

# Shift in How We Do School

## *The Changing Architecture of Learning and Schooling*

*“If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.”*

—John Dewey

*“Nothing could be more absurd than an experiment in which computers are placed in a classroom where nothing else is changed.”*


—Seymour Papert

**T**his chapter will highlight the habits that hold us back and the changes that can unleash powerful learning. Examples of learning environments beyond the traditional school model will be examined for applications to the leader’s own setting. This chapter will examine how school leaders can redesign the physical structure of traditional classrooms and schools to foster innovation, how to extend learning beyond the classroom walls, and how to design learning environments that nurture creativity and innovation. These replicable practices will guide leaders to sustaining innovation in their schools. Our students’ learning does not stop when the school bell rings, and we must become relevant learning environments or risk extinction.



## School Leader's Story

### *Increasing Parent Involvement*

<b>Leaders:</b>	Susan Higginson and Kyle Crater	 <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Photo courtesy of Susan Higginson and Kyle Crater</p>
<b>School:</b>	Amanda E. Stout Elementary School	
<b>Website:</b>	<a href="http://www.readingsd.org/amandastout">http://www.readingsd.org/amandastout</a>	
<b>Setting:</b>	Urban	
<b>Size:</b>	900 students	
<b>Grades:</b>	K–5	
<b>Population:</b>	80.7% Latino, 9.3% black, 6.9% white, 2.5% multiracial, 0.6% Asian; 18.2% English language learners	
<b>Poverty:</b>	93.3% economically disadvantaged	
<b>District:</b>	Reading School District	
<b>Location:</b>	Reading, PA	

At Amanda E. Stout Elementary School in Reading School District of Reading, Pennsylvania, the principal team of Susan Higginson and Kyle Crater led their school through student-led conferences. This elementary school is leading with the students at the heart of their work. They are working to think differently in how they do schooling and how they engage students and parents.

Assistant Principal Kyle Crater writes, "The number one challenge for our school is increasing parent involvement. Out of approximately 900 students in grades K–5, we may only see 100 parents on Meet the Teacher Night or during Parent–Teacher Conferences. It's not that parents don't want to be involved in our school; but the demographic of our community is unique when compared to our surrounding school districts. Many of our students come from single-parent homes, foster homes, or the primary guardian is an older sibling or aunt/uncle, or grandmother/grandfather. Plus, the reality that nobody likes to mention is the demographic of our staff is not like the surrounding community. The one piece of common ground that we share, however, is the students, and how much we care for them."

Piloted last school year with several classes, student-led conferences transferred the conversation that takes place with the parent from the teacher to the student. Kyle continues, "The teacher is there as a facilitator and to answer any follow-up questions. This is one component of a Leadership-themed Character Education program that is being implemented schoolwide in the coming school year. The two classes that piloted

Student-Led Conferences reported 100% attendance for all Parent/Teacher Conferences. This was unprecedented to what our school typically experiences. When asked for feedback, most parents commented simply that they wanted to be there due to the fact that it would be their child presenting their academic material to them. They recognized the work that their child had put in to prepare their presentation and wanted to be there to support them. The bottom line, their child is someone that they can relate to during a conversation. Moving forward, all students will have a Leadership Data binder where they will compose a personal mission statement, an academic goal, and a behavioral goal that they wish to accomplish. They will also track their benchmark data so they can be more aware of their gains in relation to their academic goals. This binder will be the template followed for Student-Led Conferences. The students will be able to simply open their binder, talk about their goals, what they've done so far to get there, what challenges they're still experiencing, and how they plan to overcome those challenges. We're excited to see how our entire school community transforms and bonds as we all rally behind our student leaders."

### **HOLDING BACK INNOVATION: COMFORT, COST, AND COURAGE**

Innovation is often held back, for school leaders, by simple things such as the use of cell phones, dress codes, recess, lunch monitoring, bus duty, and so many other things that come flying into the daily work of a school leader. A school leader can frequently be distracted by teacher complaints, and as soon as one fire is put out another one erupts. It can easily be cell phones, dress code violations, hallway distractions, students not dressing for physical education, or not enough proctors for recess duty. Although these are key activities that school leaders need to take care of, it must not extinguish the creative, innovative, and discovery focus of the leader and their team. Take time to establish clear procedures for these distractors and trust others to intervene on your behalf. Don't ignore them, but don't focus on them because "What You Focus on Grows!" Getting out of the rut isn't easy, but it is necessary to be an innovative leader.

You don't need to wait until you come up with the next greatest idea or the hottest program for schools—act now, take a step forward, and walk out of the rut. Rarely do educators like change, and as a result, we can be unintentionally led into a rut by well-meaning educators who are clinging to the status quo out of habit or simply out of fear of moving beyond their own comfort zones. Rise above the distractions, be courageous, and lead with boldness. The key is to focus on what you want to grow. Below are some distractors that can pull us away from innovation

and into the rut. I call these distractors the Three Cs; once you work through these Three Cs, you can see the true lens for innovation in your school.

- **Comfort:** Innovation is not comfortable because it requires failure, risks, and resilience. School leaders are regularly swayed by their own comforts and attracted to the familiar. Whether it's a routine, a common practice, or a tradition, school leaders can be tied to these things even if they hinder movement toward innovation. We can often cling to the past out of comfort and fear of rocking the boat. Innovation is like losing weight—it's something we all talk about and want to do, but regularly fail in making the commitment to move away from our regular eating habits to elicit the true change that we dream about. Here are some practical strategies to reawaken your focus toward innovation:
  - **Read:** This sounds so cliché, but reading is a powerful way to stretch your thinking and expand your horizon toward innovation.
  - **Listen:** Podcasts can be a boost of energy to take the next step in innovation. Listen to the various school leaders who are doing great things toward innovation. Check out the list of possible podcasts at the end of the chapter.
  - **View:** Whether it be a TED Talk, a YouTube video, or a short inspirational video clip, watching videos can open up one's eyes to new ideas, concepts, and ways of doing things.
  - **Connect:** Without a doubt, we grow the most from connecting with other school leaders and dreaming about how we can redo schooling.
- **Cost:** So many school leaders make excuses that they don't have the funds to innovate. Innovation does not need to break your school's budget. Innovation on a shoestring is possible and actually taking place in many schools around the country. Cost can also be much more than money. School leaders are fearful to innovate at the cost of test scores and achievement on standardized assessments. To really prepare students for the future, we can't rely on test scores but creativity, communication, teamwork, collaboration, and innovation. Here are some ways to fund your innovative ideas:
  - **Donations:** You would be surprised what your school community has laying around that they would love to get rid of. These donations, from businesses, churches, parents, and community members, can innovate with little out-of-pocket expenses.

- Grants: There are grants that often go untapped by school leaders. For example, I just found a national business that has a local work site near my school and gives grants to schools for rain gardens. After talking with the company, my school is going to receive a free rain garden for our students to use.
  - Business Partnerships: It's important that you are working with your local businesses to share your ideas and dreams for your school. If your school can't afford a 3D printer, why don't you check around to see if a business has a 3D printer that would allow your school to use it after hours. Or, ask a business to sponsor your Makerspace—allow them to have naming rights to your creative location.
  - Donors Choose ([www.donorschoose.org](http://www.donorschoose.org)): This website lets you post a financial need for your classroom or school and receive funding from participants. It's a Kickstarter-style site for teachers and schools.
- Courage: You've heard it said that failure is not an option, but failure is not only an option with innovation, it's almost a certainty. School leaders need to embrace failure. Innovation can be messy and dirty, but this can't stop us from our focus to make real change for students. Students need visionary leaders who are willing to boldly lead their school into the future. This type of leadership takes courage! Not the type of courage to jump out of an airplane skydiving for the first time or the nerve-wracking adventure of white-water rafting, but the courage to stand for what is right, to admit you aren't the smartest person in the room, to be vulnerable to ask for help, and to learn about something that you know nothing about. Work to garner courage by doing the following:
    - Mission: Return to the core mission of being an educator and to make a difference in the lives of students.
    - Student Centered: Schedule meetings with students with the sole purpose of having them teach you something new. It could be a new pop song, a drone creation, or how to use our MakerBot.
    - Collaborative: It's easier to be courageous when you have people around you who you can dream with and vision cast for your students.

“I model innovation and reflect on things when they don't work out. I work to try and review, but my staff never sees me give up.” – Dr. Senée Bell, school leader at Morton Ranch Junior High School.

Finally, consider the courage focus in the words of the Reverend Billy Graham: “Courage is contagious. When a brave man takes a stand, the spines of others are often stiffened.” Take a stand for your students today and you will be surprised how others come around you. People are just waiting on you to be courageous!

## **A FUTURE CRISIS: PULLING AWAY FROM THE PAST TO SAVE THE FUTURE**

Every 26 seconds, a student drops out of school, and 25% of all high school freshmen fail to graduate on time or at all. Sadly, high school dropouts commit about 75% of the crimes in this nation (DoSomething.org, n.d.). Schools are thirsty for real innovation that rethinks how we do school. Our country is hungry for schools that are not preparing students for prison but for the workplace, college, and beyond.

For school leaders, your future started yesterday so get ready to embrace the change that is needed to truly innovate in your school. Schools look very similar to the time when our dad, grandfather, and great grandfather went to school. Most schools still have students sitting in rows, moving to class at the sound of a bell, and having the teacher as the only evaluator of their work.

### **Unleash Powerful Learning**

Which country do you think has the most Nobel Prize winners? If you guessed China, Finland, Singapore, the United Kingdom, or India you are incorrect. The most winners come from the United States. To date, there are 356 Nobel Prize winners from the United States but China has only nine. That’s right, nine Nobel Peace Prize winners. What does that tell us about our country? It highlights the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, innovation, our endless discovery, and a focus on improving life through inventions and new designs.

Our schools need to have this same type of innovation, creativity, discovery, and entrepreneurial spirit as our 356 Nobel Prize winners. We can learn a great deal from them. In this portion of the chapter you will hear directly from school leaders who are innovating in their schools for student success. You will learn practical strategies you can immediately and thoughtfully implement in your school. We’re going to shoot straight with you—some of these strategies are easy to execute and some will really stretch your comfort level, but they are all worthwhile and will reinvigorate you and your school to make a sustaining difference for students and your entire community.

**Figure 4.1** Future Focused Education

	1900	Now	Future Focused
Teacher	Source of knowledge	Deliverer of knowledge	Facilitator to help students turn knowledge into solutions—innovative inquirer; recruits other experts to help
Student	Work produced for the teacher	Work shared with one or more teachers	Work produced for authentic audiences around the world
Seating	Students seated in rows	Students seated in rows and clusters	Students in groups; mobile, dynamic, and joining from virtual locations
Learning	Learning focused on rote memorization to meet the learning needs of the school	Learning focused on memorization and application to meet the learning needs of the class	Learning focused on personalization to meet the learning needs of each student
Schedule	Bells alerted the change of class; fixed schedule	Bells alert the change of class; fixed schedule	No bells; flexible schedule to meet the learning and physical needs of students
Curriculum	Textbooks primary source of curriculum	Textbooks primary source of curriculum supplemented by online resources	Curriculum driven by finding and solving real-world problems; online learning, Makerspaces, project-based learning
Courses	Taught at school	Taught at school and online	Choice is key; courses taught at school, online, hybrid, college, iTunes, etc.
Evaluation	Teacher is only evaluator of student work	Teacher is only evaluator of student work	Teacher, students, parents, and the world are evaluators of student work
Assessment	Teacher administered with end goal to see if students retained information; goal is ranking students	Administered by teacher, District, and state/ federal to assess content retention, standards, and college placement; goal is ranking students and schools	Authentic assessments, administered by teachers, business leaders, and experts, test students' ability to apply learning to new problems; goal is student learning

(Continued)



Figure 4.1 (Continued)

	1900	Now	Future Focused
Course Content	Taken from textbook	Taken from textbooks and websites	Student driven, many choices; created through career readiness and authentic problem solving for the community/world
Technology	Paper and pencil	High-powered computers, handheld devices, wireless access, and mobile technology; we learn about technology	Invisible, ubiquitous, powerful; we learn to learn, using technology

### *Put the Students in Charge!*

Much like the school profile of Winston Sakurai, Hawaii's 2016 Principal of the Year, who had the students design Founder's Hall, you should rely on your students to dream up and create the change in their school. After all, it is *their school!* Whether you are a K–2 school or a Grade 10–12 high school, the students are naturally inclined toward creativity. Sadly, schools often suck creativity right out of their students. Let's include students and their creative thinking to drive the real change needed in our schools. Students possess the energy, enthusiasm, creativity, collaboration, and ability to make a sustaining difference in their school, community, and nation. Below are some examples of how school leaders relied on their students to lead the change in schools.

**Student-Led Professional Development** Have students lead your teachers on professional development. Maybe it's teaching educators about the latest technology, strategies to include all students, or discussion of ideas they have to make their school better. When students and teachers work together and learn together, true systemic change can take place.

Union R-XI School District in Missouri believes that students have the leadership capacity to provide professional development for their faculty and staff. In this district, both middle and high school students plan, organize, and lead professional development opportunities for teachers (Tarte, 2015). These learning opportunities for teachers, led by students, have been some of the most popular professional development throughout the school year. Check out more of their story at <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-partnership-in-professional-development-justin-tarte>.



**Student-Led Conferences** The days of parent–teacher conferences where the teacher sits behind their desk, reviews the student’s grades, and simply asks the parents if they have any questions need to be updated. Students need to be an integral part of their learning, progress, and conferences. Remember how it changed Amanda E. Stout Elementary School? Here’s another example.

Middle School Grades 4–8, C. L. Jones Middle School, Minden School District, Minden, NE

School leader John Osgood and his teaching staff host student-led conferences every school year. In the fall, the traditional parent–teacher conference is held but in the spring, students lead the parent conferences. Students have a series of instruments that are put together for them to work on. These include a grade sheet and examples of their work. They choose two items and the teacher picks two items to reflect the quality of student work. The students do a self-assessment on how they feel about the class, their abilities in the class, and how they are doing in the class, and the teachers add to the assessment on how the student is doing on the same page so the parent can see both reflections. They also work on social structures where the students build a coat of arms that identifies them as a student, who their friends are, interests, things they like to do in school and out of school, and the students develop a script on what to do during the parent conference. Since they attend a one-to-one school with iPads, the students are beginning to move all of this work into a digital portfolio and the goal is to have students present their portfolio using the iPad with parents. The students also set academic goals for the year, and they measure that goal to check on their progress. The conference sessions are set up in the classrooms so there are typically about four or five conferences going on in the same room. There is a gap between the conferences to meet the teacher and to get more information from the teacher, and the teacher meets up with the student and the parents to triangulate what the student shared during the student-led conference. Parent turnout for student-led conferences is between 95% and 100%, but it was only 65% to 70% before student-led conferences. Osgood shares, “We have a lot more parents coming into the building and students are accountable for their own learning.”



Photo courtesy of John Osgood

**Student Feedback** Regularly solicit feedback from students on how to make the school better. Whether it’s surveys, small-group feedback meetings, or connecting with a club or sports team, student feedback is critical

to develop ownership and support for innovative change. Allow students to respond to open-ended questions about your school with anonymous surveys and they will supply great ideas to improve learning. Schedule student forums weekly to hear from a random group of students and to get feedback on your school.

Try meeting with randomly chosen groups of students, asking them four questions:

<b>What is our school doing great?</b>	<b>What do you dream our school can become?</b>
<b>What can our school improve on?</b>	<b>What can you do to improve the school?</b>

**Student Creation** Use the creativity of students to move your school toward success. See how one principal turned his school’s website over to the students. That’s right, students run the school website!

School leader Michael Piccininni, of Coronado High School in Henderson, Nevada (3,300 students), has his students create, run, and keep his school website up to date. The school still has a static and formal web site that is part of the larger district’s website, but this student-led website is the life and breath of the school. This is the website that students, parents, teachers, and the entire school community go to for the latest information.

The entire website is student centered and created by students. At Coronado High School, students are responsible for learning coding to create the school website. “We did away with the school newspaper and made this website our online newspaper. It has worked very well; student interest is much higher, and the students are doing the reporting, website design, and taking the lead on it.” Students need to attend school and community events to report and design articles that will run on the website. In addition to reporting on special events, students provide updates on important health issues, movie reviews, tips on positive relationships, and so much more. The website is packed with student testimonies, student-created videos, and information about news, sports, media, social media, and an entire section focused on student voice. This student section features an editorial, pro/con, student opinion, and a humor piece that highlights funny things going on in the school and world. Piccininni attributes the success of the website to his teachers and students. “We have amazing students here at Coronado High School who are dedicated to the success of this online newspaper.”

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Many school leaders cannot change the physical structure of their building, but they can change the furniture, classroom setup, use of open spaces, and other areas of the school. We need to move away from having students in rows to a more collaborative model, and we need to consider how to use open areas for student engagement and collaboration.

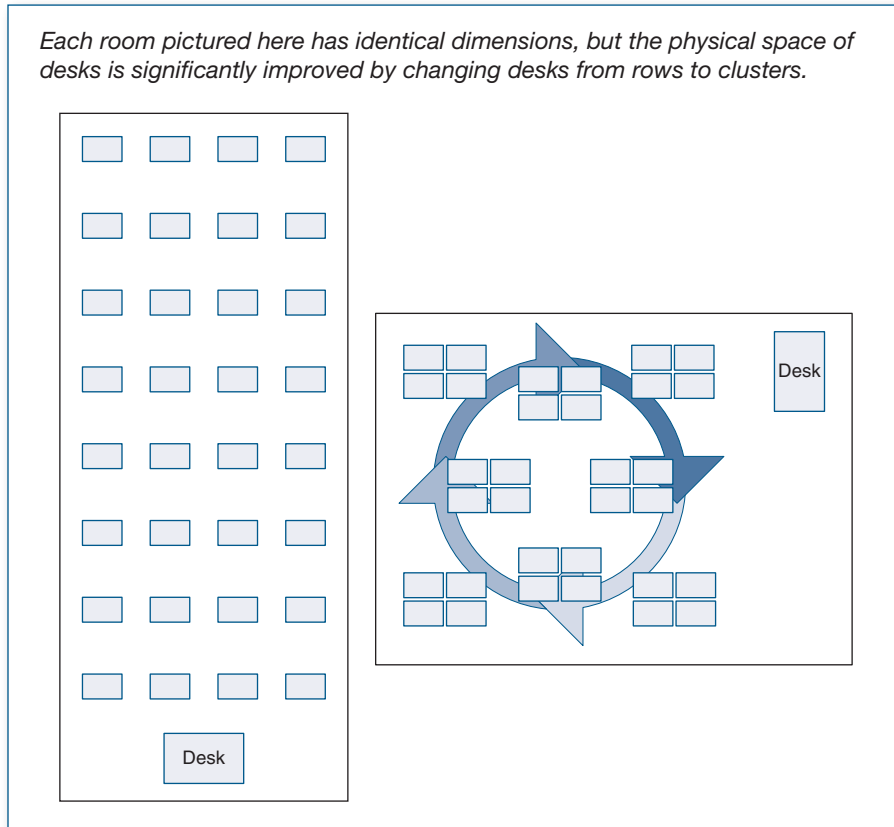
Classroom redesign is something that all school leaders should consider. Designing the classroom in a manner to enhance engagement is critical. Plus, our learning environments need to mirror the needs and culture of students. Having students in groups at either tables or adjoining desks fosters and nurtures collaboration and team talk with students.

One of the easiest, and cheapest, solutions to creating a more collaborative and engaging physical space is to move desks from rows to clusters of four. Figure 4.2 shows how a classroom with 32 desks can be transformed. This design also allows the teacher to facilitate collaboration and check for understanding by spending time in the “inner circle” and circulating to each group of four. This new arrangement allows for efficient formative assessment by monitoring student talk and connecting to conference with each group. Anywhere you stand in the inner ring places you at close proximity to three groups at once. This physical arrangement allows you to be in the midst of learning while students own the work. The new layout supports the teacher as facilitator of learning.

### Open Spaces for Learning and School Furniture That Engages

Use the open spaces in your school for learning and collaboration. Allowing students to use lobbies, hallways, cafeteria spaces, courtyards, and other open areas increases opportunities for collaboration and the collegial environment with students. When we trust students to work in collaborative open spaces a cooperative environment is nurtured. Now I’m not saying to simply release students anywhere in the building without supervision; it’s key to set clear expectations, have adult supervision, and establish norms in the building that promote collaboration and respect for learning. More and more, we are seeing school leaders who are using open spaces to create collaborative think tanks where students can write (with washable markers) on glass windows, students can film videos and complete assignments, and students can come together to plan, think, converse, and deliberate over complex issues and learning.

Elementary schools use classroom spaces so well—you almost always see elementary students working collaboratively at tables, work stations,

**Figure 4.2** Transforming Learning Environments

or on the floor. So why is it when students hit the secondary level rows become the norm and collaboration is often stifled by rigid rules and fear of misbehavior. As school leaders, we may have the opportunity to purchase new school furniture for classes and hallways. Use this opportunity to purchase with collaboration in mind.

For example, rather than purchasing traditional desks, go for round tables, boomerang-shaped desks that can easily create groups of three or four, and furniture that allows for a flexible learning environment. Think of high-top round tables that allow students to stand and collaborate like two businesswomen working together at a Starbucks. Why do we always have students seated? In the business world, people are up and moving around, collaborating around standing areas, and many major deals get done in the open spaces of a lobby or coffee area.

We've seen students sitting on exercise ball chairs with desks that allow students to rest their feet on a bar that sways back and forth. As a

hyper student growing up, I would have flourished in this chair. We need to consider innovation in every area of schooling, even the physical environment. Whether you are in a school built in the 1920s, a school that still has shag carpet, or a newly renovated school, we need to redesign how we do schooling and learning.



### School Leader's Story

*Empowering Students*

**Leader:** Winston Sakurai  
**School:** Hanalani Upper School  
**Website:** [www.hanalani.org](http://www.hanalani.org)  
**Setting:** Suburban  
**Size:** 350 students  
**Grades:** 7–12  
**Population:** 55% Asian, 24% Caucasian, 10% Pacific Islander, 4% Hispanic, 3% African American, 3% multiracial, 1% Native American  
**Poverty:** 6% economically disadvantaged  
**District:** Hawaii Association of Independent Schools  
**Location:** Mililani, HI



Photo courtesy of Winston Sakurai

Every day is a great day for Winston Sakurai, upper school (grades 7–12) principal at Hanalani Schools in Mililani, Hawaii, because he is doing what he always wanted to be: a school principal. As a young child he saw the issues with administrator turnover, having had nine different principals from kindergarten to eighth grade. “I learned early that schools could only be great with administrators who are willing to stay and make a difference.”

However, he always felt that real improvement comes because of great local leadership at the school level. When he became an administrator his first thought was to empower students to help improve their own educational journey. The school latched on to Stanford’s Design Thinking process, which employs empathy and ideating to improve the lives of others. Sakurai went back to teach an applied engineering class, helping students navigate the stormy waters of collaboration and problem solving. Their big project that first year was redesigning a traditional library into a modern learning commons. Sakurai notes, “Students worked to observe patterns of

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

library traffic, conducted online surveys of peers and faculty, and presented a budget with furniture selections and floor layouts.” The students always comment that working together was the hardest part, but they learned that you have to give and take and respect everyone’s ideas. The real work happened during the summer when the students went through every library book, ripped out carpet, painted the walls, and disassembled shelving, all to create an open collaborative learning space for students at the school.

### Key Chapter Takeaways

Changing the way we teach and learn has more to do with our culture and beliefs than our textbooks, architecture, or technology. To make a change in school culture it will take work to build trust, examine beliefs, and grow together as a unified community. Use the (positive) tension that results from an honest look at where you are, compared to where you want to be as a school community. These aspirations can lead to real innovation and change. Don’t just pile on new ideas, decide what can be discarded, and take the necessary steps to change instructional practices across your classroom.

### RELATE, INNOVATE, INVIGORATE ACTIVITIES

#### Relate



- Use Google Docs or Survey Monkey to conduct an anonymous survey with your students. Ask them how they would change the school structure, schedule, and physical layout, and include some open-ended questions to get ideas you may not think of at all.
- Conduct a school engagement survey; look for attitudes toward school and learning.
- Start a student forum to get feedback on your school from students.

#### Innovate



- Allow your staff to ask “why?” and “what if . . .?” questions. Imagine how you would design your school if you could start from scratch with your current students, staff, and community.
- Turn your mission statement into a mission question and see where your school can begin an innovation or change in practice.

- Foster student leadership by having students lead a professional development session for teachers, lead student-led parent conferences, or solicit student feedback on your school.



### Invigorate

- Work with faculty, students, and staff to create a timeline of achievements for your school. Celebrate where you started, and where you've come as a learning organization.
- Have students share the positive impact teachers have on them in a faculty meeting.
- Listen to a podcast with your faculty and leadership team, and reflect on how your school has grown and needs to improve.



### Team Talk: Innovate

As a School Leadership Team, assess your school's future focused leadership and learning by using Figure 4.1 and by taking the Leadership Team Self-Assessment at [www.chaselearning.org/TeamTalk](http://www.chaselearning.org/TeamTalk). Share your team's reflections with us.

**Continue the conversation with us on Twitter at [#chaselearning](https://twitter.com/chaselearning).**