

Connecting Education with the Real World: **SOUTH ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL**



Where Learning Makes Sense

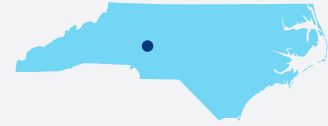
At Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS), we have a guiding belief: **children are more than their test scores.** We know not every student learns in the same way—and that when educators have the flexibility to try new, innovative teaching approaches, we can truly help students learn and succeed.

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 WEST ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL



LOCATION
CHINA GROVE, NC

GRADES
9-12

SIZE
~1,000 STUDENTS

CHALLENGE:

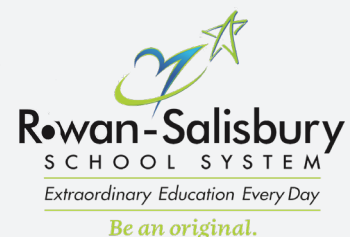
The school found that their courses overfocused on preparing kids for standardized tests, missing out on opportunities to strengthen student engagement. As a result, some students were not as engaged in their school work as they could be—and didn't feel like they were learning the right life skills, either.

SOLUTION:

The school created a customized set of programs for students, including competency-based education, Pivot Education—which combines multiple subjects into one course—and building in real world experiences to the curriculum.

RENEWAL FLEXIBILITIES USED:

The school used their budget, hiring, calendar and scheduling flexibilities.



THE CHALLENGE

At South Rowan High, education leaders knew they they could create even stronger programs for students by helping them in three key areas:

1

ACCESSING REAL WORLD EXPERIENCES.

The South Rowan team knew that exploring real-world opportunities is critical in helping students see the value of education and explore what they are passionate about, too. As high school students started making decisions about their future—enrollment, employment or enlistment—they needed more support in how to decide what career path to pursue.

2

LEARNING CONCEPTS AT THEIR OWN PACE.

In some cases, students didn't have enough time to truly understand a concept—and their grades suffered. By introducing competency-based education, the team knew they could empower students to learn at their own pace and truly grasp every concept.

3

MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS.

The South Rowan team found that students were taking traditional courses like English and math—but they were left asking “*why do I even need to know all of this?*” They didn't understand why the classes were important to them and how they would use what they learned in the future. As a result, in many cases, motivation and interest were low and students weren't learning as much as they could be. By building ownership into courses and introducing integrated classes, the team could make learning exciting for students.



How the Team Identified the Need

South Rowan started the Renewal process by analyzing the school's data, conducting in-depth research and engaging key stakeholders like students and families.



Staff Engagement

As part of Renewal, South Rowan created a **teacher-led design team**. The team started by asking important questions such as: *what do our students need, what is our school missing and what would make students excited to learn?* The team put answers on posters and Post-Its—ones they would then review together with students. Renewal leaders then looked at the standards and what students had to learn and dove deep into how students would use them—starting to build out ideas for how they could make this work relevant for kids. As part of this process, Renewal leaders also visited schools across the country to learn from what they were doing and to understand what was working.



Data Analysis + Research

The Renewal team started by **analyzing historical data** focused on everything from behavior to attendance. They knew that cultural and demographic factors can also impact learning, so the team took a close look at the makeup for both the school AND the surrounding community. They then took the data, along with their everyday experiences, and created a plan to strengthen teaching and learning to reflect the community's needs. As part of this research phase, they brought in education experts to ask, *“why do you think this is a need?”* The data made it clear that students would benefit from courses that make learning real—and that students needed to be excited about shaping their high school experience, too.



Student Engagement

The South Rowan team wanted to create **a plan that was driven by students**—and inclusive of all types of learners. To ensure they could do so, they sent out student surveys for every grade. Each grade also elected two student representatives who could then meet with Renewal leaders and share their input and more details about their classmates' experiences. The team focused on asking for feedback from students who historically struggled in the classroom, in addition to ones highly involved in academics. Finally, seminar teachers led in-depth discussions with students about what their dream classes were.



Family Engagement

The South Rowan team believes that parents know their kids the best—and that every plan should include their input! They started by sending out information about the Renewal process, and **inviting parents to be part of the planning from the very beginning**. The team focused on getting different perspectives, including parents of students with special education needs, ones on the collegiate track, ones focused on career technical education and more. They then asked interested parents questions such as *“what is your vision for an ideal school?”* and *“what do you think doesn't work in traditional schools?”* Renewal leaders then invited parents who shared feedback to discuss the plan they were creating based on their feedback.

THE SOLUTION

Making Education Real for Students Using Pivot Education, Real World Experiences and Competency-Based Education

Based on their extensive Renewal planning process, the team decided to focus deeply on making learning real for students. They created a Pivot Education curriculum that shows students the practical application of their classes, built real-world experiences into the school day and implemented a competency-based education system as well.



“

The interesting thing about Renewal is that we were given a blank slate. We got to think about our own school's data, our own kids' needs. We asked how can we help kids learn what they love, and just as important, what they hate? How can we help them get across that graduation stage and follow their dreams? No school has the same Renewal plan—and that's why it works.”

DR. AMANDA MACON

FORMER SOUTH ROWAN PRINCIPAL ,
CURRENT DIRECTOR OF
RECRUITMENT AND INDUCTION

The Work in Action

As you walk across South Rowan's campus, you may notice students riding skateboards, but they're not in PE class! They are actually testing out the skateboards their class built as part of a course that combines entrepreneurship and math. Or you may see them building chicken tractors, which are chicken coops on wheels. As they do so, they are learning about everything from building to math to science. These opportunities are helping students see HOW school applies to them—and building excitement, too. As part of South Rowan's culture, students and their goals are part of every course and program.



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Sometimes teachers go into the profession because they love the content, and forget that not everyone loves that content. Renewal was this amazing reminder to figure out how to make course materials real, fun, exciting for students.

KELLY WITHERS

ROWAN-SALISBURY SCHOOLS
SUPERINTENDENT AND FORMER
SOUTH ROWAN PRINCIPAL



Students Help Design Their Learning Experience

Students take an active role in designing their own education tract.

- **Seminar courses.** Every student has a seminar teacher, and each seminar course includes about 15 students. Through these classes, teachers work closely with students to learn more about what students care about—and then how South Rowan can include what they are interested in into their courses. For example, from teaching more about things like bank loans and taxes, the team now incorporates more real-world lessons into their classes.
- **Student-led schedules.** During the first week of classes, South Rowan students don't go to traditional periods. Instead, they build their schedules! Every teacher makes a video—like a commercial for their classes—to explain what their course will cover and how students will learn. By the end of the week, students have schedules that are tailored to their interests and that they can be proud of, too. At the end of each year, the Renewal team meets with students about what went well, so they can use that feedback to update this process.



South Rowan Offers Real-Life Experiences

At South Rowan, the Renewal team had a goal: help all students graduate with not just an idea of “what they want to be when they grow up,” but also a specific, actionable plan to make it happen. To accomplish this goal, South Rowan’s curriculum includes helping students with:

- **Creating a career path.** The Renewal team works closely with students to explore every option after high school—and to create an actionable plan to help students follow their dreams. For example, if a student is interested in enlisting in the military, the Renewal team helps them figure out what steps they might need to take to make that dream happen and succeed in the Armed Forces—from physical fitness to determining which branch and concentration may be best for them.
- **Work experience.** During Renewal, the team asked themselves, *why should a student have to wait until college or after high school for an internship?* Now, internships, externships and job shadowing are part of South Rowan’s curriculum—and a requirement for students to graduate. In just one example, a South Rowan student thought she wanted to be a veterinarian. However, while she completed her job shadowing, she realized that being a vet includes making hard decisions, such as euthanizing animals, and she felt like she “could never do that.” She then started exploring other animal-related job options, learned more about dog therapy, and realized it would be the perfect career path for her instead!



Integrated Courses Make Learning Real for Students

During the Renewal process, one student shared: *I don’t want to know synthetic division for the sake of knowing it, I need to know why it’s important. What do I do with it?* As a result, the Renewal team started thinking of how to show students real-world applications for everything from math to science to English.

The team introduced Pivot Education: courses that integrate more than one subject into a class. For example, students can now choose a class that combines geometry and construction. When students learn about scales and slopes, they also learn how to use this information when building a house. Students work through projects, such as building duck boxes, using their math AND building skills. These lessons make learning real for students. Just a couple of other options include learning history and African American studies; and math and entrepreneurship.

Educators are teaching lessons to help students succeed in the real world—and kids are excited about learning and applying their new-found knowledge.



Students Learn Through Competency-Based Education

At South Rowan, no grade is final until students walk across the graduation stage. When a student takes a test—and sees that they don’t truly understand the materials yet—they can continue learning until they feel confident in the material. They can then resubmit their test! South Rowan also offers summer school options where students can focus exclusively on what they didn’t understand, preparing them for the next school year.

Lessons From the South Rowan Team

The South Rowan team believes that Renewal helps students thrive—and that by focusing on what students truly need, you can make real, positive change happen in your school and your district. When asked what advice they have for other leaders focused on rethinking education, the team shared the following recommendations:

- **Invite (and be open to!) feedback.** Feedback comes from a place of wanting what's best for kids! Hearing from parents, students and your staff is invaluable during a process like this one. The more perspectives you listen to, the more likely your work is to be inclusive and successful.
- **Be patient and wait to see real outcomes.** It's easy to want to see results in a month or two—but real change takes time. Complete at least one school year with your new programs in place and then reassess what's working and where there are opportunities for improvement.
- **Find the right balance between new and old for your school.** Remember that some of your traditional teaching methods may still serve your school well. Trying new strategies doesn't mean getting rid of what's already working for your students.
- **Be transparent about your goals.** By starting with what you want to accomplish and why, you can ensure every decision you make is driving toward that goal and serving students well. That clarity has a huge impact on future success.
- **Remember that you teach humans.** Every student is an individual who has their own thoughts, feelings, experiences, strengths and areas where they want more support. Every class will also have a different personality as students work together. Remember to consider your students' humanity—and to tailor the way you teach to that humanity.



South Rowan High School's Vision

At South Rowan, the team has a simple vision: to provide the right supports for students so they are achieving and accepted for who they are, every day. Educators focus on teaching every student in the way they like to learn—in the way that helps them learn best. 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. As a result, students can explore what they are passionate about as they make career decisions, take classes that make course materials real and build excitement about the future, too.

Learn More about our Renewal work

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

