

# Designing Schools that Work

Organizing Resources Strategically for Student Success

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February 2015

*Through over a decade of research and practice in the area of strategic resource use, Education Resource Strategies (ERS) has found that strategic schools start with a strong vision around what it will take for students and teachers to be successful, and then they reorganize resources—people, time, technology, and money—around that vision.*

*We call this **Strategic School Design**.*

FEBRUARY 2015

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## Reinventing Ashley Park

In 2008, Ashley Park Elementary in Charlotte, North Carolina, was staring failure in the eye. Fewer than 35 percent of students scored proficient in math and ELA. Relationships among teachers were poor—in many cases, they didn't even know each other's names.

By 2010, Ashley Park was a school transformed. Proficiency levels had doubled in math, reaching 66 percent, and reading proficiency scores increased to 49 percent. Student behavior and teacher morale had also improved profoundly. What happened?

Principal Tonya Kales introduced a new *family model* for the school based on an entirely new approach. Groups of teachers shared responsibility for all students in a grade level. Teachers met twice a week in facilitated meetings to analyze student data, group students according to their needs, and plan instruction for each group. The master schedule was eliminated. Instead, teachers and students were grouped and regrouped throughout the day. Time allocated to a subject varied based on what students needed at any given moment. Students with special needs and special education staff were included in these “families.” Because special education services were integrated into the broader family model grouping, struggling general education students had access to more specialized support when they needed it.

Principal Kales' strategy started with a clear vision of what it would take for Ashley Park's students and teachers to be successful, then reorganized resources—people, time, technology, and money—around that vision. We call this *Strategic School Design*.

Ashley Park is not an isolated case. In more than a decade of working with urban school districts nationwide, we have seen the transformational impact Strategic School Design can have on student achievement. This paper explores the strategies that make it work—and how your school can achieve transformational results.

## Transforming Schools through Strategic School Design

As a nation, our vision for success in schools—the way we think about the needs of our students and the resources we bring to bear—has changed significantly over the past 50 years. We now have clear, rigorous standards and heightened accountability and urgency around helping all students meet them. We have more current data on what students need, and on teachers’ skills and expertise. Workforce demands have changed, requiring graduates prepared to be critical consumers and manipulators of information, rather than simply knowers of facts. Educators have different aspirations. They want opportunities to learn quickly and advance their careers in measurable ways. They want to work in teams with trusted colleagues. And they want flexible job arrangements that allow them to better integrate their work and personal lives. Finally, new technologies that support learning are advancing every day.

Yet, despite these significant changes, resource use in schools looks very much the same as it did 50 years ago. Students are divided into classrooms of 20 to 30 students, and they study a particular subject for a set period of time—usually about 50 minutes per day for 180 days—instructed by one teacher. Teachers have roughly the same set of responsibilities on day one of their job as they will have on the last day of their career. And they usually work alone to plan and deliver instruction, rather than as part of a highly functioning team.

Through more than a decade of research and practice in the area of school resource use, ERS has found that high-performing schools are responding to the changing context in education by using people, time, technology, and money in ways that look significantly different than the status quo. Indeed, nearly every one of these high-performing schools practices three basic principles of strategic resource use, which we call the Big Three:

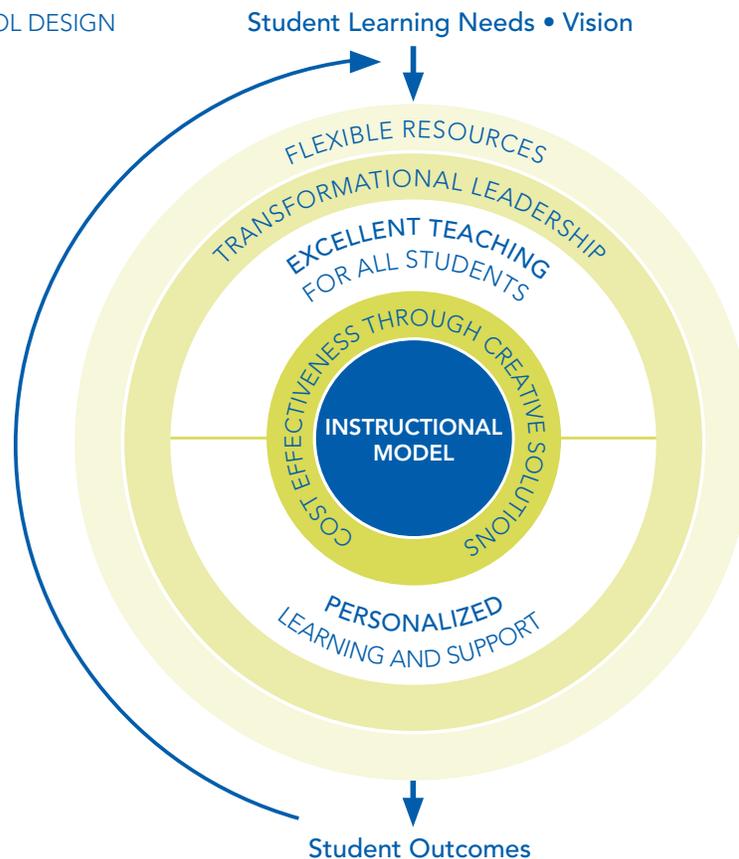
1. **Excellent teaching for all students:** Organize teachers and teams to maximize student learning and continuously grow talent.
2. **Personalized learning and support:** Match grouping, learning time, technology, and program to students’ individual needs.
3. **Cost effectiveness through creative solutions:** Organize jobs, partnerships, and technology to maximize resources that support teaching and learning.

Each school puts the Big Three into action differently based on the needs of its students, the capacity of its teachers, and its instructional model. For example, a school staffed with a high percentage of expert teachers might place more emphasis on personalized learning and support through creating targeted and dynamic groups, or on extending time in core classes for low performers, rather than on revamping its professional development system. In contrast, a school with a relatively new and inexperienced teaching staff may emphasize the excellent teaching for all students principle more than the other two at first, working to improve instruction within existing school structures for time and grouping.

### *What does Strategic School Design look like in action?*

Strategic schools implement the Big Three by following a series of resource strategies, shown in Figure 2 (pages 4–5). These more detailed strategies in each of the Big Three principles may help practitioners as they try to implement the principles in their own schools. In every case, these

FIGURE 1.  
STRATEGIC SCHOOL DESIGN



strategies represent a fundamental shift from the traditional, typical way of organizing schools. We’ve laid out the typical practices within the strategy as well as the more strategic practices that differentiate the high-performing schools we’ve studied.

It is important to note that while the strategies we describe here are framed at the school level, creating strategic designs at scale also requires complementary strategic systems in the central office. We begin here by describing school-level transformation because we believe that only by being clear about what we are trying to achieve in schools can we envision the types of systems we need.

## School Design Transformations

As we’ve worked with schools to implement the 12 strategies described in Figure 2 (next page), we’ve learned that some require more significant transformation in the way they think about and practice education—including how the student day is organized to best facilitate learning, and what the teachers know and do. In this section, we describe four key transformations:

- **Teacher Teaming**
- **Personal Relationships and School Culture**
- **Targeted and Dynamic Learning Resources**
- **Differentiated Teacher Roles**

For each, we provide an example of a real school that has successfully used the strategy and seen dramatic results.

FIGURE 2. SCHOOL DESIGN STRATEGIES

## Excellent Teaching for All Students

Organize teachers and teams to maximize student learning and continuously grow talent.



**1. Hiring and Strategic Retention:** Attract and retain the best teachers for students.

**Typical:** Hiring is done to fill vacancies, and excellent teachers exit at highest rates.

**Strategic:** Hiring is based on rigorous assessment of gaps in staff expertise. High performers are deliberately retained through additional responsibilities, recognition, and pay, while consistent underperformers are efficiently exited.



**2. Data:** Systematically use common, standards-based assessments and other data to track student progress and adjust instruction and support.

**Typical:** Teachers do not use interim assessments or they create tests that are not directly aligned with or at the rigor of state standards. They review student work and make instructional changes on their own at various times during the year.

**Strategic:** Teachers use common interim assessments administered four to six times a year, and other common assessments more frequently that are aligned with state standards at the correct levels of rigor. The assessments themselves inform detailed scope and sequences, other tests, and unit and lesson plans (backwards planning); and the data produced directs student groupings, whole- and small-group instruction, and interventions.



**3. Differentiated Teacher Roles:** Give teachers roles that match their skills to student needs.

**Typical:** Teachers are mostly kept in traditional roles that don't leverage their unique talents and interests to help students and peers and align with school goals.

**Strategic:** Teachers are strategically assigned to roles that apply their time and individual assets to meet diverse student needs, extend the reach of strong performers, and advance school goals.



**4. Teaching Teams:** Cultivate teams of teachers who share responsibility for student success and build collective expertise by working together to plan and adjust instruction based on data.

**Typical:** Teachers largely work in isolation from one another. Student work and other data are not rigorously and collaboratively examined to inform instruction.

**Strategic:** Teaching teams, led by instructional experts, excellent teacher leaders, or meet regularly to plan and adjust instruction based on student data; team members view themselves as collectively responsible for the success of the students they share.



**5. Individual Professional Growth:** Facilitate teacher learning through job-embedded supports tailored to their needs.

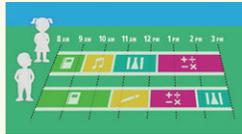
**Typical:** Professional growth opportunities are one-size-fits-all professional development workshops with no or limited follow-up. Teachers are observed primarily for evaluation.

**Strategic:** Differentiated individual professional growth, particularly in the form of regular observation and coaching, is linked to teacher performance standards, student data, and school needs.

## Personalized Learning and Support

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Match grouping, learning time, technology, and program to students' individual needs.



- 6. Targeted and Dynamic Learning Resources:** Create targeted student groupings and schedules that match resources (talent, learning time, program, and technology) to student needs and adjust groupings and schedules during the school year as needs change.

**Typical:** Class sizes, teacher loads, and schedules are standardized and rigid.

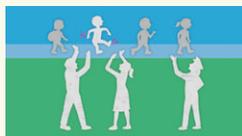
**Strategic:** Groupings and schedules are initially set and frequently adapted to differentiate which students need to be with which teachers or technology, learning what content, in what group size, and for how long, based on their individual needs.



- 7. Personal Relationships and School Culture:** Ensure students are deeply known within a community of shared expectations.

**Typical:** Teachers are responsible for 100+ students, and strong personal relationships are rare; expectations of students, the definition of success, and beliefs about what it will take to get there vary significantly across teachers and students.

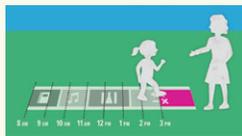
**Strategic:** Learning happens in the context of deep relationships between students and teachers, students and students, and teachers and teachers. Strong shared culture and a common definition of success are evidenced through individual interactions and the execution of common routines.



- 8. Targeted Social-Emotional Support:** Integrate more intensive social-emotional support where necessary.

**Typical:** The spectrum of support does not align with the spectrum of student need.

**Strategic:** Systems exist to link students to the right supports, both inside and outside the school, and to ensure strong, ongoing communication between teachers, support providers, and families.



- 9. Sufficient Time:** Ensure students have enough time to meet rigorous standards and engage in motivating enrichment opportunities.

**Typical:** The day and year are too short for students to get to mastery on core subjects and also have sufficient time to explore their interests and passions.

**Strategic:** The school day and/or year is lengthened to match the needs of students, enabling their participation in activities that fuel optimism and motivation more broadly.

## Cost Effectiveness through Creative Solutions

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Organize a combined set of jobs, partnerships, and technology to maximize resources that support teaching and learning.



- 10. Targeted Teacher Time:** Enable teachers to focus on the most important aspects of instruction by integrating instructional support staff and technology.

**Typical:** The full instructional cycle, and most other parts of the student day, are facilitated by teachers.

**Strategic:** Various types of support staff and technology are used in targeted ways across the student day to ensure teacher time is prioritized to the most critical activities.



- 11. Community Partnerships:** Create community partnerships that expand opportunities for students and help schools meet key goals.

**Typical:** School-based services are provided by school-based staff in traditional, full-time roles.

**Strategic:** Community partners are used to provide high-quality services at a lower cost where possible; shared goals and ongoing communication ensure tight alignment between partner and school.



- 12. Creative Staffing Arrangements:** Use creative staffing arrangements to meet the school's unique staffing needs in the most efficient way.

**Typical:** Most school staff are in traditional, full-time roles.

**Strategic:** Part-time, shared, and other nontraditional roles ensure that the investment made in any given role matches the needs of students and the school.

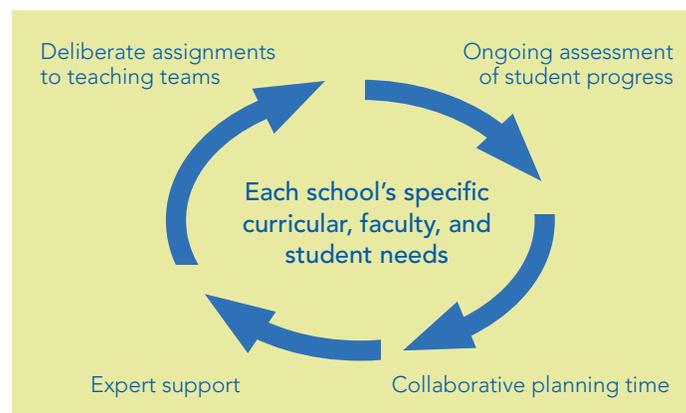
## Teacher Teaming

Teaching has traditionally been done in isolation. Teachers most often operate within the confines of the four walls of their classrooms, rarely collaborating deeply with peers on instructional planning or delivery. Yet research consistently shows the value of effective collaboration: Not only does it have a demonstrated positive impact on overall teaching effectiveness,<sup>1</sup> but teachers also like their jobs more when they have the opportunity to work with peers and learn from their experiences.<sup>2</sup> Our research into high-performing schools also speaks strongly to the power of collaboration. We've consistently seen that instruction in high-performing schools is not performed by individual teachers, but by *teams* of educators who all work together to achieve the best possible results for their collective students. We've also learned that cultivating high-performing teams requires organizing resources differently in four specific ways (see Figure 3, below):

1. **Deliberate team assignments**—High-performing schools assign teachers to grades and subjects to create teams that collectively include skills and experience matched to student needs.
2. **Ongoing assessment**—Teams need access to accurate and timely common assessments of student progress that allow adult learning across classrooms.
3. **Collaborative planning time**—The schedule must allow long blocks of time for teachers to meet to analyze these data and adjust instruction.
4. **Expert support**—Collaborative work should take place under the guidance of a qualified coach, administrator, teacher leader, or other expert who can help interpret data, inform instructional planning, model and observe teaching techniques, and provide feedback.

While most schools have one or more of these elements, it's rare for them to have all four elements in place and working coherently together. For example, a school might create a long block of time for teachers but not invest in the expert to lead the time—or, conversely, invest in expertise without long blocks of time. Without *all* these elements working together, investments in individual elements are much less effective.

FIGURE 3. CREATING HIGH-PERFORMING TEACHING TEAMS



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*Instruction in high-performing schools is not performed by individual teachers, but rather by teams of educators who all work together to achieve the best possible results for their collective students.*

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### **TEACHER TEAMING IN ACTION: Ashley Park**

A critical component of making the family model work at Ashley Park was building highly effective teaching teams that would meet regularly to review data, plan instruction, and create student and teacher groupings for upcoming lessons, in an environment where collaboration had not been the norm. Principal Tonya Kales took the following actions:

She thought carefully about team assignments. Rather than balancing expertise across teams in the first year, she deliberately assigned her most effective teachers to the upper-grade teams so that she would be able to show quick wins on the state tests in her first year of turnaround and galvanize her community around her reforms. She later rebalanced teams to better spread expertise.

To ensure that all teams had an expert facilitator, she restructured the role of Ashley Park's two instructional coaches to ensure that one was present at each of these blocks to facilitate the meeting and to plan and prepare the content.

She rescheduled students' four weekly specials periods (e.g., art, music, physical education), into two back-to-back blocks that met only two days per week to create two weekly 90-minute blocks of collaborative planning time (CPT) that was shared by grade-level teams. One 90-minute block focused on examining data from common assessment and individualized student learning needs, while the other provided time for joint lesson planning.

As with all designs, Principal Kales had to make difficult trade-offs to achieve what she believed was most important. Eliminating daily teacher planning time to allow for longer blocks of CPT risked creating an unsustainable job for teachers but underscored the importance of using collaborative sessions to accomplish joint planning and data analysis work that teachers would otherwise use individual time to do. The unique schedule she created also required her to move from part-time to full-time specials staff in some areas to better control when specials teachers were in the building. When they weren't teaching their subjects, specials teachers pushed into literacy blocks within families.

Ultimately, the bet that Principal Kales made on the family model paid off. Teachers now say they feel accountable to each other for success and are able to bring the best thinking of their peers and experts to bear on the challenges they face. Most importantly, the focus on teaming, together with other aspects of the family model strategy at Ashley Park, had a big impact on student results.

## Targeted and Dynamic Learning Resources

One of the most difficult parts of a teacher’s job is differentiating instruction well to give every student the opportunity to perform up to his or her potential. The teacher works to catch up students who have fallen behind and challenge others to advance through content more quickly, all while keeping aligned with state standards. This is so challenging that within some traditional, one-teacher classroom settings, it’s virtually impossible.

High-performing schools enable individual teachers to differentiate instruction by building school-wide systems that support more targeted and flexible use of the resources that support instruction: people, time, program, and technology. This means tailoring schedules, class sizes, teacher loads, and technology use to the specific needs of individual students or content areas. For example, writing teachers might have student loads of 60 versus the school average of 90 so they can provide meaningful and applicable feedback several times a week. Struggling 6<sup>th</sup>-grade readers might receive an extra block of reading time with a lower group size and expert reading specialists.

In addition, high-performing schools ensure that learning resources are not fixed for any individual student—they’re flexible over time, allowing constant adjustment to each student’s changing needs. For example, students placed into the extra reading block might exit at mid-year or sooner based on performance, just as new students might enter. Or, schools might build in flexible blocks of time during the day to allow resources to vary more frequently, such as tutoring or intervention/enrichment blocks.

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*High-performing schools ensure that learning resources are not locked for any individual student—they’re flexible over time, allowing constant adjustment to each student’s changing needs.*

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## TARGETED AND DYNAMIC LEARNING RESOURCES IN ACTION: *UP Academy*

In 2011, UP Academy in Boston opened in place of Patrick F. Gavin Middle School, a chronically underperforming Boston public school. UP Academy created targeted academic supports in the form of tutoring and intervention blocks to help students catch up to their peers.

All students receive 30 minutes of additional support during an intervention/enrichment block in math or literacy, four days per week.

All homeroom teachers teach during the block, and additional math/literacy experts push in to further reduce group size.

Teachers regroup students for the intervention block every six to eight weeks, based on benchmark assessment results, ensuring students continue to receive attention according to need, and to work on assignments and tasks suited to their level.

There is a 50-minute tutoring block at the end of each school day. All teachers and administrative staff participate in the tutoring program, and each adult tutors four students at a time on the same standard. One cycle of tutoring includes two sessions, Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday. Eighty percent of students are tutored during the block, and students who are not being tutored engage in enrichment work, independent work, or silent reading.

Together, these intervention strategies ensure time and groupings remain flexible to the needs of students. To create time in the schedule to implement these strategies, students take three core classes per year instead of four, including math, English, and either social studies or science.

UP Academy's strategy of varying time and attention as part of a broader strategy has worked. Since 2011, student proficiency results have roughly doubled—a remarkable turnaround for a chronically underperforming school.

## Personal Relationships and School Culture

Most of us can cite examples of teachers who had a great impact on us—ones who stepped up to be our advocates, who had a unique way to connect with us, who made learning come to life in a way that others hadn't. Yet few of us had educational experiences composed *mostly* of these kinds of deep relationships with teachers. In most traditional schools, this is the exception rather than the norm, due to both structural barriers (e.g., teachers are often responsible for as many as 150 or more individual students at any given time) and the way the teaching role has been defined, which has largely excluded responsibility for forming deep relationships with students.

Yet our studies of high-performing schools have shown that the power of strong personal relationships is far-reaching. When teachers relate well to students, feedback becomes more meaningful, examples more relevant, and tasks and activities more engaging. Student-to-student and teacher-to-teacher relationships are equally important. Research has consistently demonstrated not only that peer-to-peer learning has strong impact on student achievement,<sup>3</sup> but also that teachers get better when they have meaningful opportunities to work with their peers.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, a critical part of creating a fabric of healthy relationships within a school building is establishing a strong shared culture around what defines student success—and what it will take to get there. We've seen that leaders at high-performing schools work with staff to articulate a common vision and values to guide their work and decisions and to build common student and adult routines that reinforce shared expectations for student learning and behavior.

When personal relationships and school culture are working well, they can actually reduce the need for social and emotional interventions outside the classroom. This, in turn, frees more resources to invest in core instruction, creating a virtuous cycle in which teachers have lower student loads and are able to invest more deeply in relationships.

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*High-performing schools rely first and foremost on deep personal relationships between students and their core teachers—rather than add-on structures outside the classroom—to provide personalized academic and social-emotional support.*

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## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ACTION: *The Generation Schools Network*

The Generation Schools Network is a nationally recognized non-profit that runs two schools that have high populations of minority and economically disadvantaged students, Brooklyn Generation School (BGS) and West Generation Academy. In 2007, when BGS opened as part of a district-wide turnaround strategy, only 20 percent of its incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders entered at or above grade level. BGS leadership placed great emphasis on cultivating personal relationships among students and teachers as a part of their strategy to catch students up to their peers.

- BGS reduced core class size from approximately 35 to 18–22 by building a schedule in which most teachers teach core classes, which all meet in the morning. Then, students meet in larger groups for elective courses in the afternoon; each core teacher teaches one elective course in the afternoon.
- Traditional core courses were organized into interdisciplinary STEM and humanities courses; each student takes one of each type of course each morning. This means that core teachers teach only two sections of core instruction per day, with class sizes of 18–22, keeping their loads in core classes to just 40 students.
- To create even more opportunity for personal interactions, students were split into three smaller groups within each of their core courses that rotate through 20- to 30-minute *stations* of data-informed, small-group instruction, independent work according to skill, and small group work and collaboration.
- Teachers who share students also share two hours of daily planning time to discuss individual students and adjust instruction and other intervention based on their needs.
- To complement its core instruction structure, BGS built in advocacy blocks each day. During these blocks, groups of nine to 12 students meet with teachers for 30–45 minutes, enabling teachers to identify issues and build relationships with their students.

BGS paid for its investment in small group sizes in several ways. First, as described above, it significantly raised class sizes in elective courses. Second, it reduced its investment in non-instructional staff, reducing dedicated student-support staff in favor of student support embedded in student-teacher relationships, and freeing time in some teachers' schedules for them to take on administrative roles. Many of its general education staff are also dual certified in special education and a subject area or grade level, allowing a smaller investment in specialized support staff.

BGS' strategy to embed learning within the context of deep personal relationships, as a part of its broader reform approach, has shown strong results. BGS' first 9<sup>th</sup>-grade class graduated with a proficiency of 60 percent or higher in all state-tested subjects, and more than 85 percent of each graduating class has been accepted to college.

## Differentiated Teacher Roles

In most traditional schools there is only one teaching job. The roles and responsibilities are the same for a first-year teacher as they are for a highly effective veteran. They teach the same number of students in their daily interaction, and their core responsibility is to independently execute the full cycle of instruction—from data analysis to planning to instructional delivery and assessment. Further, grade and/or subject assignments often prioritize the least disruption in existing assignments (i.e., new teachers are assigned wherever there are openings), individual teacher preference, and seniority (i.e., more senior teachers get first pick of the *best* assignments).

High-performing schools approach teacher roles and assignments very differently. They create differentiated roles that extend the reach of their most effective teachers to impact more students—either by teaching more students or by coaching, managing, or supervising the work of their peers. In addition, they assign teachers to grades, subjects, and individual students to deliberately match teacher strengths with student needs.



### DIFFERENTIATED TEACHER ROLES IN ACTION: *St. Monica Catholic School*

Students at St. Monica Catholic School (SMCS) in Indiana had a wide range of performance within grades. Believing the school could do more to organize its students and faculty in a way that optimized learning, Principal Michelle Boyd adopted a strategy for differentiating teacher roles called the Giffin Model.<sup>5</sup> Using teacher effectiveness data that linked students to teachers by subject, SMCS assigned teachers to the subjects in which the data indicated they would be most successful at teaching.<sup>6</sup> Students are now taught by teachers who are best suited to their needs, and teachers are in environments that foster their success.

The results of this approach have been strong. The school now has consistently high pass ratings on the state test, with an average 86 percent passing rate across all grades and exams. It is worth noting that the school does not have a very high-need population. Sixty-nine percent of its students are white, and only one percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Nonetheless, the change in student performance suggests SMCS' strategic assignment of teachers to students was an effective school design practice, and one that is garnering national attention. Other schools, including several within the Broad Prize-winning Aldine Independent School District in Texas, are in the process of implementing the Giffin Model and aspire to replicate SMCS' success.

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*High-performing schools break from the tradition of a one-size-fits-all teaching job by differentiating teaching roles and assignments to match each individual’s unique skills and expertise to his/her job.*

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With robust teacher effectiveness data now available in many schools and districts, we believe the potential power of thinking differently about roles and assignments is enormous. Indeed, schools have just scratched the surface of what’s possible.

Imagine the student achievement result if we could double the number of students who had access to a highly effective teacher in reading and math just by better differentiating teaching roles and strategically assigning teachers to them. Imagine if these new roles helped us change the mix of teachers in our schools and districts, getting higher-potential new teachers in the door through the promise of a career trajectory, and keeping great teachers in the classroom with increased responsibility that challenges them and keeps them excited about their jobs.

FIGURE 4. SAMPLE STRATEGIC DESIGN SCENARIOS

Student and Teacher Needs and Characteristics	Likely Resource Strategies to Emphasize
<p><b>Scenario 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low student performance and troubled school culture among both staff and students</li> <li>• Very high teacher turnover</li> <li>• Difficulty recruiting highly effective teachers to open positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Hiring and Strategic Retention, and Differentiated Teacher Roles:</b> Create and deliberately hire for unique and exciting leadership roles with additional pay that incentivize great teachers to come and stay, and extend their reach across more students.</li> <li>• <b>Data-Driven Teaching Teams:</b> Build collaborative teacher teams led by experts that focus on supporting instructional planning and delivery and work to address both staff and student culture.</li> <li>• <b>Individual Professional Growth:</b> Ensure new and struggling teachers get extra support tailored to their needs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Scenario 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students performing at or just above the district average</li> <li>• Teachers are effective but work in fairly traditional roles and need a push to go from good to great</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Data-Driven Teacher Teams:</b> Push teachers to grow in a supportive environment by creating teacher teams with diverse combinations of expertise that share students and hold each other jointly accountable for success.</li> <li>• <b>Targeted and Dynamic Learning Resources:</b> Introduce much more flexible structures for groupings and the use of time to maximize each individual student’s potential for growth.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Scenario 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most students enter multiple grade levels behind</li> <li>• Staff and student culture is healthy</li> <li>• Students have often experienced trauma and instability in their personal lives</li> <li>• Large distribution of effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Hiring and Strategic Retention:</b> Focus on exiting consistent underperformers.</li> <li>• <b>Targeted and Dynamic Learning Resources:</b> Better match teacher assignment to strength and create roles that extend the reach of the most effective teachers.</li> <li>• <b>Sufficient Time:</b> Increase instructional time to catch students up to grade level.</li> <li>• <b>Targeted Social-Emotional Support:</b> Ensure students are able to receive a full spectrum of social-emotional support.</li> </ul>

## Creating a Strategic Design

Strategic designs don't happen by accident. They happen because school leaders and their teams develop a deliberate strategy for organizing resources—people, time, technology, and money. They achieve this using a process that almost always includes seven key steps (see below). Ideally, these steps are integrated into broader school planning processes. However, in most districts, resource use decisions precede and are disconnected from the development of school plans. Strategic designs created through this process have two key features. They:

- **Involve a deep focus on trade-offs.** At every step, school leaders thoroughly analyze and weigh the benefits they gain from their plan against what they have to give up. For example, a school that focuses on extending the reach of its best teachers to more students gains a measurable benefit in the number of students reached by an effective teacher; but that may mean larger loads for these teachers, which may influence the extent to which students are known.
- **Are iterative.** The thinking you do in step three may lead you to refine the work you did in step one. And, most important, strategic school design is never *done*. High-performing leaders and teams are constantly evaluating the success of their strategies and the changing needs of their students, and adjusting resources and implementation on the basis of new information.

### *Seven Steps for Strategic Design:*

1. **Clarify and Communicate the Vision:** The first step in deciding how to use your resources strategically is to clarify with staff what your school is trying to achieve and what defines the student and teacher experience required to get there. It's also important to set concrete and measurable goals against which you will ultimately measure your progress and the success of the chosen strategies.
2. **Assess the Need and Set Goals:** Once you've agreed on your vision, determine what most needs to change to be able to realize it. This means using data to identify your students' most urgent needs, and then quantifying goals that will define your success in meeting these needs. It's also important to dig deeper in order to reveal staff and school factors (instructional model, teacher capacity, adult culture) that you must account for as you design a resource plan. Finally, you must analyze how you are *currently* using resources. With all this information, you can then set concrete priorities for changing the way you are using resources. Don't try to tackle everything at once. Selecting a *small number* of areas on which to focus in the first year, and staging goals for subsequent years, is a key to success.
3. **Design the Change:** Once you decide what needs to change the most, you have to determine what specific changes you will make. For example, you might decide to focus on the strategy of individual professional development, but what does that mean? One option for change—or *Design Building Block*—you might consider is a deep, one-on-one coaching model. The work in this phase is to define all the possible Design Building Blocks you want to consider given the needs you've defined, weigh the trade-offs and benefits of each, and select the one that will work best for your school.

4. **Make it Work:** With your Design Building Blocks chosen, you can then consider the specific resource reallocations that are required for full implementation. For example, to implement a coaching model, you have to decide:
- How teacher professional development/planning time will be restructured to create enough time for coaching observation and debrief, and whether this requires any broader schedule changes.
  - Which staff members are qualified and available to serve as coaches, or whether you will need to hire additional staff.
  - What additional professional development for coaches might be required.
  - How much this might cost and how you will pay for it. This phase will require you to make deliberate trade-offs as you consider what lower-priority things you might have to give up to be able to pay for a design that meets the most urgent needs you have defined with the resources you have.
5. **Prepare to Implement:** The next step is to identify key implementation supports that will enable success. Continuing the example above, key supports for a coaching model might include (but are certainly not limited to) an observation and debrief protocol or coaching tools around particular areas of effective teaching practice. Also, preparing to implement requires preparing to evaluate. Just as a teacher creates her tests at the same time she creates her unit plans, you should clarify in this step when and how you'll assess the project during the upcoming year.
6. **Implement:** Finally, after a year of planning, you and your faculty start putting your plan into action!
7. **Evolve to Improve:** Every great team reflects and corrects. You and your faculty should gather regularly, based on the schedule you established, to assess the data against the measures of progress, identify problems and remove obstacles to increase the probability of success.

### *Every Situation is Unique*

This process reinforces the idea that there is no one right answer to strategic school design. Any school undertaking the strategic design process will choose unique areas of focus based on its own needs assessment. These areas would likely include some, but *not all*, of the 12 common strategies that describe strategic resource use (see Figure 2, pages 4-5).

The table in Figure 4 (page 12) illustrates how different combinations of student and teacher needs might lead to different areas of emphasis. Within any given area of emphasis, two schools might choose to implement very different Design Building Blocks to address the issue they're trying to solve. One school might choose to use looping to build relationships, while another might implement an advisory structure. Resource reallocations will also be customized to each school's context. Even two schools implementing advisory might choose to schedule and staff it differently, which will have different implications for student and teacher time reallocation.

## Conclusion: Time to Act

In more than a decade of supporting districts and schools, we've learned that transforming resource use from more traditional approaches to create strategic school designs is incredibly hard. It requires dismantling the structures that have defined the way schools have used people, time, technology, and money for over 50 years—and changing the way we think about a class, the school day, and the teaching job. While much of this work is done at the school level, it cannot be done successfully at scale without central offices that are willing to also transform the systems that have supported traditional resource structures and build new ones. This means redesigning school funding systems, budget and planning processes and timelines, central supports, and union agreements to enable the practices of strategic school design.

Despite these challenges, we've seen that strategic designs that better leverage resources to serve student needs are *possible*. When done well, they are powerful in driving the types of outcomes we want for our students. We are now able to describe the practices that define strategic resource use, and we know the specific steps schools have taken to prioritize, sequence, and implement these practices. School systems, school leaders, teachers, students, and communities must now come together to begin applying these ideas to their unique contexts and begin the work of scaling more strategic designs. We can't continue to use our resources in the ways we always have and expect fundamentally different outcomes for our students. The time to act is now.

## Endnotes

1. C. Kirabo Jackson and E. Bruegmann. (2009). *Teaching Students and Teaching Each Other: The Importance of Peer Learning for Teachers*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
2. J. Goggsall, E. Behrstock-Sherratt, and K. Drill. (2010). *Workplaces That Support High-Performing Teaching and Learning: Insights from Generation Y Teachers*. American Institutes for Research and the American Federation of Teachers.
3. P.A. Cohen, and J.A. Kulik, *Synthesis of Research on the Effects of Tutoring*. Educational Leadership 39/3 (1981): 226–227.
4. C. Kirabo Jackson and E. Bruegmann.
5. The Giffin Model was developed by Joel Giffin and follows the belief that teachers should teach students and subjects that they are most successful with; students in the same grade have different achievement levels and learn at different rates and in different ways; students need different amounts of time, attention, curriculum, and practice to reach their learning potential; some students need additional resources and interventions; students need change throughout the school year.
6. *St. Monica Catholic School*. Operation Public Education.

**Acknowledgements:**

This work resulted from the efforts of numerous ERS team members over time. We would like to particularly recognize lead authors Karen Hawley Miles and Kristen Ferris, as well as our School Design practice area, including Sam Ensslin, Genevieve Green, Rob Daigneau, Nisha Garg, Kate Carpenter Bernier, and Ashley Woo. We also want to thank Karen Hawley Miles and Stephen Frank, for their authorship of *The Strategic School*, which was the basis of much of the thinking captured here. As always, we are indebted to ERS partner districts whose data and experience continue to inform our analysis and thinking. Finally, we are grateful to Carnegie Corporation of New York for providing funding for this report. ERS is solely responsible for any ideas presented in this paper, as well as any errors.

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