

Leadership Mindsets at Rowan-Salisbury Schools

UNDERSTANDING HOW LEADERS REIMAGINED TEACHING AND LEARNING



About Rowan-Salisbury Schools

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.

What does it really take to lead district-wide change?

In 2018, RSS leaders—a committed, trusting group of central staff working alongside a superintendent with a bold vision—came together to take on transformational change in our district.

While each leader came to the table with different experiences, perspectives and skills, RSS leaders embraced five core leadership mindsets that truly set them (and ultimately the district) up for success.



MINDSET 1:
Have the courage to identify a need



MINDSET 2:
A team of leaders must be grounded in the "why"



MINDSET 3:
Collaborative leadership doesn't require full consensus



MINDSET 4:
Stakeholder engagement is necessary, powerful work



MINDSET 5:
Embrace the challenges of transformative change bravely

Below, we've outlined these mindsets and how they helped bring about innovation in our district. While every district is different, we hope that seeing what we learned during the Renewal process helps you and YOUR district as you reimagine education.



MINDSET 1:

Have the courage to identify a need for change

Identifying the need sets you up for success, and it takes bravery, humility and out-of-the-box thinking to get started.

Saying the hard part out loud was RSS leaders' first step before taking on district-wide change. That started with asking tough questions about *the way things have always been* and identifying how those systems *were or were not serving all students*. In a district where some, but not all, schools had charter-like flexibility, how could the district innovate to better serve all students?

Answering those questions meant having the courage to say that, maybe, the best way forward was to throw away the playbook and consider entirely different models of thinking and teaching.

So, when North Carolina State Senator Michael Lee first asked then Superintendent Dr. Lynn Moody what she would do if she had a magic wand to improve teaching and learning in Rowan-Salisbury Schools, she replied, *"We'd have charter-like flexibility across the district."*



Coming from the private sector, the North Carolina school finance model and lack of flexibility felt so constraining. We were making choices that fit into funding buckets, but not choices that would benefit our students. When Dr. Moody shared the vision for flexibility, it felt like a huge relief.

CAROL HERNDON
THEN CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER AT
ROWAN-SALISBURY SCHOOLS



Sometimes you jump, and you don't always know where you might land, but the promise of what you can do is so important that sometimes you have to take the chance.

DR. ANDREW J. SMITH
THEN CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER AT
ROWAN-SALISBURY SCHOOLS

Dr. Moody knew she did not have all the details figured out yet, but she understood it was time to say out loud that we needed wholesale change for RSS students—a sentiment she knew her trusted leadership team shared. That courageous answer got Senator Lee's attention in the state legislature, where the district would seek legislative flexibility to bring the vision to life. Dr. Moody also took the mindset from that initial conversation with Senator Lee back to our central leadership team—inspiring us to get to work rewriting the playbook, together.





MINDSET 2:

A team of leaders must be grounded in the “why”

You can get so, so far if you share a clear sense of why you’re committed to making transformative change happen for all of your students and schools.

Our central leadership team brought different perspectives and backgrounds to the work, but shared a commitment to dreaming big and transforming our district. We knew that with flexibility, we could create a better, truly excellent educational experiences for all students.

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It was one of the most incredible experiences I’ve ever had as a leader... We shared the same why.”

DR. JULIE MORROW

THEN ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT FOR CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION AT ROWAN-SALISBURY SCHOOLS



Agreeing on *the why* meant we could make sure every step we took was building toward that bright vision for reimagining teaching and learning in Rowan-Salisbury.

Dr. Jason Gardner, then Executive Director of Elementary Education for RSS, recalled that the vision, *the underlying mission to innovate*, guided the whole process, clarifying for the team what the final directional model and measurement of student success could be.

For example, we stayed driven by our vision that all RSS students would be able to walk across the graduation stage with the skills needed to be successful in life, whether that was through continuing education, employment or through enlisting. To accomplish this goal, we knew we needed to engage our principals early and that we needed to bring the community along meaningfully. In this way, *the why* determined our path forward every step of the journey!

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We were dreaming big... At first, we were asking, how do we innovate and change schools? But, those first big questions didn’t tether back to outcomes, and that led us to reconfigure the directional system because we had to make sure the innovation and changes aligned.”

DR. JASON GARDNER

FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION AND CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER



MINDSET 3:

Collaborative leadership doesn't require full consensus

Once you have your “why,” focus on alignment.

Many of our leaders, including April Kunh, who has held many leadership positions at RSS, including Interim Superintendent, and Dr. Smith, then Chief Innovation Officer, share similar reflections of taking RSS Renewal from idea to implementation: *You want people who will challenge each other. Don't get bogged down by always seeking full consensus, when it's alignment around shared objectives that will carry you through work like this.* This mindset, RSS leaders learned, sets you up for clarity, collaboration and trust.

According to Dr. Smith, the team accepted that the bigness of the work looked and even felt “messy,” as our leaders allowed each other to pass into each other's lanes to vet ideas. With Dr. Moody's leadership and vision as an anchor, the team accepted this collaborative dynamic, knowing it was this dynamic that enabled us to reimagine systems and really do things differently.

Embracing alignment over full consensus was also a mindset that led to a key piece of RSS's transformation: empowering principals and school leaders to come up with their own systems—systems that reflected the unique needs of each school. Our leadership team understood that principals know their school communities best and they were best positioned to design a system that worked for all students at their school.

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Be cautious about thinking about this type of work as requiring consensus—it takes leadership, someone who is going to allow themselves to be held accountable, who has a clear vision and can build commitment. Consensus tries to make everyone happy. Focus on the students, that's who we need to make happy.”

CRAIG HORN
FORMER STATE REPRESENTATIVE,
NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY





MINDSET 4:

Stakeholder engagement is necessary, powerful work



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This is all about people,” said Senator Lee. “It started with the leadership team, and everyone in the district had to be on board in order to move the work forward. They all had to buy in to doing something different, into the thought process that it was time to reinvent education to support engaged students who wanted to be lifelong learners.”

Success means a willingness to invite people in early, to gather their feedback and to bring them along continuously.

Transformative change *transforms* the everyday experiences of entire school communities: from students and families to educators to school leaders. All of these people have a stake in the outcome, and a successful leadership team will invest in engaging the community continuously. *That means leaders act with a guiding belief that change cannot be top-down and happens alongside the community and all of the passionate educators and school leaders bringing the vision to life.*

RSS leaders recall the importance of directly engaging people—business leaders, principals, families—with whom you may disagree and facing those challenges head on. Bringing people in and communicating directly was key. That means exploring with your whole community what innovation and transformation looks like and *why you’re doing it.*

Leaders like Dr. Gardner emphasize the value of two-way communication, transparency and accountability. He said, “*You have to take more time than you ever thought to communicate.*”





MINDSET 5:

Embrace the challenges of transformative change bravely

Remembering that the work is not easy—by design—and embracing challenges can lead to success.

Dr. Moody concedes that this type of work is, simply put, *hard*—that people may be hesitant about so much change and newness. She said, *“It was all about changing the mindset, asking ‘Do you believe that you can do it, and if you do then what would you do?’ Then, go figure out how to do that, whatever that is.”*

Not everyone immediately shared the belief that this was possible or the right next step, and it took heavy lifting to make headway over time, building buy-in around a vision for a better, stronger district.

Dr. Gardner points to the value of showing, rather than telling, when it comes to transformative change. For RSS, that meant inviting people in to actually see and experience what teaching and learning *could* look like. It meant embracing a mindset that says we know this won’t be easy, but we have a responsibility to take it on and to bring people along.

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Before you say no,
you have to say maybe.”

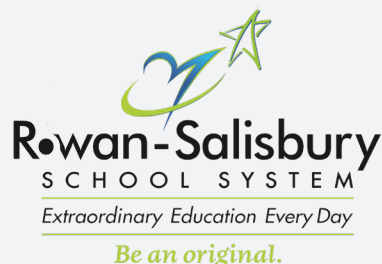
ANDREW J. SMITH

FORMER CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER



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