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Our Moonshot: Dighton Public Schools

Kelly Arnberger

“Through redesign you have the opportunity do whatever you choose to do to make your school reflect the needs and desires of your community. I believe our public-school teachers can do the great things we keep hearing private and charter schools do if we would just let them.” Randy Watson, Kansas Deputy Commissioner of Education, said something to that effect at Dighton in January, 2017. We would now have permission to make our school reflect the true mission, vision, and values of our community without constraint. Sounds great! At least many of us in attendance listening to Dr. Watson that day thought so. We chose to redesign but we had no idea what we were getting into, where it would take us, and how it would change us.

Dighton is not unlike any other rural school in many ways. The teachers are well-established and many are from Dighton and the surrounding areas. The students demonstrate normal student behaviors. Certainly nothing unmanageable and some of them would even shovel your side walk if it snowed. Many students assume they will go to college and figure it out from there. It is the expectation. The standard high school classes are offered in order to meet college requirements, but limited elective options. Your typical sports and activities are offered and students generally perform at a pleasing level but participation is dwindling, again like many other small rural schools. Overall, the community is supportive and speaks positively about the school system. Outside of our general successes and practices, there were some advantages that made Dighton a great candidate for Redesign. The community passed a \$12.9 million bond in 2013 to improve and beautify the facilities. Our board of education demonstrated the perfect balance of fiscal stewardship, desire for improvement, and a deep love for the community in which they live. At the time, the real issue for Dighton: scores were just ok. In fact, our ACT scores were below the state average and that just did not make sense based on our rural demographic.

Let's talk about what we could do.

In our halls, you could hear teachers talking about how things would improve if they could just do...fill in the blank. The conversation would escalate to an excited frenzy of ideas and possibilities until someone would say, “Yes, but... fill in the blank.” Business as usual prevailed. Students matriculated through the system chronologically and in many cases with passing marks based on effort but not mastery. Justifications and rationalizations proved comfortable and everyone shared in the guilt to the detriment of the child. Those who did not fit perfectly in the ‘standard model’, were passed on to the next. They moved through the system because that was what the system accommodated and expected.

After Dr. Watson's visit to Dighton, conversations were sparked again. The new superintendent listened to the people in the hallways during those conversations. After asking a few probing questions, “Why don't we do that?” The litany of reasons exploded ‘Yes, but...’. However, after some reflecting, everyone realized that Redesign would remove the excuses. And so it began in earnest.

Consider things we know: no two children are alike. Yet, we strive to standardize almost every single aspect of the school experience. It is absurd.

The First Year

Our school system completed the tasks necessary to complete an application for redesign. Dighton was not picked to be a Mercury School and while disappointed, the faculty was determined to continue to redesign as a Gemini I school system. Oddly enough, being passed over for the Mercury program and being relegated to Gemini status served our staff well. We saw ourselves as underdogs. We would do this our way, on our own. We did appreciate the support from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), but we also felt we had even more freedom to do redesign the Dighton way. We are not a pretty bunch, but we are gritty. Especially gritty at the high school. And gritty is what you have to be if you are going to completely innovate a secondary building in a small, rural, conservative leaning community. The process at Dighton Elementary was much like the Glorious Revolution. It was bloodless. There was a natural division of primary and intermediate teams. Enthusiasm for project-based learning and standards-based grading existed. It was now a matter of hammering out details. Personalized learning was taking hold in various forms through supplemental programs, playlists, and small group instruction.

The process at Dighton Jr/Sr High School resembled the French Revolution. The tyranny of an antiquated system would be overthrown, there would be casualties and friendships tested, in the confusion a new code would develop, and the citizenry would be much better off.

Vivid and accurate comparisons, yes. The whole story, no. Change is just not that simple.

There has to be a “why” to change. To find the why, you have to take a hard and honest look at yourself, and the system. What did we know? We knew we had students coming to us with adverse childhood experiences. We knew we had students dependent on the assistance provided willing to move passively through the system. We knew they had little idea why they had to go to school, only that is what good rural kids do. We knew we had students who could not demonstrate independently they mastered many of the essential skills needed to be successful. We knew we had apathetic students. We knew we had frustrated adults. Superstars and pockets of excellence were trotted out to be noted allowing the frustrated to fly below the radar. The results we measured were mediocre at best and our ‘North Star’, the ACT composites, were significantly below the State and National average. And yet, we graduated high numbers. We also knew our community was hemorrhaging population. According to projections, only 644 residents will live in Lane County by 2044. Although there was much more we would continue to learn...we had our “why.” We needed to develop a system in which students owned their learning and success in order to become the economic driver of our community.

When you do not know how to solve a problem, you research. Teams from both buildings visited schools that were currently reshaping how students experienced learning. You may have heard of EPIC Elementary School in Liberty, Missouri. We visited. You may have heard of *Summit Learning*, we visited two *Summit* schools and were blown away at the engagement of the students. “*Summit Learning* is a personalized approach to teaching and learning inspired by our mission to help every student lead a fulfilled life” (<https://www.summitlearning.org>).

Project Based Learning is another popular way to engage students. We visited two schools with *Project Based Learning* programs at the secondary level. We made phone calls. We talked to whoever we could and followed all leads on innovation. We did not know it at the time, but we were on the way to coming to grip with a hard fact. We had to quit focusing on what we could do in the classroom. We needed to shift our focus to the entire system.

We constructed a plan for our buildings. We would begin the process of becoming gradeless in the primary pod at the elementary. We would report progress with standards-based report cards through the second grade and move to the intermediate pod the following year. We hired a Project Based Learning coordinator to develop PBL in the intermediate pod. We introduced “*Families*” to address our need to be connected to students and begin to address the mental health issues within our student community. The Jr/Sr High School chose to adopt the Summit Learning platform in grades 7-9, a flex mod schedule for all students, and start a PBL academy in grades 10-12. Homerooms helped develop individualized plans of study and created a structure to begin addressing social and emotional growth. Many people said, this is too much. They were wrong. Yoda said, “Do or do not, there is no try.” We chose to do. And thankfully, we happened to wander into a partnership through serendipity, propelling us, a booster, if you will.

The superintendent was sitting at a meeting one morning when a representative from Lumen Touch talked about their company’s interest in working with redesign schools and the services they could offer. There was a technology piece that was intriguing and it was shared it with the teams at the district.

The Second Year

We implemented our redesign plan. Like any initial design, there were hiccups. One of the redesign coaches from KSDE said, “the first ones through the wall are the bloodiest.” This is true. The first quarter of the year was rough for both students and staff at the secondary building. The doubters, internally and externally, had a field day with the challenges and changes. However, the tenacity and humility of the assistant principal and her team proved many doubters wrong. I mentioned earlier the grittiness of the secondary staff.

You keep learning. You keep persevering.

We found the best way to really learn what we did not know was to dive in, build the plane while you fly it. But we needed to answer a couple questions. First, when will we know if it works? Second, when will we be done?

To answer those questions, I need to first address our relationship with Lumen Touch. Dr. John Vandewalle, CEO of Lumen Touch, was not interested in selling us some technology to help with a flex mod schedule or a standards-based grading platform. He was more interested in seeing if Dighton would be up for the challenge to truly break away from traditions and transform the system. From our very first conversation, we quickly realized, this could get interesting.

We talked about culture and he asked about our processes. Did we have a marketing and communication plan? What measures were we using to demonstrate the success of our different initiatives? What books are we reading? How did you derive your vision and mission? Do you have a vision and mission? What are your priorities? What are your goals? What does our school look like five years from now? What is our model of the ideal school?

I would love to say we had answers. We did not. That was hard. We thought we were a district doing all of the right things. We were redesigning. There was nothing we could not take on. We realized quickly we were still missing many components. So, we decided to accept Dr. Vandewalle's challenge and took on Lumen Touch as a true partner. And, first up, we began developing teams composed of members of our entire staff to address our fundamental issues as a community.

So, to answer the first question, 'How will we know it is working?' We know it is working because we now measure almost everything. You cannot change what you don't measure. We are making informed decisions based on our data to move our work forward. The answer to the second question is simple. We will never be done. We are no longer redesigning. We "redesigned" a year ago. We are now refining, innovating, and planning.

We have a vision. We are a leading economic development driver for Lane County. Our mission is to be the number one district in the State of Kansas by 2025. Our staff has developed five priorities to guide our work.

1. We will deconstruct class.
2. We will ensure students are first and all voices are heard.
3. We will provide a safe and nurturing learning environment.
4. We ensure the best appropriate technology available to students and staff.
5. We will be an economic development engine.

All our efforts are now directly tied to our vision, mission, and priorities. We flew through year one knowing we wanted better but we could not articulate it beyond trying to figure out our why. Year two has been connecting our why to our actions in all aspects of the community.

As I said earlier, the elementary redesign was essentially bloodless. Initial change was implemented and generally supported by the teams. Let me say now, it is still far from perfect. We have yet to develop a gradeless elementary school. We have yet to seamlessly weave project-based learning with the acquisition of foundational skills. We also still struggle to break away from our comfort zones. Even with our struggles, our children are experiencing an environment much better suited to their learning.

The truly remarkable transformation takes place in the Jr/Sr High building every day. Students at Dighton Jr/Sr High School regularly engage visitors, sharing with them why they are a part of this change, how it has impacted their lives, and how they will continue to improve. Our students can tell you how they are owning their learning and their success. They will share with you about their experience rebuilding engines while learning from a local mechanic and that these skills will help them as they anticipate taking over the family farm. They will tell you about their

experience participating in an internship and experiences that directly impact their fellow students, families and community members. They can show you how to replace a toilet since our head of maintenance now teaches a residential maintenance class. These students do not work for free so do not ask. When students are struggling, they can call upon their “bad day buddies” to work through situations at any time of the day. And while standardized test scores are not a main priority, our pre-ACT scores are up. Teachers show up every Wednesday morning at 7:00 a.m. to talk about our norms and our students, on their own. They stay late on Fridays to reflect on their week and encourage each other. It is what they do. It is now our culture.

The Future

Finally, where do we go from here? Our partnership with Lumen Touch has taken us to places we did not know we could go, and given us the support and direction to tackle more than just the classroom changes we had envisioned. We are an economic engine for our community. We have engaged our community members to help us solve our early learning and child care deficiencies in our county. We are mining our community resources to build a school system in which the community becomes the classroom. We are examining our system and eliminating barriers, developing processes to ensure our district continues to innovate regardless of the people in place. We are building our brand.

Most of all, we want others to approach our graduates saying, “You are from Dighton? We want to talk to you.”

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