Innovate Salisbury: An Action Research Project

Editor's note: *In addition to Ross Cooper, [Randy Ziegenfuss and Lynn Fuini-Hetten](#), the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent of Salisbury Township School District, contributed to this post.*

Creating Transformational Learning Experiences

We begin with a prominent question for many school and district leaders: What conditions must we create in order to promote the scaling of identified classroom innovations?

In the [Salisbury Township School District](#), an [Apple Distinguished Program](#), we have focused much of our time, energy, and resources on intentionally supporting classroom innovation. In the 2014-15 school year, we had the opportunity to design and implement an action research project with the support of educational researchers and members of the Apple Education team.

The [action research](#) focused on answering three questions:

1. What are the critical factors of success for our teachers who are creating transformational learning experiences?
2. Which factors can the district foster?
3. What is the role of teacher leadership, building leadership, and district leadership?

As an outcome of the research, we identified six factors necessary for moving toward a climate in which teachers are most comfortable designing transformational learning experiences:

- Social networking
- Peer networking
- Professional learning opportunities
- Safe, risk-taking environment
- Internal and external motivation
- Personal teaching/learning philosophy

With these factors in mind, we then designed [Innovate Salisbury](#) -- a year-long professional learning opportunity for 2015-2016 -- with a cohort of 15 teachers who represent all of our schools and levels. The team meets for full-day sessions on a monthly basis to develop [innovative ideas](#) for their classrooms, with the goal of eventually scaling innovation throughout the district.

Program Components

Book Studies, Projects, Podcasts

The first Innovate Salisbury session took place this past October, and during that time all members of the team chose at least one book that piqued their interest. Some of these books included Don Wettrick's *Pure Genius*, Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey's *Making Learning Personal*, Stephanie Harvey and Harvey "Smokey" Daniels' *Comprehension and Collaboration*, and Laura Fleming's *Worlds of Making*. Reading these books, combined with the sharing, choice time, and professional development that take place, supports teachers with the individual projects that they plan and execute throughout the year. Some of these projects include:

- Genius hour in high school language arts
- Digital portfolios in the middle school
- A makerspace in a fourth-grade classroom
- Student blogging in an elementary ESL room

Also, Randy and Lynn have interviewed many of these books' authors. These interviews can be found on their podcast TLTalk Radio, available to everyone in the interest of pushing our learning even farther.

Sharing, Conversation, Choice Time

Toward the beginning of each Innovate Salisbury session, time is set aside for teachers to share and discuss their work relating to the progress of their individual projects, and/or any other risks that they may be taking with their students.

Toward the end of each session, teachers are provided choice time. Their options here regularly include project conferencing for teachers to work with each other and/or with administrators, project work time, and professional reading time.

Professional Development

The majority of the sessions have included some form of more direct professional development.

Most of this guidance has focused on project-based learning (PBL), which we have explored over two periods of two hours each, with a third period coming next month. The first period contained an exploration of PBL's seven essential design elements, the "grading" of a finished project using the Project Design Rubric (PDF), and a redesign of

said project. The [second PBL session](#) contained a module in which teachers, playing the role of students, designed student-created rubrics for a PBL unit on opinions and arguments.

Other professional development has related to leveraging Twitter to promote student learning, a look at the significance of higher-order questioning, and investigating innovative classroom and school models.

Turnkey: During and After

Throughout the year, we have been encouraging the cohort to continuously share their experiences with other educators. For example, during a recent district professional development day, the middle school cohort members implemented a version of the first PBL session with other educators from their school. Currently, all team members are creating a slide deck that details all of their individual projects. This work will be shared with school and district leaders, our school board, and all stakeholders both in and out of district.

In the End

As we reflect upon our work, we have four main takeaways for school leaders who are identifying, supporting, and scaling up classroom innovations:

1. Personalize the change experience.

The teachers in Innovate Salisbury were able to select their own area of innovation and are provided agency over the path, time, and location for their learning.

2. Know where you're going.

In Salisbury, we have spent the year having conversations to define the profile of a Salisbury graduate, and our beliefs about learning.

3. Support the transition.

The Innovate Salisbury team is supported in multiple ways: face-to-face professional development, asynchronous work, making connections both internally and externally, and welcoming iterations throughout the innovation process.

4. Evaluate and adjust.

We must engage teachers and school leaders in the reflection process and use that

outcome to build the next iteration. Over the course of time, progress toward the organization's vision for learning will be evident as new innovations reach scale.

Along with these four takeaways, we believe that our teachers' and students' accomplishments as a result of Innovate Salisbury will play an instrumental role in driving and defining the future of Salisbury, both in and out of the classroom.