

# Tough and competent: an autoethnography of secondary school redesign in Kansas

Jay Scott, EdD

“Moving forward, it will be critically important for district and building leaders to balance change management with order, and patience with a sense of urgency.”

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, the Kansas State Department of Education implemented the Kansans Can School Redesign project with the aim of fundamentally changing teaching and learning. Volunteer elementary and secondary schools across the state began the project by forming a school Redesign team to lead the building through the transformation. I was the secondary school Redesign specialist, coaching the middle and high school Redesign teams. This autoethnographic study revealed that the success of the Redesign project in schools depended on the degree to which the school Redesign team balanced two leadership skills: acting as change agents and providing order to the change process. Focusing too much on challenging the status quo with little consideration for structure and order, or vice versa, resulted in a lack of trust and ownership of the results of the Redesign process by the adults (teachers and community) and students. Those school Redesign teams that skillfully balanced disrupting the traditional environment of school while also providing order through predictable routines and protocols, were able to increase trust and ownership by the adults and students in the school.

## INTRODUCTION

The Kansans Can School Redesign Project has its origins in the Kansas Children – Kansas’ Future Community Conversations which occurred during the 2015-2016 school year. Those conversations and the subsequent feedback from over 2,000 Kansans elicited the largest qualitative research study ever done in education in Kansas ((Neuenswander, 2018). The main lesson learned from the

feedback was that there was a “state of imbalance” in K-12 education, focusing heavily on academic achievement to the detriment of students developing critical social-emotional skills necessary for future success (Neuenswander, 2018). In response to “what Kansans told us” the Kansans Can School Redesign project was born. The Kansas State Board of Education decided the Redesign project would be the rocket to transport our state’s educational system to the moon. An initiative of this magnitude and scope had never been done before in Kansas, where the goal is for every school district to redesign their system that leads to Kansas K-12 achieving the vision of leading the world in the success of each student, their version of a “moonshot.”

While many would place the school Redesign project in the category of school reform, the uniqueness of this work sets this project apart from other reform efforts. First, this is a statewide project initiated and facilitated by a state department of education. Generally, these types of initiatives are run by other entities besides the department of education in a state. The department of education may fund innovative projects such as this through grants or other funds but usually does not work directly with schools. Second, the schools selected to be part of this project volunteered and were not provided any extra funding or given any waivers from current state education regulations. These schools desired to improve student outcomes by re-thinking, re-imagining, and redesigning teaching and learning without the incentives of waivers or funding from the state. Third, this project was born from the Kansans Can

Community Conversations, hereafter), where stakeholders from across the state provided feedback to create a new vision for Kansas schools. Redesign is the work to achieve that vision. The public were the authors of a major school reform effort for a state, making Redesign a first in Kansas and unique to other school reform efforts.

## METHODS

Autoethnography is a highly diverse methodology with multiple contexts available to apply to your research and writing. However, as a broad approach, there are some general characteristics to keep in mind when it comes to autoethnography. As Chang (2016) mentions, when writing using autoethnography as a methodological approach, it is like “stringing discovered gems together in an intriguing pattern so that the finished product will sound cohesive and interesting” (p. 139). That is one of the most attractive qualities of autoethnography; the challenge of taking qualitative research and making it interesting to the reader, while also including structured, coherent cultural analysis and interpretation through a narrative that blends research and storytelling.

The theoretical framework for this study was the Balanced Leadership research completed by McREL (Waters et al., 2003), identifying twenty-one school leadership responsibilities that have a significant impact on student achievement. This was the third meta-analysis research study done by McREL, with the first two meta-analyses studies focusing on curriculum, instruction, and school practices that are associated with student achievement. With Balanced Leadership, McREL focused on reviewing 30 years of research in school leadership and constructing a framework that outlines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions leaders need to positively impact student achievement.

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to understand and make meaning of my experiences with secondary schools in the Kansas Can School Redesign project with a specific focus on the Balanced Leadership approach. The research question guiding this project was: *How has my coaching role as secondary school Redesign specialist from KSDE fostered the development of core leadership responsibilities, identified in the Balanced Leadership framework, in building principals and the School Redesign team (SRT) across secondary schools in the Redesign process?*

In the case of autoethnography, the narrative details involve the “self,” or from the perspective of the researcher. This self-narration is in the context of the culture of which the researcher either becomes a part of or observes from afar. I became part of the fabric of each school’s Redesign project as an “outside-insider”, to be able to capture the cultural shifts taking place as the school journeyed through the changes of Redesign. Through my lens in the role of Redesign coach and as a former public school educator, I sought to understand the cultural shifts taking place within a school seeking to transform the learning experience for students and the impact of my coaching on those cultural shifts. The data curated for this research study came from the many interactions I had with Redesign school teams, staff, students, and community members over the five-year period of the Redesign project through field notes of my observations and interviews. After each on-site visit with a Redesign secondary school, I would use a dictation tool to record my reflections of each interaction. Those reflections were then analyzed through coding and categorizing that eventually led to identified themes that served as the basis for my findings. In addition to analyzing my field notes, I conducted a pilot project where Redesign secondary school principals were interviewed about their leadership approach through Redesign and most specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to generate common leadership practices across Redesign school principals leading buildings of various size, geographic location, and student population. Combining the themes from my field notes and observations with those from the principal interviews formed the findings of this study.

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Just as the Kansas Can Community Conversations revealed the need to balance academic learning with social-emotional learning, I learned through coaching Redesign secondary schools that balancing the leadership responsibilities of Change Agent and Order is critical to successfully planning, implementing, and sustaining transformational change, the kind of change that demands the adults to think and behave differently in a school and the kind of change that has major implications for a school's culture. The degree to which school leaders balanced these two diametrically opposed responsibilities had a profound impact on the culture of the school in terms of collaboration, decision-making, and managing change.

Redesign secondary school leaders were not the only party that needed to strike a balance between being an agent of change and providing structure and order to the change process. As a coach, I learned that balancing my approach has major implications on the leadership and resulting culture of a school. There were two continuums to balance: coaching for change versus for order and coaching with patience versus urgency. With the high degree of potential change taking place in a Redesign school, there was an intense need for strong change leadership from me as the coach, to the principal and the SRT. Just by its very nature, Redesign is about change so, in the beginning, my coaching approach was to challenge the status quo of the traditional educational environment. Schools were to scrutinize all teaching and learning practices, which led to highly theoretical discourse that, at first, seemed to lack practicality. I encouraged SRT's to think differently about the student learning experience, with very few parameters. As the work progressed in the Redesign schools and became more chaotic and difficult to contextualize in a way educators could see themselves teaching, I began to focus more on coaching the SRT into providing more structure, bringing some much-needed order into the project.

As schools progressed through the Redesign process, the principal had to rely on the staff to drive the work of school improvement and the staff had to rely on the principal to support them through the hills and valleys of continuous improvement, especially when the broader school community challenged their ideas. The degree of openness between the principal to the community and the principal to staff, played a major role in the support for Redesign from stakeholders throughout the project. The schools that were explicit and transparent with the reasons they wished to Redesign built the trust needed with each other and their community to withstand the pending trials and tribulations inherent in any major school change effort. From my perspective as an "outside-insider", the schools where trust levels were high, staff, students, and families showed more ownership in the outcomes of the Redesign effort, as evidenced by the sustained focus on reaching the shared vision of student success that was collaboratively created.

## CONCLUSIONS

The desire to give in to the gravitational pull of the traditional learning environment is strong and will pull even the most ardent change agents back into what is familiar and known if an imbalance occurs. The findings are what I observed from my unique position as an "outside insider", through my lens as a coach to Redesign secondary schools, and they are meant to be lessons learned when fundamentally changing teaching and learning to improve student outcomes. The perceived implications on the culture of these Redesign secondary schools are linked to striking the right balance between these two leadership responsibilities, as evidenced by the decisions made by the principal and the school Redesign team, which were influenced by my coaching. Factors that need to be addressed when finding a good balance between pushing for change and providing structure in schools include the collective efficacy of the staff, the compelling reason or reasons to change, teacher ownership, and the timeframe from planning, to implementing, and eventually sustaining the changes being put in place.

"There is no finish line to Redesign, it is an ongoing process and way of thinking our state needs to sustain if we are serious about leading the world in the success of each student, just like the seriousness required to land a man on the moon."

## RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the aims of the Kansans Can Vision, KSDE must narrow its expectations of school districts. The expectations for school systems are wide-ranging: accreditation, the four Redesign principles, the five State Board Outcomes, and the five areas of a successful Kansas high school graduate. Initially, this direction was desperately needed and largely welcomed by the educational community. A clear, compelling vision for student success was established by the State Board of Education and injected inspiration into many educators across the state. This new direction seemed to galvanize the state and re-balance the focus in developing academic and non-academic skills in students. KSDE pushed innovation as part of this re-balancing effort through the Redesign project, another source of inspiration to educators as it was viewed as “permission” to branch out from traditional methods of education that had lost relevance. However, if fundamental practices are not mastered as a pre-cursor, innovation has nothing to root itself to, making sustainability very difficult, if not impossible. Tried and true practices such as ensuring standards-aligned curricula, a strong literacy program, a system of balanced assessment, and quality instruction must be firmly in place prior to any attempt to innovate in the classroom and school. Establishing those fundamental areas as priorities moving forward is a critical next step that KSDE and school districts must take in order to actualize improved student outcomes. The belief is, with these fundamental practices becoming the expectation in every classroom, many of the current adaptive challenges in education (teacher shortage, declining academic performance, chronic absenteeism) will be addressed and student learning will begin to improve overall.

## REFERENCES

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

To learn more about this research brief and other research endeavors in the College of Education at Kansas State University, please reach out to the Office of External Funding and Research at: [coeresearch@k-state.edu](mailto:coeresearch@k-state.edu)

Major Professor: Dr. Debbie Mercer

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