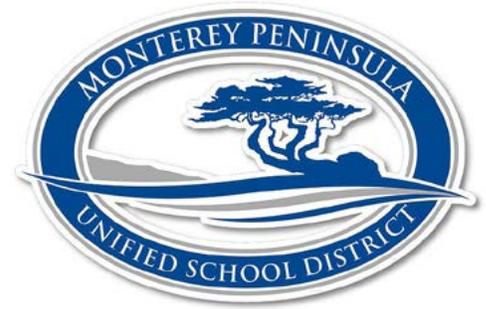# Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Real-Time Redesign Case Study

Overview

- Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) in California is home to more than 10,000 students, 68 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch and 80 percent of whom identify as students of color.

- Through stakeholder engagement, external inspiration, and internal research, MPUSD identified a central problem of practice connected to their long-term vision for "deep learning that prepares them to solve the challenges of the 21st century": **"How might we increase flexibility and personalization to build a sense of belonging and connection within the context of our labor and policy constraints?"**

- To address their problem of practice, MPUSD piloted a **process to engage students and teachers to design new systems for personalization and connection**.

Introduction

In summer 2020, leaders at Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) 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 MPUSD 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, MPUSD 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

MPUSD convened a core design team that included its **superintendent and a diverse group of cabinet members**.

- In many ways, MPUSD senior leaders were well-positioned to lead this work. All are strongly

committed to the district's goal to "listen to and engage with all stakeholders (family, community, staff) in order to better understand and respond to the needs of our community." As **chief-level executives, they also had positional power to enact major change in the district** and brought to the table experiences across different functional areas, including teaching and learning, human resources, and more.

- However, the group also realized the limitations of their perspectives given that they were all district-level administrators. This inspired the team to plan how to **deeply integrate student and teacher voice into the process**.

The design team built a shared commitment to change based on their ideal future classroom.

- MPUSD had already defined a compelling vision of excellence in teaching and learning – one where **each student engages in authentic, relevant learning activities and is supported to be an empowered and engaged critical thinker with mastery of knowledge and skills**. The explicit emphasis on reaching every student in every classroom demonstrated a focus on equity. The vision also prioritized resiliency in its emphasis on adapting learning activities to individual students' interests and needs.

- The design team hypothesized that **increasing flexibility and personalization** while **strengthening students' sense of belonging** would help the district achieve this vision. Notably, these ideas felt particularly acute in terms of meeting students' needs – academically and beyond – during a period of remote learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Step 2: Look Backward Before Going Forward

The design team engaged a diverse group of students, families, and staff to inform its work.

- The design team knew that there were a range of perspectives on what it would take to achieve the district's vision. In accordance, the design team **planned empathy interviews with people whose perspectives had not always been sought out in the district, such as families who spoke Spanish**.

- Empathy interviews were so powerful that the design team wanted more leaders to hear the insights. MPUSD held an **"empathy interview board meeting" where students, staff, and teachers were invited to share their stories in a town hall format**. This brought important voices to an even broader audience, including powerful decision-makers like board members, and built deeper connections among community members through hearing and sharing each other's personal stories.

Step 3: Stand on the Shoulders of Giants

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

- Early on, the design team hypothesized that student-teacher relationships would help build students' sense of belonging and help teachers more effectively personalize learning. To find inspiration for how to do this, the team looked to **other districts that had developed structures and processes for building strong student-teacher relationships**; for example, the team reviewed staffing and scheduling changes other districts had made to develop time and space for intentional community-building.

Dream Big

Step 1: Clearly Define the Problem You Seek to Change

MPUSD drew out clear themes from their empathy interviews.

- Student and teacher input provided helpful direction for the team. Interviewees identified the need for developing **stronger connections** between and amongst students and teachers, as well as **personalizing support** for students' academic development.

- These themes affirmed the team's hunch that relationships and personalization would be especially powerful ways to advance the district's vision.

Based on these themes, the team identified a problem of practice: **"How might we increase flexibility and personalization to build a sense of belonging and connection within the context of our labor and policy constraints?"**

- This problem statement challenged the team to focus on *equity* through solutions that would **meet the academic and social-emotional needs of each student**. The problem statement also promotes *resiliency* in that it **acknowledges the team's real-world, short-term constraints without taking the focus off of their longer-term goals** of improved flexibility, personalization, and relationships.

Step 2: Brainstorm & Pick a Solution

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

- In a collaborative brainstorming session with other Strategy Lab districts, the team shared their problem of practice to generate possible solutions. The resulting ideas could be grouped into six categories:

  - **Engage students and teachers to co-design new systems.** This set of solutions highlights the fact that equity requires those most impacted by teaching and learning – students and teachers – to be involved in developing new systems. It also challenges the district to be resilient through adapting and flexing to enable the new systems developed by students and teachers.

  - **Revise policies.** This set of solutions recognizes that sometimes district policies can be major barriers to equity in a district; certain policies, like seat-time duration or grading expectations, can limit flexibility and personalization. These solutions also demonstrate the district's willingness to dramatically reinvent itself – even rewriting policy – so as to improve teaching and learning.

  - **Focus on staff members' sense of belonging.** This set of solutions recognizes that in order for teachers to be able to foster students' sense of belonging, teachers must feel that they belong and are supported.

  - **Revise grading to be mastery-based**. This set of solutions elevates the fact that traditional methods for grading are often not flexible or personalized (instead, grades are based on rigid scales, include non-academic behavioral measures, and are attained at one point in time). A

mastery-based approach to grading allows teachers to give more personalized feedback to students and gives students multiple chances to prove mastery.

- **Regroup students by academic need and/or interest.** This set of solutions recognizes that each student has different needs, academically and beyond. It explores opportunities to revisit traditional structures (e.g., age-based grouping) and to instead develop systems that group students by targeted academic need and/or type of learning the student is interested in.

- **Build social-emotional activities into academic courses and set aside time for intentional community-building.** This set of solutions honors the fact that students' sense of belonging and connection is an important precursor to academic learning. It also highlights the fact that building students' sense of belonging cannot just be a "check-the-box" activity – it must be integrated throughout the approach to teaching and learning.

The design team decided on a solution that would **engage students and teachers in a process to co-design new systems for personalization, flexibility, connection, and belonging**.

- 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. **This solution rose to the top because it would include teachers and students in every step of the process**. Inviting teachers and students to directly participate in the work demonstrated the team's commitment to prioritizing their voices. It also showed their willingness to adapt the process as they learned more about what this work would take.

- This solution aligns well with MPUSD's goals for this work. It supports *equity* because it **cedes decision-making authority to those closest to the problem**. This solution supports *resiliency* because it challenges the district to respond to solutions that teachers and students develop; it also **introduces a new method, teacher- and student-involved design sessions, that the district can use in the future**.

Start Small

Step 1: Design & Run a Pilot

The team decided to pilot a design-thinking process for **students and teachers to co-design new systems for personalization and connection**.

- MPUSD **planned to pilot a collaborative design session for teachers and students.** Participants were taught about the design-thinking process and then confronted with the problem of practice: "How might we increase flexibility and personalization to build a sense of belonging and connection within the context of our labor and policy constraints?" Together, teachers and students brainstormed solutions and built prototypes and strategies that could be implemented to address the problem. Teachers and students had support from district leaders to dream big – and assurance that leading ideas would actually be implemented in the district.

- This approach had several benefits. It was a chance to **make sure that those most impacted by teaching and learning (students and teachers) led the change**. Bringing together students and teachers for this work **created an early opportunity to build connections** – one of the district's key goals. Lastly, the design team was also excited to **build a reusable process** that could drive future change.

- **The design team kept the process simple and organized**. To start, the design team wrote a project plan to manage the process. They identified two teachers, two administrators, and 12 students as participants. The design team then curated resources and created short training sessions to introduce participants to the process. Finally, they developed a timeline for participants to work within and a process by which participants' solutions could be integrated into the district's broader approach.

Conclusion

As of spring 2021, MPUSD's 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. MPUSD 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. The design team's work centered around the district's goal of **strong student-teacher relationships and student sense of belonging**. Where do you see opportunities in your context to build connection and belonging? How would such work support equity and resiliency in teaching and learning?

3. MPUSD's problem of practice **focuses on an aspirational vision but also recognizes the policy and labor constraints it faces**. What constraints do you face in your context as you work toward more equitable and resilient teaching and learning? What would it look like to acknowledge those constraints (like MPUSD did) without letting them hold you back?

4. MPUSD's pilot **brought teachers and students together to co-create a solution**. How are teachers and students in your context brought in as co-designers? How might you increase opportunities for teachers and students to lead change?