

The Power of Design Thinking: NORTH ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL



Competency-Based Education

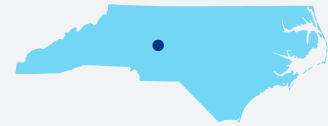
At Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS), we have a guiding belief: **children are more than their test scores.** We know not every student learns in the same way—and that when educators have the flexibility to try new, innovative teaching approaches, we can truly help students learn and succeed.

That's why the RSS team called state legislators with a bold request. **We asked for charter-like flexibility that would empower our schools and local Board of Education with more autonomy.** The policymakers were inspired by our data and experience-backed vision. They introduced legislation, which passed in less than a month. North Carolina's Renewal district was born!

Through our Renewal status, we enjoy curriculum, personnel, financial and scheduling flexibility. Every school in our district has created a plan to serve their students' specific needs, while building academic and interpersonal skills—and helping students pursue their unique life goals, too.

Now, through our case studies, we're sharing more specifics about what we've done, how we've done it and what school leaders across the country can try in their own districts.

ABOUT NORTH ROWAN HIGH



LOCATION
SPENCER, NC

GRADES
9-12

SIZE
~600 STUDENTS

CHALLENGE:

The traditional education system wasn't connecting with students, or teaching them the right SEL skills to thrive. As a result, students weren't excited about school, and the school faced high absentee and discipline rates.

SOLUTION:

North Rowan created a curriculum focused on design thinking, problem-based learning, real-life experiences and SEL, making learning come alive for students—and catering to their individual interests and strengths, too.

RENEWAL FLEXIBILITIES USED:

The school used their budget, calendar and scheduling flexibilities.



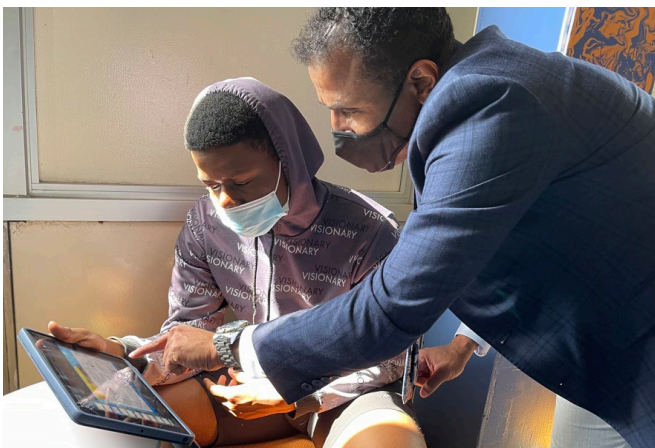
THE CHALLENGE

At North Rowan High, education leaders knew they needed to redesign support for students, with two main focus areas:

1

BUILDING EXCITEMENT AND INTEREST IN SCHOOL.

The Renewal team knew from both the data and their own experiences in the classroom that there was, as the team put it, “an extreme disconnect between the outcomes we wanted for our students and the education they were receiving.” Kids weren’t excited to be in school, and in many cases, weren’t learning in the ways that would best help them retain information and progress. As a result, the school had below average test scores and faced challenges around absenteeism. The team knew the traditional education system wasn’t working for their students—and they were ready to create a curriculum and school environment that DID.



2



BUILDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) AND LIFE SKILLS.

At North Rowan, educators knew that skills like communication, team building, problem solving and effective conflict resolution would help North Rowan students succeed, whether they chose enrollment, enlistment or employment after graduation. Yet the school’s data—such as high discipline rates—showed that students needed more support to build these skills.

How the Team Identified the Need

North Rowan High started the Renewal process by analyzing the school's data, conducting in-depth research and engaging the community.



Staff Engagement

North Rowan High launched a **teacher-led design team** as one of the first steps of the Renewal process. They invited not only teachers, but administrators and other staff to join the planning team. As part of this work, in one meeting, then Principal Meredith Williams asked every educator to write down what they thought the most important thing to teach students was. Educators displayed their sticky notes, which revealed that all but one teacher wrote down a life or “soft” skill such as problem solving or responsibility. This led the team to ask themselves, are we actually teaching what is most important for our students to thrive? Answering this question together made them realize there was more they could do to give their students a competitive edge. They needed to teach skills like collaboration and communication that would set students apart from their peers, and set them up for success in life. This launched a culture of design thinking at North Rowan. The Renewal team worked together to identify how they could best support North Rowan students—and then created a plan for them.



Data Analysis + Research

The team looked closely at the school's data throughout their planning. They analyzed everything from test scores to absentee rates and discipline numbers. They **made sure to look at both traditional academic numbers AND indicators of social-emotional skills** to ensure they were building a strong, holistic understanding of the school and where there were opportunities for their students to learn and grow. The data made it clear that students needed programs that would make them excited to learn—creating an enriching environment that contributed to lower absentee rates. Students also needed more soft skills to help them effectively resolve conflicts and work with their peers.



Community Engagement

The North Rowan team knew that engaging the community would not only build support for Renewal in the community, it would also help build a supportive network for students. The North Rowan team started by reaching out to the community and asking, what outcomes do you think are important for our students? They then continued the conversation by engaging the community in brainstorming to determine how community members and leaders could support students and their unique talents as part of the Renewal process. **From mentorship and internship opportunities, to helping come up with design learning ideas, the community was an active part of creating the school's path forward.**



Student Engagement

As part of North Rowan's Renewal work, the team knew they needed to engage students. They asked students what would make them excited to learn and what kind of courses they were interested in. They **used what students shared to create a plan** that reflected their experiences, needs and hopes for learning.

THE SOLUTION

Challenge Based, Personalized Learning for All



Based on their extensive Renewal planning process, the team decided to focus on design thinking, problem-based learning, real-world experiences for students and community partnerships to give students even more opportunities.

This work includes everything from new programs for kids to additional professional development for educators focused on innovative teaching. The team has also partnered closely with Apple through its status as an Apple Distinguished School.



BRIAN WHITSON
RENEWAL TEAM MEMBER,
DPI CONSULTANT

“Renewal gave us the flexibility to give kids what they really needed: the necessary life skills to be successful after high school. And it works! We were able to reengage students who weren't invested in school before. One student told me that for the first time in a long time, they felt as smart as the AP kids. That's what this work is all about—serving kids with different strengths, different learning techniques and helping each of them grow.”

The Work in Action

If you walk into North Rowan's cafeteria, you'll notice books across the room. If you stroll into the library, however, you'll notice it's no traditional library. Instead, the North Rowan team created a design lab in that space. Everything Renewal leaders heard from students, from the Apple team and from the data itself, told school leaders that students needed spaces set up for design thinking, for collaboration and to mimic modern workspaces. With the flexibility of Renewal, that's exactly what they created!

Now, students can go into these spaces and work on real-world problems—helping them learn to think critically and collaboratively.



I've seen that in the traditional school system, teachers often don't have enough freedom in how they get to teach their courses. As a result, we have squelched all the creativity out of our students. Renewal allows us to help students find their passion again. We get to find out what excites them, what helps them learn. Reenergizing kids' creativity and excitement over learning is a huge win that we're already seeing."

ALEXIS GREER
NORTH ROWAN TEACHER



Design Thinking & Problem-Based Learning

When you ask North Rowan team members to describe design thinking and problem-based learning, they break it down easily: **let's give students real-world problems and then support them in learning to solve them.**

Teachers create customized projects that engage students and their personal interests deeply.

For example, through one project, students worked on a marketing campaign with Historic Salisbury Foundation. From interviewing the Historic Salisbury Foundation leadership to receiving feedback from the team there, they treated the class as a real client-public relations agency relationship with the nonprofit. The students completed tours of the city, learned from real marketing professionals, conducted quantitative research and developed real-world job skills. The students created a full communications

plan for the nonprofit, from learning to create a website to podcasting and design. Their work is actually being used in the real world, giving them a sense of accomplishment in addition to learning important skills.

Through these projects, students work together like they are part of a business. Since students are collaborating, it helps them build strong social-emotional skills like communication and healthy conflict resolution. The Renewal team even worked with organizations to learn more about what they look for in their workforce, to ensure kids are learning the necessary skills to thrive once they leave school.

Today, teachers apply design thinking to not just individual lessons, but the structure of the full school, too. At North Rowan, students spend 25 percent of their time in design thinking courses.



Trips to Make Education Real

In addition to design thinking in school, North Rowan uses its Renewal budget flexibility to invest in taking students on trips to make learning real.

For example, during one project, students focused on designing homes that could withstand hurricane-force winds. The class visited the beach as part of the project to add real-world experiences to their planning.

During another project, students created business plans for making their own candy.

Teacher Alexis Greer took the class to visit a candy shop in Salisbury, where they learned directly from the owner about how they managed the business—and made money selling sweets. The students learned about entrepreneurship and had the opportunity to apply their learning—making their own candy and marketing it.

North Rowan kids build their professional networks through this model as well. Students often form long-term relationships with mentors and business professionals they meet during their trips.



Community Partnerships

At North Rowan, the team wants students to have access to all types of opportunities—even if they are off high school grounds! They work hard with partners to make this happen, including:

Community colleges. North Rowan students can take community college courses for free. The challenge? Before Renewal, the community college courses started weeks before the high school year—so only 2 to 3 students took these classes each year. Using Renewal flexibility, the North Rowan team started their school year earlier, making sure students had the right support to take community college classes. Now, more than 80 students take advantage of the free college classes each semester!

Internships and job shadowing. The North Rowan team knows that experiencing a career in real life can help students discover what they are truly passionate about. The team works with local businesses and organizations to offer kids opportunities to gain real-world experience.

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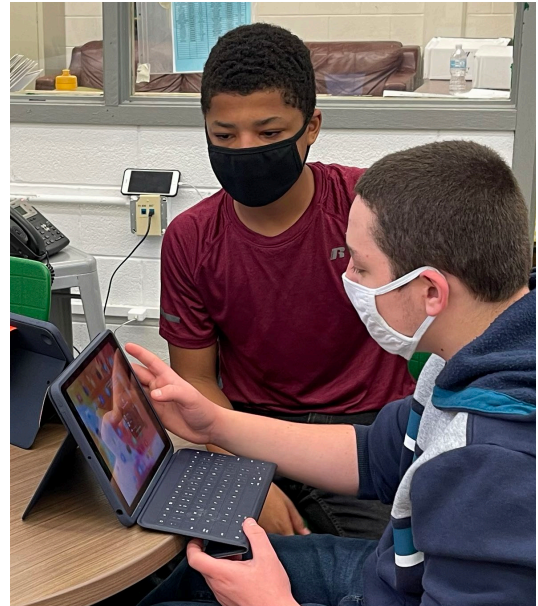
It's hard to describe the major upswing we saw as a result of this work. We saw a dramatic decrease in disciplinary action, attendance improved. Students felt more heard, more empowered. They even reported that they enjoyed going to school.”

MEREDITH WILLIAMS
FORMER PRINCIPAL

Lessons From the North Rowan Team

The North Rowan team wants education leaders, superintendents, principals and educators to know that this work makes a real, measurable difference for students. Their biggest advice includes:

- **Always start with your students.** Have you asked kids themselves what they need? What are their hopes and dreams? What will make them excited to come to school every day? Students should be your first and last thought as you create a plan that serves them.
- **For big change, start small.** Even setting the meeting to talk about how you can best support your students is a step in the right direction. Take that first step!
- **Celebrate failure.** It's important for teachers to know that they are allowed—and even encouraged—to fail. Not every strategy will succeed, but the team will learn something from every new strategy, ultimately helping students learn.
- **Embrace a culture shift.** The phrase “this is how we’ve always done it” is an enemy of innovation—of meeting students where they are. Getting your team excited about change and about trying new things can lead to so much good in your district.



North Rowan High School's Vision

At North Rowan High School, the team works to nurture and encourage students to cultivate their own unique passions and gifts for academics, careers and life. North Rowan wants every student to have a personalized learning experience—one that sets them up for lifelong success. To help make this a reality, teachers are empowered with the autonomy and flexibility to respond to and engage with each child's unique needs so every day, everyone discovers and achieves the extraordinary. They focus not only on academics, but on life skills that will help every student thrive in school and beyond.

Learn More about our Renewal work

- Download more case studies at resources.rssrenewal.org
- Reach out to principal Michael White at whitema2@rss.k12.nc.us to schedule a conversation or school visit.

