Managing Change while Re-Imagining High School, March 2022

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Introduction

The Chief Academic Officer of the Knox County schools asked the Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) to collect feedback regarding the progress of the high school re-imagined pilot. The high school re-imagined pilot connects high school academies to college and career paths while fostering community relationships. REA invited the executive principals from the seven high schools participating in the pilot to provide their reflections through an interview process. This author generated this report from the feedback provided by the five principals who elected to participate. The interview process was structured to mirror Ambrose's model for managing complex change (Ambrose, 1987). The author generalized the responses into a thematically categorized summary.

Findings: Why this initiative?

Many schools have an existing academy structure or had one in the past. However, principals cited different reasons for participating in the pilot. Principals cited the following reasons for participating.

- The chance to build hands-on learning spaces (such as health science labs and school-based bookstores) before funds became unavailable or competition for funds increased.
- The ability to stoke student interests in science and math through the academy structure.
- Participation fosters relationships to help all students feel like a part of a larger community.
- The prospect of engaging students who currently see no relevance in their schooling.
- The opportunity to influence the district-level policies regarding the academy structure.

The district vision for re-imagining high school is broad enough to encompass the reasons a principal may have elected to participate in the pilot. However, district leaders should recognize the differences in school-level goals when designing support and progress monitoring benchmarks for the program.

Findings: Support

The principals have been satisfied with the district leaders' engagement during the planning sessions. They would like a similar level of support as they move to the execution phase. Specifically, they would like district-level support as they plan for academy-specific programming. Principals want to negotiate how their academy is structured (be it around career paths or broader themes) and be provided with high-quality information to help them identify academy themes. They would also like support to identify current courses that are incompatible with their eventual academies. Some schools have built identities around offerings that may need to be removed. They would appreciate help from district-level staff in communicating (to their staff) the necessity for any changes.

Principals shared concerns about managing the changes required from the re-imagined learning pilot with other changes (e.g. curriculum shifts, etc.). District leadership will want to strategically prioritize changes at the pilot schools. Principals want to keep the focus on the changes for the pilot and minimize "change fatigue" among their staff.

Principals were asked who they went to when they had questions about the re-imagined learning program. The answers were as varied as the reasons each school joined the initiative. Principals direct their questions to executive-level staff (Jon Rysewyk, Keith Wilson), secondary supervisors (Danny Trent, Sallee Reynolds), or colleagues that have led academies in the past. The district may benefit from identifying the ultimate source of information on the re-imagined learning pilot and have that person coordinate messaging through all other sources.

Findings: Communication.
The principals have been somewhat disappointed with the level of communication regarding the initiative. District leaders told the principals that all high schools would eventually migrate to the academy model. They worry that a lack of public communication suggests that the re-imagined learning imitative may not have broad support. Teachers are wary of making changes if the district is not fully committed to the initiative. The lack of public communication may delay teacher buy-in. The principals also suggest communicating through the local press will proactively answer stakeholders' questions.

The principals reported that their staff was also anxious about the impact of re-imaging high school on the schedule. The principals felt semester-long courses benefit high and low-performing students. High-performing students can access a wider breadth of post-secondary courses, and struggling students have opportunities to re-take courses they failed. The principals understand that a year-long schedule would facilitate common planning but do not feel that the benefit is worth disrupting the status quo. They would like the district to communicate with teachers explicitly about its intention about scheduling.

The district may benefit internally and externally from a coordinated and consistent communication campaign. The campaign can signal the district's commitment to the stakeholders and efficiently clear up misunderstandings that lead to implementation barriers. Principals feel that district-level non-negotiables communicate that the district has a vision, but the lack of public communication leaves them concerned that district-level commitment may be missing.

Findings: Student Voice
Principals were interested in figuring out ways to incorporate "student voice" into their academy decisions. Generally, principals wanted students to feel like the shift to the academy structure was something done for them instead of something done to them. Academy themes may not capture student attention if programming decisions are based solely on economic drivers or adult inputs. Using current high-school students' thoughts to define academy themes ignores the input of the rising middle-school students who will enroll in the academy structure.

Principals felt the tension of providing programming for high-performing and low-performing students. Some principals want to build their academy structures to target students who are not successful in their current high school. For example, one principal was gathering input specifically from Juniors who had 17 or fewer credits. However, some principals are concerned that focusing on low-performing students may

limit the growth of high-performing students. District leaders may want to help schools balance the needs of the high and low-performing students. They could do so by developing best practices for incorporating "student voice" into academy decisions.

Findings: First Year Changes.
The district defined the minimum changes that pilot schools had to make in 2022-2023. These required changes include designating a freshman academy leadership team, designing a freshman seminar course, and relocating the freshman cohort to its own space in the building. All of the schools participating in the pilot planned only on making the minimum changes in 2022-2023. Most of the principals appreciated the district's setting of these non-negotiables. They felt it made the initiative's goals easier to present to their staff. However, principals want clear boundaries while also exercising local flexibility in implementing the initiative. They view local flexibility as an indicator that their input and expertise are valued. Therefore, the district may wish to communicate the 2023-2024 expectations as soon as possible. This will allow for principal feedback about how they could meet the expectations while exercising their autonomy. The findings from this study also suggest that the 2023-2024 non-negotiables will dictate the totality of changes.

The relocation of the freshman cohort was the largest source of angst. Most principals have structured the physical layout of their building based on content areas to facilitate intra-department planning. The principals are concerned about the near-term impacts on school culture and teacher-teacher collegiality as they dismantle the existing content-centered structures. There were also concerns about providing specialized instructional spaces (lab spaces, art studios, gyms, CTE classrooms). Most of the principals felt that the current physical configuration of their building did not support the district's academy vision. The district does have funding that can address many of these concerns. Meetings with the pilot principals could identify their specific needs, develop a cost analysis, and create timetables for reconfiguring their buildings.

Proposed Next Steps
The principals were unified in a desire to move forward. They felt there were diminishing returns from gathering more input. The principals were excited to start enacting the plans they have spent so much time developing. They are eager to see the impact of the programming on the students they serve.

The author proposes the next steps for this work at the district level.
1. Create the progress monitoring framework for the re-imagined learning initiative. A cohesive framework will coordinate the benchmark indicators submitted as part of the ESSER plan and align with the LEA plan submitted to the state.
2. REA will collect data from the freshman academy leaders (College and Career Counselors, Academy Coaches, and Freshman Administrators). Interviews will be used to determine what each person's job responsibility is, how they view their changing job responsibilities, and how they would like district-level support deployed.