stories and feelings**.

- In addition to general questions about students' and teachers' experiences, the team also included targeted questions about standards, assessment, and grading since the team hypothesized it would need to focus on these areas. With this thoughtful set of questions, the conversations not only **helped shed light on the problem but also surfaced specific ideas about what it would take to close gaps.**

Step 3: Stand on the Shoulders of Giants

To build on what they were learning internally, CRCSD looked to outside research and examples.

- With its emerging focus, Cedar Rapids **decided to [research other communities with standards-based grading systems](#)**. From this research, the team learned new approaches to track individual students' mastery of standards over time versus having grades that reflect mastery at one, stagnant point in time. These approaches struck the team as potentially powerful ways to close persistent achievement gaps.
- Cedar Rapids **also researched districts that made assessments and grading relevant to students' real-world experiences and future aspirations**. From this research, the team sought to include [multiple dimensions of relevance in learning](#) - personal, academic, real-world, and cultural - in their designs. Such an approach helps teachers adapt the learning to different students' needs, identities, and interests.

Dream Big

Step 1: Clearly Define the Problem You Seek to Change

Cedar Rapids [drew out clear themes from their empathy interviews](#).

Student and teacher input provided helpful direction for the design team. Interviewees identified the need to **build stronger relationships across students and teachers, create more personalized and authentic learning experiences, and reconsider effective feedback for students**. These themes affirmed the team's hunch that work related to standards-based grading would be highly valuable, and it provided specific ideas about how to implement that work.

Insights from Empathy Interviews

Based on these themes, [the team identified their problem of practice](#): “How might we provide relevant, standards-aligned feedback to students so that every student reaches mastery?”

This problem statement challenged the team to **find solutions that help each and every student deepen their learning through opportunities for ownership and personalized feedback** (including feedback relevant to the student's goals and aspirations). The problem statement also required the team to think about more individualized and flexible systems than traditional grading structures, which apply a “one-size-fits-all” approach to assessing learning at a single point in time. Such traditional systems do not always include personalized feedback or give students additional opportunities to improve their mastery.

Step 2: Brainstorm & Pick a Solution

In brainstorming solutions to the problem they had identified, the team identified a range of solutions.

The team's [potential solutions](#) fell into one of four categories:

- **Connecting student feedback and grades more explicitly to the district's profile of a graduate.** This set of solutions would make learning more relevant for students (by connecting it to their future goals) and more individualized (as it would deliver more personalized feedback to students on their learning).
- **Getting the community involved in assessing students' progress toward the goals outlined in the district's profile of a graduate.** This set of solutions also makes learning more relevant and individualized. However, it more deeply enhances the relevancy of learning by connecting students to members of their community – people with whom they share community culture, and people who can speak to how learning will show up in a student's future career.
- **Building space and structures for students to reflect on their own learning.** This set of solutions would more deeply engage students in their learning by promoting self-reflection (versus just having a teacher assign a grade).
- **Exploring other (non-grade-related) ways to gauge student progress.** This set of solutions would give students more choice and flexibility in how they demonstrate their learning, especially as compared to traditional assessments, which can sometimes not accurately assess learning and/or can have inequities baked in such that some student groups consistently outperform others.

The design team [decided on a solution](#) that would **give students space and structures to reflect on their own learning via a clear reflection and goal-setting protocol.**

- The design team reviewed the ideas to consider which would best meet the needs of students, promote equity and resiliency, and be feasible for near-term improvement. The winning solution rose to the top because it would **empower students to set their own goals (in academics and beyond), prompt conversations between teachers and students about the purpose of the learning, and engage students to reflect on and track their progress toward goals.**
- This solution aligns well with CRCSA's goals for this work. It supports equity because it respects each students' individual goals for and pace of learning, and it **provides each student with the feedback and support needed to help them advance.** It supports resiliency because it **enables teachers to adapt their support of students** based on valuable information gathered via the goal-setting and feedback process.

Start Small

Step 1: Design & Run a Pilot

The design team decided to [pilot a reflection and goal-setting process](#) with students.

- CRCSO built a **clear prototype for reflection and goal setting that it could pilot**. The pilot involved a teacher introducing a new standard to students – with clear articulation of how the standard would apply to students' lives outside of the classroom. Then, students set their own learning targets for the standard, including what level of mastery they aspired to achieve. After the lesson and assessment, the teacher provided personalized feedback to the student about progress toward their goals. The student then used that feedback to self-reflect on their learning and set goals for future learning. Throughout the process, students met with the teacher and each other to define and track progress toward goals. The teacher also tracked simple measures for engagement and performance for each student and the class as a whole.
- This pilot had several benefits. It **helps students understand the “why” behind learning and make authentic connections between courses** and the world around them. It also helps teachers give more personalized, standards-based feedback and brings teachers and students together for reflection and collaboration.
- The design team kept the pilot simple. **To start, the team focused on a single learning task in one middle school classroom**; only after initial success did the team more formally document the process and plan to expand the pilot to additional classrooms.

Conclusion

As of the spring semester of 2021, Cedar Rapids' pilot was in progress, and the design team was hopeful the data they were collecting would show the benefits of this solution for students and teachers. Cedar Rapids had plans in place regardless of the outcome and was prepared to scale a successful solution and/or take lessons from this experience to inform future work.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Where do you **see your own system in this case study**? Are you facing similar challenges? What have you learned from this case study that might help you address your challenges?
2. Cedar Rapids tackled a piece of their broader, long-term work toward competency-based learning by **focusing on a targeted, small-scale improvement**. What about this approach differs from how your team designs teaching and learning today? Where do you see opportunities in your district to use a real-time, targeted improvement process?
3. Early in their process, CRCSO **paused to reflect on their identity and history to make sure their design team was inclusive** and to regroup in their commitment to equity and resiliency. How might the process have turned out differently without this kind of preparation?

and reflection? Where do you see opportunities in your context to build toward equity and resiliency in teaching and learning?

4. CRCSD's pilot of goal-setting and reflection **started with a small-scale change in a single classroom**. For your own pilot, how might your design team measure impact and assess scalability? What challenges to scaling might you encounter, and how might you overcome them?
5. CRCSD's work supported their district-wide shift toward **competency-based learning and standards-based grading**. Where do you see opportunities in your context for competency-based learning and standards-based grading? How would such work support equity and resiliency in teaching and learning?