Infusing the Basics With the Spirit of Innovation

In our opinion, one of the biggest misconceptions in education is the idea that "the basics" must precede innovation. While foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy will always be necessary, there's no reason why we can't teach them alongside innovative practices.

According to [George Couros](#) in [The Innovator's Mindset](#):

> Innovation demands that our students learn the basics, but how we go about teaching them may look different than in years past. The basics are crucial, but they cannot be the **only** things we teach our students.

4 Foundational Innovation Strategies

With these thoughts in mind, here are four ways to strategically infuse the basics with innovation.

1. Utilize your specialist teachers.

When Ross was an elementary school assistant principal in a district with a highly-regarded [career and technical education (CTE) program](#), two of its instructors gave him a tour of their high school facilities. Throughout that visit, the teachers shared their educational philosophies and how they facilitated student learning. Some of these tenets included:

- Allowing students to engage in productive struggle to uncover a deeper understanding of engineering principles
- An emphasis on the iterative process
- Assessment and grading not based solely on final products

Clearly, there was a contrast between learning in the CTE program and in a typical classroom. Ross asked these teachers, "Have you been given a formal opportunity to talk about your philosophies with other teachers at your school? Would students benefit if these philosophies were applied across *all their classes?"* The answers to these questions, not surprisingly, were "no" and then "yes!"

In [Where Good Ideas Come From](#), Steven Johnson discusses the **coffeehouse model** of creativity and how "many of history's greatest innovators managed to build a cross-disciplinary coffeehouse environment within their own private work routines." The same

idea can be applied to education, as something can be learned from *anyone* regardless of official job title. For example, we'd love to see specialists (such as CTE, art, and music teachers) present to regular education teachers on the philosophies that drive the teaching and learning in their classrooms. Then we'd offer them structured time to collaborate on merging these approaches with what's already taking place.

2. Embed innovative practices into the curriculum.

Every day brings chances for students to innovate. But in our experience, the schools' forward-thinking change agents simply cross their fingers and hope the innovation happens (maybe through some form of professional development). Yet we can *and should* be more intentional about promoting innovation in our districts and schools with everything in our power.

Curriculum rewrites present us with unique opportunities to embed innovative practices that also represent our priorities as educators. While these additions may not guarantee that everything will be executed precisely as we envision, they're a step in the right direction.

Next year, Ross' district will rewrite its elementary science curriculum. It could be advantageous to include innovative practices such as Genius Hour, design thinking, robotics, and coding. These methods could be merged with other science topics or subject areas, and/or 30-40 minutes a week could be allocated to students immersing themselves in at least one of them. Of course, professional development would probably be necessary, and teachers might be able to participate on a volunteer basis.

A few years ago, Wissahickon School District in Ambler, Pennsylvania took a similar approach. According to former administrator A.J. Juliani:

> *Innovation often happens in organic fashion. At Wissahickon, we shared Genius Hour at our Best Practices Fair, and five other teachers jumped on board. The next year, momentum carried it into the new ELA curriculum. Now every ninth grader experiences Genius Hour, and teachers get to improve facilitating this type of learning every year.*

3. Empower students to lead their own (and others') learning.

Tony has referred to himself as Cantiague Elementary School's **lead learner** ever since he saw Joe Mazza tweeting about the term and started researching its significance. He repeatedly encountered statements from thinkers like Michael Fullan and Robert Marzano

stressing the importance of a principal becoming an instructional leader focused on staff, student, and community learning. As Tony researched, he realized that he already was a lead learner (one of many in his school community) because he modeled the importance of learning through his own daily actions while supporting and facilitating the learning of those around him.

He focused on empowering students through conversations with staff about how minor tweaks in daily instruction might give children opportunities to facilitate their own learning and shape the trajectory of their educational experiences. One adjustment involved teachers giving students choices in their reading and in their writing workshop. Whether through picking books that excited them (regardless of level) or researching an area about which they were passionate for a writing unit, the children were leading their own learning.

In addition to these language arts modifications, students have led lessons as a result of their Genius Hour research or science experiments that they've tried. As a result, Tony's school has seen a shift from a culture of teaching to a culture of learning.

4. Engage families and students differently and build transparency.

Many schools in this country function as fortresses in which everything that happens inside is the educators' business while everything that happens outside is the families' business. Unfortunately, there's never a bridge connecting these two worlds because many schools do very little to meaningfully engage families. This fortress mentality isn't in the best interest of students or the educational community. In their 2002 report titled _A New Wave of Evidence_ (PDF), Mapp and Henderson wrote:

> _When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement._

The bottom line is that engaging families is a must, not an option. We can no longer rely solely on connecting with the families who happen to show up at PTA meetings. We must go beyond in our efforts to flatten our school walls, build transparency, and engage all families. We can accomplish these goals by letting _children_ share their powerful educational experiences. For example, consider implementing a Social Media Intern or Tweeter of the Week program in your school (idea courtesy of Missy Emler). You could also create a Snapchatter or Instagrammer of the Week. Regardless of platform, what matters is children sharing timely and dynamic stories with the community. Schools have incredible stories, and children can be the best storytellers, so empower them to shape

your school's narrative.

A Right, Not a Privilege

Withholding innovation from students who are learning the basics is equivalent to saying, "You're not ready for the privilege of learning in an exciting, authentic way."

It's not a matter of *if* we can make the two coexist, but *how* we can find a way to synchronously expose our students to both in order to create the districts, schools, and classrooms in which we'd want our very own children to learn.

How does your school embrace innovation without sacrificing the foundations of teaching and learning?