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As I write this last “Say Hey,” my mind drifts back to the first note I wrote to you 10 years ago as the newly appointed Executive Director. Many of you were not yet superintendents or members of our association; some of you were fresh out of college; and some of you were seasoned vets with a handle on all things educational.

I knew that I wanted to share profound thoughts about the important work we all were doing, inspiring you to never forget that it was all about the children—each and every one of them. In that year, monies were good. Raises were still being given, sometimes as high as five and seven percent. Times were financially ok—definitely better than today.

The MASA team set out to change the organizational culture by making it a true learning community, ensuring that everything we did helped superintendents and front-line administrators be all about student achievement.

We launched the Courageous Journey™ certification and endorsement program—now 18 cohorts strong and growing—for aspiring and experienced superintendents. We introduced executive coaching and expanded our services to new superintendents.

Today, our conferences are true working sessions with speakers addressing a common theme. We brought in speakers from the national arena with the newest ideas on instruction and leadership, as well as presenters from our ranks, who were doing great things in their districts. They shared best practices and ideas that worked and could be replicated in different settings across the state.

Superintendents joined our Conference Planning Committee to participate with Dan Pappas and crew to make every conference better than the last. With that came new technologies and strategies. The Apple iPad project pushed us into new arenas of “what can be.” It was heady stuff and very exciting.

Through it all we endured continual funding cuts and student decline after 2008. I started reminding you to “never, never, never give up” and to remember that somewhere underneath that pile of manure, there was, indeed, a pony.

We worked on reforming the system—first, with the Council’s Lead Forward vision and then with the Systemic School Reform Committee. We achieved reforms in tenure, PERA, and healthcare, as well as many tweaked curriculum reforms that helped move Michigan educators forward in this changed world.

The work continues with a new leader who will take MASA even further into an even brighter future for public education in Michigan.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of this great courageous journey. Thank you for doing the great things you do under difficult circumstances. Thank you for your support for me and the many kind words.

And thank you MASA staff for making me look good as your leader and for the great things you have done for children and the members we serve. It has been one wonderful ride. Godspeed and never, never, never give up.
I believe that as superintendent, one of my greatest responsibilities is to convene various people who would not ordinarily come together around a common purpose. By establishing opportunities for dreaming, visioning, and creating, people from diverse organizations may be brought together to work and solve problems, use resources more efficiently, and better serve those in our communities.

One of our greatest challenges is collaboration to facilitate learning and creativity for students who will compete on a world stage. To that end, it is the responsibility of educational leaders to provide students with what they need to lead happy, healthy, and productive lives in a rapidly changing world. A comprehensive mosaic of supports must be designed to remove all roadblocks to equity of opportunity for all students. Each student deserves to compete on a level playing field where his or her inner genius is discovered and encouraged to grow and flourish in a supportive environment.

Leadership means we must work to build trust and meaningful relationships in our districts and in our communities by convening business and civic leaders to develop a common vision and goals. This type of innovation around new ideas typically has a powerful synergistic effect, which can be used to more effectively serve our stakeholders. While today’s working environment tempts us to focus on budgets and cutting programs, leaders have an obligation to think without constraints, collaborate around shared values and outcomes, and create opportunities for economic development that will improve the lives of our students.

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In March 2012, our district faced a multi-million dollar operational deficit trend, declining enrollment, underutilized buildings, low staff morale, and a lack of district-wide coherence. Two major redesign steps needed implementation immediately:

1. Reconfiguration of our school facilities, which would maximize their use and support a long-term instructional vision; and
2. Re-focus on our core mission of teaching and learning by using instructional practices data to improve student achievement.

These two initiatives set in motion major change in the way our schools were grade-configured and altered our professional learning conversations from solely focusing on student outcome data to analyzing the impact of our instructional practices.

**Reconfiguration of the district**

With declining enrollment occurring each year, several attempts were made to reconfigure the district (downsize) and reduce facility usage. Community groups and internal committees had made recommendations; none yielded a Board decision for a district direction. Previous recommendations had approached reconfiguration from a bricks-and-mortar-perspective by eliminating several neighborhood schools, reducing utilities, and closing one of three high schools. However, that approach did not provide a long-term solution, nor was it based on what was best for students, staff, and the community.

The Board approved the *Bold Changes, Smarter Schools: Reset for Student Success* plan later that month. Based on child development research, the district restructured around a PreK–3rd grade core of early childhood centers with an emphasis on *learning to read*; created 4th–6th grade middle years schools with a focus on *reading to learn*; and converted the three high schools into 7th–12th grade facilities emphasizing *career and college readiness*. We eliminated “middle schools” because the research suggested that it was critical to capture incoming seventh graders and engage them in the life of high school, offering them higher-level course options, pep assemblies, and extra-curricular activities/clubs/sports, which were more likely ensuring an increase in graduation rate.

**iCollaborate: Collaborative inquiry around instructional practices**

Committed to instructional excellence and system-wide coherence, we initiated a research-based cutting-edge approach to improving instructional practices called *iCollaborate*. Coined by staff, *iCollaborate* is a district-wide classroom observation protocol that gives teachers and principals instructional process language and data with which to drive their professional learning discussions and plans.

Using the *Snapshot* in grades PreK–3 as the classroom observation instrument, trained data coaches gather information about the students’ experiences in the classroom and codifies the percentage of “time spent” in an activity setting, the...
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Bold Changes, Continued from page 10

curriculum content to which they’re exposed, and the instructional approach used by the teacher. Each percentage point represents four minutes.

The CLASS** instrument is used in grades 4–12 and looks at the relationship between the teacher and student and the instructional environment created by the teacher. Each classroom is quantified on a seven-point scaled rubric for relative classroom quality in three domains—emotional support, classroom organization, instructional support—and includes student engagement.

School-level Leadership Teams analyze their data and develop action plans to address areas of need using their iCollaborate data to drive professional learning agendas and allocations. Teachers can ask for their individual data, viewed only by the teacher and not used for evaluation purposes. This initiative significantly changed the discourse around instructional practices and gave our district a laser-like focus on instructional practices (the “how”), provided a point of reference for addressing district-wide curriculum pacing guides (the “what”), and created an impetus for interim assessments ensuring a comprehensive alignment between instruction and student performance outcomes. Teachers are now talking about their own instructional practices and how they impact student engagement and achievement.

So what’s new about this?

Three major trends have created the need to change the way we design our educational systems:

“Choice” is the catalyst for revisiting the way we configure schools outside of mandatory attendance areas and neighborhood boundaries. Districts are increasingly more focused on providing innovative learning options and appropriate age/grade level cohorts.

Accountability systems have mandated a different approach to analyzing the effects of instructional practices. Using outdated student performance data to gauge instructional effectiveness does not move the needle. Teachers need real-time process data. We have expended energy on determining the “what;” it is time we focused more purposefully on the “how.”

Declining enrollment in urban areas forces us to find creative ways to maintain our student population base. Investment in early childhood can sustain long-term loyalty. We cannot take anything or anyone for granted.

In our third year of the redesign, enthusiasm continues to percolate in our district and community. Change is always a challenge but staying true to our core mission, we are the better for it.

Yvonne Caamal Canul is Superintendent of the Lansing School District and the 2015 Michigan Superintendent of the Year. Contact her at 517.755.1010 or yvonne.caamalcanul@lansingschools.net


**CLASS: Bob Pianta, University of Virginia.
Across the United States, there has been a resounding call for more graduates with technical knowledge and skills. Employers across sectors—from the auto industry to the national defense industry—have lamented a skills gap that is making it difficult to fill job openings and create a skilled workforce. As educators, we have an opportunity to help prepare our students for job opportunities in high-tech, high-skill careers that are open now and will be even more abundant in the future. As a result, we can set our students on a path for tremendous success.

Eighty-seven school districts across the state are leading the way in this effort through partnerships with Project Lead The Way (PLTW) and Eastern Michigan University (EMU). Through PLTW’s K–12 programs, students are learning science, technology, engineering, and math—the STEM subjects—in integrated, project-based ways. As early as kindergarten, students are using the engineering design process, learning to problem solve and think critically, and building a strong foundation for the rest of their education and their careers.

One of these districts is the Plymouth-Canton School District. Three years ago, it implemented a career pathways model at the high school level. The district is unique in that it has three high schools, all on the same campus (the Plymouth-Canton Educational Park), which allows students to take advantage of courses at the other buildings. One of the star pathways at the Park is the STEM Academy, using PLTW’s Engineering and Biomedical Science programs. The popularity of the programs surprised even the school’s STEM Academy Director, Danielle Ramos.

“On the first parent information night three years ago, we had between 800 and 900 parents show up!” she recalls. “That first year, we had 64 students in the engineering pathway, and 100 in the biomedical science pathway. Now we are at 543 students, and we expect to add another 96 students in engineering and 128 more in biomedical science next year. We have a waiting list for engineering, and biomedical is always full.”

To truly create career pathways, Plymouth-Canton has integrated PLTW’s STEM programs into the middle school level as well. This year, all five of the district’s middle schools offer the PLTW Gateway program, including classes in design and modeling, automation and robotics, and green architecture. Next year, PLTW will be a requirement for all sixth graders, says the district’s regional STEM Director Anthony Ruela.

“The ultimate goal is really to provide an education that best helps students become college and career ready, to give them a wide variety of experiences so that when the time comes, they are prepared to make the choices they need to make: which two classes to take in high school or college, what to major in, or what job offer to take,” said Ruela. “So we’re providing kids with real 21st century experiences and an education that is relevant to who they are and who they want to become.”

Ruela said the district is looking at adding additional PLTW courses in biomedical science and computer science at the middle school level to align with the high school career pathways, and may consider adding PLTW’s elementary program down the road as well.

Ramos and Ruela say PLTW has been a great fit for Plymouth-Canton because of its K–12 pathways model, as well as the training and support that teachers receive. PLTW teachers in Michigan attend professional development training over the summer at EMU. Beginning in the Summer of 2015, teachers will attend PLTW Biomedical Science training at Lawrence Technological University.
“The [teacher] training is very rigorous,” Ramos said. “But I know our teachers appreciate it, and that the training brings collaboration with teachers from across the nation. They have Facebook pages, chat groups, and message boards, where they ask about projects and share ideas they are using across the U.S. They really help each other out. The collaboration PLTW provides is the number one thing from a teacher standpoint.”

The final piece for Ramos is the tremendous community involvement PLTW has provided for the district’s students.

“Students are taking what they’re learning, working through hands-on activities, and then applying it to real-world situations, especially when we tie it into the community. It’s not just about curriculum, but making sure students are career ready and getting hands-on experiences.”

Aisin Technical Center of America pairs two Plymouth-Canton students with mentors each year, often providing up to five mentors in different engineering fields. Yazaki, a major supplier to auto manufacturers, is offering two seniors full-time, paid summer internships. Students are also helping U-M Dearborn and Schoolcraft College professors with their research.

“I could never thank these companies enough for the experiences they are giving our students,” Ramos said.

From EMU’s perspective, students with STEM knowledge, skills, and career experiences are the ones they would like to recruit and will be prepared for the jobs of the 21st century.

“Our economy is changing, and employers are demanding students who can think critically, solve problems, and communicate,” said EMU PLTW Affiliate Director John Duggar. “We need to do everything we can to prepare students to be successful.”

Amy Rauch is Director of School Engagement for Michigan’s Project Lead The Way. For more information, visit www.pltw.org and www.pltwmichigan.org or contact arauch@pltw.org.
How the ‘Old West’ Was Made New Again: The CFI Story

By Jared Field

On a Thursday night in February, a once-skeptical community came together to see what all the fuss was about. For most, it was the first opportunity to see a shared community space devoted to new methods of instruction, collaboration, and development of 21st century skills. We call it the Center for Innovation; they call it the “old West.”

This is the story of how the ‘old West’ was made new again.

Project-based instruction
The Media Center at the former Lapeer West High School, now the District’s Center for Innovation (CFI), has become a catchall compartment for project-based learning, computer science, and, on this day, a makeshift driving range.

Senior Austin Bozun is taking full advantage of the opportunities the recent merger of Lapeer East and West High Schools has provided him. He participates in the L-12 Capstone Program for seniors at CFI, a two-hour multi-disciplinary block that brings together English, math, science and technology in a way that appeals to a wide variety of students.

Austin, dressed for success, sits down in front of two computers and an iPad and explains away the reams of digital data his group collected on the correlation (or lack thereof) between the elasticity of golf balls and how far they travel off the clubface.

To test their hypothesis, his group built something medieval—picture a miniature Titleist Trebuchet. Their creation was spring-loaded to maintain a consistent amount of force for each swing of the club. It was fitted with special sensors to measure ball speed and launch angle. The goal of the project was not simply to hypothesize and conclude, but to read, write, and ultimately present findings. (If you’re curious, the more elastic balls did not travel farther off the clubface).

Melissa Campbell, an instructor in the Capstone Program, said the emphasis on collaboration mimics the real world, where there aren’t many Mulligans.

“For students, either you like the topic or you don’t; either you like who you work with or you don’t,” said Campbell. “This is real life and can make or break your attitude about anything.”

Rebirth
Innovative programs like Capstone surround students like Austin and around every corner offer substance to learners at all levels.

CFI is home to our Project Lead the Way (PLTW) Program, the nation’s leading Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) curriculum. (PLTW students recently built a Rube Goldberg Machine that was over 200 feet long.)

Head west up the ramp and down the hall and you will find the humble abode of our two state champion middle-level robotics teams. The students are prepping their bots for nationals and doing a little show and tell for parents.

Across the hall is an old art room that has been transformed to accommodate a local community of young musicians called Third Degree Burns. From the opposite end of the building, where our high school robotics teams hang out, you can barely make out the words to “Final Countdown” and a few other classics their parents loved first.

On the short walk to our College on Campus Program, you find Ombudsman, a research-based alternative education
program, as well as the district’s virtual learning and standardized testing centers. (Speaking of a walk, CFI is also the home of the district’s Senior Walking Program.)

College on Campus, perhaps the most popular program of all, is a partnership with four colleges and universities that allows students to take college-level coursework with professors on site, without having to leave Lapeer. Students can receive $5,000 worth of college credits for around $500. Because of the district’s campus structure, transfer buses between buildings is provided at no cost to students.

“Each program has its own approach. To see all these ideas and innovations, borne of ideas from our staff, students, and community, come to fruition is nothing short of inspiring.”

CFI Director Matt Olson says opportunities for innovation abound in the facility, in large part because students and staff have the flexibility to use non-traditional means to reach diverse groups of learners.

“Innovate; synergize
Lapeer Community Schools Superintendent Matt Wandrie had a big idea and a building just big enough to hold it. Wandrie never considered shuttering the 1960s-era facility since the cost savings involved in the 2014-15 high school consolidation were not tied up in operations.

“We looked at it as an opportunity to bring an assortment of district and community-based programs together under one roof,” said Wandrie, now in his fourth year in the district. “You would be amazed at how seemingly divergent disciplines can compliment each other, creating outcomes that are positive for all students. And we’re just getting started.”

What he describes is synergy, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Olson sees evidence of it every day.

“Synergy is a powerful force that brings great educational minds together in one place,” said Olson. “Even though we represent different levels, schools, and subjects, we have developed an excellent building culture all our own. It’s amazing the ideas a middle school science teacher can bring to a high school alternative classroom, or a college professor can bring to a senior capstone program. There’s no limit to it.”

In the future, there are plans to expand offerings to include training in specific in-demand trades. Thanks to an investment from Baker College, one of our College on Campus partners, the old metal shop will soon make room for a shiny new CNC milling machine for metal fabrication.

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Jared Field, a former journalist and New Media Manager, is the Director of Communications for Lapeer Community Schools. He can be reached at 810.538.1638 or at jfield@laperschools.org.
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The first day of the 2014-15 school year at Madison Elementary began like any other—filled with fresh haircuts, new pencils, smiles, and butterflies of excitement. What was different was that school opened on July 28. More than one-third of the school’s 800 Young 5s through fifth-grade students were starting the year on a new balanced school year (BSY) calendar. The rest of the student body would join them on the traditional school year (TSY) calendar on September 2.

This is not the first cutting-edge education opportunity offered by the district. Committed to expanding educational opportunities for students, Madison also recently implemented programming around strings/orchestra, Project Lead the Way (PLTW) Biomedical Technology, career exploration, and youth athletics. In fact, research for a different learning opportunity actually led to the BSY option.

“A group of staff members from Madison visited Croswell-Lexington Community Schools to learn about their 1:1 technology initiative. At one point during the conversation, the district’s superintendent at that time, Dr. Kevin Miller, mentioned year-round schooling. This caught my attention, and we spent the rest of the morning discussing a balanced calendar while the remainder of the group toured campus,” said Madison School District Superintendent Ryan Rowe.

Upon returning to Madison, discussions about the BSY concept began, and excitement began to build. Administrators and staff met to form exploratory committees to research and develop a BSY option for Madison Elementary. Two aspects quickly surfaced as priorities: the choice to teach or enroll in BSY would be voluntary, and the number of days (180), curriculum, specials, and supports would be equal to those of the TSY.

A calendar was developed, based on a six-week summer vacation. The remainder of the 20 vacation days were then spread out over the rest of the year.

“The driving force behind a BSY calendar is to reduce the learning loss that can occur over an extended summer break. Although the focus of the program is student achievement, our staff and families also report that having the opportunity to travel in off-peak times is also appreciated,” said Rowe.

Continued on page 20
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Once preliminary plans were in place, informational meetings were held for staff and parents. Surveys indicated that Madison families were ready to try the BSY option, and staff members volunteered to teach on the new calendar. Based on a high level of interest on commitment forms provided by families, the recommendation for approval to adopt the BSY option was made to the Board of Education in March 2014. The plan was approved; the Michigan Board of Education approved the waiver to start school prior to Labor Day; and a whirlwind of final preparations began.

“Holding school in July and August means we often need air conditioning. Fortunately, Madison received $333,765 from the Section 31b Year-Round School Grant from the Michigan Department of Education to make improvements to the building’s HVAC system,” said Rowe. Grant funds also covered the purchase of a new bus.

Data focused on student achievement, attendance, and discipline is being collected to measure success. Although it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, preliminary indications illustrate that the program is on the right track.

“Early test results show that, on average, TSY students decreased in literacy by three percentile points over the summer, whereas our BSY students gained approximately one percentage point in literacy. In addition, our BSY attendance rates are better than those of students who are on a TSY schedule,” explained Early Elementary Principal Linda Kaufman.

Madison Elementary serves approximately 800 students, 295 of whom are enrolled on the BSY calendar. The percentage of students classified as at-risk and the percentage of students with an IEP is nearly equal across the BSY and TSY calendars.

A survey recently completed by parents of BSY students illustrates overwhelming appreciation for this opportunity. More than 90 percent of those currently enrolled plan to re-enroll next year.

“Twenty-five percent of parents with students on the TSY calendar have indicated an interest in moving to the BSY calendar for 2015-16.

“We are very pleased to provide the BSY option and deeply appreciate the feedback we received from those within the Madison family. Information from surveys, discussions at parent meetings, and phone calls and emails with ideas and questions helped shape the first year. Feedback will certainly help to guide planning and preparations for next year,” said Rowe.

Rebecca Schwan is Performing Arts Center Director for the Madison School District. Contact her at 517.263.0741 ext. 498 or Rebecca.Schwan@madisonk12.us.
How do you create a fully literate urban community, and why would anyone want one? Since there is no fully literate urban community—with socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity—in the country, the answer is speculative. But here’s why the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) Board of Education, KPS staff, and many of our community partners want to be the first, and what we’re trying to do to get there.

Literacy—early language development, reading, and writing—is the greatest opportunity to transform a community with large percentages of working-class and poor children and families. It is not a quick or short-term opportunity, but it is both enduring and effective. Literacy serves as the foundation for education, and in its absence, success in school is impossible. It is success in school that in some measure is necessary for substantial access to today’s labor market.

Here is what we have done in Kalamazoo in the last several years to build an urban literacy community:

• Created grant-funded parent education and family literacy programs at 12 community sites. These Lift Up Through Literacy programs help teach parents and grandparents how to work with young people to develop kids’ speaking, reading, and writing skills.

• Increased Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP, or what we call PEEP in KPS) pre-kindergarten program slots from 324 in 2009 to 612 today, an increase of 89 percent in the last five years. KPS now has some form of pre-kindergarten at 13 of its 17 elementary schools, with full-day pre-kindergarten at six socioeconomically challenged elementary schools with free and/or reduced-price eligibility of 90 percent or more.

• Increased the number of full-day kindergarten students from 176 in 2007 to 882 today, an increase of 401 percent, with the use of federal Title I funds for the second half of full-day kindergarten. KPS students have experienced more than two million additional instructional hours in kindergarten in the last seven school years as a result of this change.

• Adopted a new K–5 English language arts series, Pearson Reading Street, one rich in nonfiction as well as fiction, leveled readers, and strong diagnostic and intervention materials.

• Created K–3 writing blocks to provide explicit instructional time for the teaching of writing to our early elementary students.

• Taken all first graders in the district, just shy of 1,000 per year, to the Kalamazoo Public Library. Each first grade class goes to the library three times, and students receive library cards, learn to check out and return books, and learn about the summer reading program. Students experience their branch library and the downtown library as well.

• Provided professional development in writing for all teachers in grades K–12, regardless of content area, including teachers of art, music, and physical education. Teachers of K–5 students received Lucy Calkins professional development, while teachers of students in grades 6–12 received John Collins professional development. Increasingly, the expectation in the district is that teachers in all subjects are expected to support the reading, writing, and oral language development of our children.

• Created a middle school schedule that permits students behind in reading or math to double block, to take two courses in their area in need of improvement. Under the former schedule, a student had a 48-minute language arts course, regardless of whether he or she was reading at grade level. Under the restructured schedule, students have 58-minute periods. Students who are at grade level experience 40 minutes more a day in their core courses of language arts, math, science, and social studies, or approximately 120 hours more per year. Students who are below grade level have two periods of 58 minutes each of language arts, 116 minutes a day, or 68 minutes more per day, 204 hours more per year.

• Created programs to address the summer slide in reading. Most notably, based on Professor James Kim’s...
research, the district sends eight books home in the summer to students going into fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, one every week and a half to each student, in areas of interest and at students’ reading levels. Students send self-addressed stamped postcards back to their teachers to indicate what they thought about the books that they have read, and teachers respond in cards to them. Last summer, the district distributed 24,000 books to students with the assistance of its partner, Goodwill Industries. Analysis of the program has shown a positive effect on reading levels in the summer.

- Promoted the Kalamazoo Public Library’s summer reading program and First Saturday of the Month at KPL. In the last two years, the number of students who have participated in the summer reading program has increased by 68 percent. In the last three years, the number of children’s books for students up to age 11 checked out of the library has increased by 36 percent, approximately 12 percent per year over the three-year period.

- Expanded the partnership with Communities in Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS). CIS has grown substantially in the last seven years, from providing support to nine of 22 schools in the district in 2007 to having an impact on 20 of the district’s 25 schools this year. In addition to site coordinators at 16 schools in the district, 15 schools have 21st century grant-funded after-school programs.

- Expanded partnerships with other community support organizations for children, families, and schools, including the Kalamazoo Center for Youth and Community, created just a few years ago to serve children on the east side of Kalamazoo, and SLD Reads, a 40-year organization that helps individuals with dyslexia and other learning difficulties learn to read. In total, KPS partners with more than 200 organizations in the community, many of which have a profound commitment both to KPS students and to our students’ literacy.

- Provided professional development in and active support for Reading Recovery, a program to improve the reading levels of the bottom quintile of first graders. Reading Recovery helps many readers in elementary schools in the district every year.

Since 2008, KPS has raised reading, writing, and math achievement, in most cases at rates faster than the state as a whole. KPS has increased its high school Michigan Merit Exam (MME) and ACT scores to their highest levels in the last four years. Since 2007, the number of students taking high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses has increased by 146 percent, while the number of AP courses taken has increased by 209 percent. Graduation rates have increased during this period, and dropout rates have declined.

We have a long way to go before we have created a fully literate urban community. At the same time, however, our literacy work of the last several years has moved us closer to a time when all students will be able to take full advantage of their promise.

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The true value of the Technology Readiness Infrastructure Grant (TRIG) comes from its statewide activities. Even though these activities have the greatest impact on districts and students in Michigan, they can also be the most difficult to understand. Many educators do not realize the impact the TRIG activities have on their educational process. These activities have been able to undertake technology projects that have long been talked about by technology leaders in the state, but have never had a structure or opportunity to be realized. The TRIG activities are collectively able to move online testing solutions forward, and generally make our Michigan students more technologically prepared for the future.

The TRIG statewide activities are broken down into three categories for ease of understanding. Each activity is classified based on the areas that they impact most with the work that they accomplish. The activities are categorized under Personalized Learning, Actionable Data, or Ubiquitous Access. One of the activities that will have a major impact on districts is the Data Integration activity, which falls under Actionable Data.

Data Integration activity aims to reduce redundancy for districts

The Data Integration activity seeks to resolve a longstanding issue in Michigan schools, which has been the inconsistent ways in which student data is managed and handled. Each school district makes its own set of choices as to which systems to use and how to share data among those systems. This leads to the unreliable integration of systems and a large amount of redundant work, as many districts and ISDs perform duplicate work to address the issue.

Data Integration will solve this inefficiency by establishing regional data hubs to handle the bridging of student data among applications and reducing reporting redundancy. This approach will then centralize data bridging processes so that a connector written for a product will work for all users of that product, regardless of which student information system (SIS) they use. Having a data hub at the center of the process allows for data to be standardized on its way into the new system. This enables connectors out to other systems to work no matter which system originated the data.

To see this concept in action, consider the example of a food service system that works with five different student information systems. If they have provided standard connectors, there is...
still a need for five different connectors to handle each of the different systems. If they have not, then many users may have written their own, resulting in far more than five versions of connectors being created and maintained. With a data hub, one connector will do the job for all customers from all five systems—and more—since the data is being standardized as it passes through the data hub. When you consider the dozens of different student information systems and many dozens of other systems in use in the hundreds of school systems in the state, the massive potential for efficiency and savings becomes apparent.

Data Integration will improve results
For Michigan school districts, schools will spend far less time and money establishing and maintaining their own data bridging services. What used to take hours for many programmers will become an implementation task to connect local systems to a robust centralized database. Data quality will also improve significantly. Every connector will include error checking with feedback to the data originator. Quality control measures can be focused on one source for each piece of data with the results being propagated to other systems in a controlled, error-checked manner.

Finally, the implementation of the regional data hubs creates an environment that allows for improvement in many of our data related processes, in addition to the integration of systems.

Implementation of the regional data hubs creates an environment that allows for improvement in many of our data related processes, in addition to the integration of systems. Each district will have its own consolidated database that brings together all of their data sources. That database will then be essential for simplifying reporting to the State, serving up dashboards that provide actionable data to district stakeholders, facilitating movement of data between districts, and serving as a common platform for building future solutions. The value of these data hubs will grow over time as increasingly more systems have connectors that link to them, and as additional uses are identified and implemented.

Learn more about the TRIG project’s efforts to provide actionable data at http://22itrig.org/activities/activity-6.

Tim Hall is the TRIG Project Director. He can be contacted at 517.327.5919 or thall@gomasa.org.
Port Huron Schools Launches a “Blueprint” Plan for Change

By Keely Baribeau

In his first year as superintendent of Port Huron Schools, James Cain feels the district is poised for a significant turnaround.

“Change is imperative and urgent,” he said.

After assembling a leadership team, performing a personnel audit, and having a frank analysis of the district status and conditions, Cain recognized the crucial need for improved communication district wide and with the Board of Education.

Cain’s first steps were to work with the Port Huron Schools’ (called Port Huron Area School District prior to a January 2015 rebranding) Board of Education on developing a mission and vision that would establish the priorities and themes for change.

“This helped both the day-to-day operations managers in my team and the governance leaders on the board to create a common, shared direction of where we need to go as a district,” Cain said.

“Not everyone embraces change, so it’s important that when new leadership sets the course, it’s done with clear expectations and a common purpose.”

Introducing a Blueprint

At the first school board meeting of 2015, Port Huron Schools’ leadership introduced an educational “Blueprint,” a series of strategies related to the district’s Board of Education Goals. These strategies are designed to align with the vision and mission of the district.

The goals are to:

1. Increase student academic achievement through the implementation of an aligned K-12 curriculum and high-quality, focused instruction on a daily basis;

2. Personalize learning for each student through the use of 21st century technologies and differentiated instruction;

3. Create an organizational culture of excellence with clear expectations, a focus on exemplary customer service, and an urgency to meet the needs of each student and family every day; and

4. Prioritize financial resources with an unwavering focus on student learning and achievement.

The Blueprint contains more than 50 items or strategies that will be addressed while working toward achieving each of the four goals. Superintendent Cain, along with the leadership team of Executive Director of Employee and Student Services Tracie Eschenburg, Executive Director of Achievement and Innovation Theo Kerhoulas, and Executive Director of Business Services Kate Peternel were the primary architects of the Blueprint. Leadership was then assigned for each of the strategies listed under the four goals. Progress will be tracked using action plans for reporting and monitoring.
It started with a team
The process began with Cain and his team drafting the goals.

“Once they were adopted by the board, the executive leadership team and I began the journey of developing the strategies and steps behind the goals,” Cain said. “The board’s role was to visualize the big picture, and the leadership team established what specific steps to take to achieve our mission, vision and goals.”

The Blueprint strategies were derived from the renewed direction of the district. Development involved hours of think-tank discussions, observations, and analysis.

“The board entrusted the leadership team and me to develop this plan based on the focus we agreed upon in collaboration as part of a cause and effect model,” Cain said. “Allowing us to be empowered in the process was very important to the speed of having this developed and presented within a couple of months. We simply do not feel that this district has time to waste in starting on a path to improvement, better supporting staff, and raising the bar on student achievement. Results have to come as quickly as possible from our actions.”

New direction, new brand
Simultaneous to addressing these operational changes, Port Huron Schools also launched a rebranding of the district, including a new logo as part of the Blueprint.

“Rebranding provided a visual representation of change in both process and development. We wanted it to help establish our district’s core values and identity,” Cain said.

James Cain
Superintendent, Port Huron Schools

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The rebranding, the mission, vision, and Blueprint all stem from the call-to-action of Advocate, Innovate and Educate:

- Advocate—make the needs of our families and students our own;
- Innovate—constantly strive to improve all we do;
- Educate—at the core of what we do and our primary objective.

As this dynamic shift begins to set the course of Michigan’s 22nd largest district, Cain feels it is premature to present conclusions or lessons on these efforts, citing the importance of patience—despite having accomplished a lot in a short amount of time.

“We have a long way to go, but what I can confidently say at this point is that establishing the process was important,” Cain said. “We couldn’t short-cut the steps, and communication was important.”

Cain recognized that he couldn’t take for granted that everyone will agree or go along with so many proposed changes, so he was careful to back up his strategies with research, along with a variety of sources.

“When you’re moving fast, you have to possess awareness and discipline to guard against false starts. That really starts to erode people’s confidence,” Cain said. “So it’s challenging; you don’t have a margin for mistakes, but you must take time to explain yourself and see a concept through to completion. It can’t just be a good idea. Everyone has to decide, including the board in their governance, that the goal will improve our district and its student achievement data.”

“The district launched a social media tag, “#1PHASD” to represent unity, and that mission continues.

“We have an aligned and consistent mission, vision, and goals set that drive our district’s students, staff, and leadership. We couldn’t move forward until we knew where it was that we wanted to be and the important and challenging changes necessary for success.”

The Blueprint is available at www.phasd.us. Follow @PHSchools on Twitter or on Facebook at Facebook.com/PortHuronSchools.

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All children should have access to a great STEM program. STEM education is critical in our society, and 21st century learning is dependent upon thinking critically about scientific issues.

Not every child is dreaming of becoming the next Tom Brady or Jackie Joyner-Kersey, although bravo to those who are. Many children are dreaming of becoming some of our nation’s top scientists, engineers, economists, or mathematicians. That is why understanding how to live and work in our world requires a thorough understanding of data processing. That is what STEM is all about.

Learning excellence in these core subjects has become paramount in our schools. Educators know that all children need to have access to a quality STEM program in order for the U.S. to compete successfully in our global economy.

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, recently launched a partnership with JASON Learning to help make excellence in STEM learning a reality in our school districts—not just the large urban and suburban districts or those with large budgets.

Created in part by the National Geographic Society, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, NASA, and other international STEM leaders, JASON Learning is used by more than three million students nationwide. One of America’s foremost authorities in STEM-based, standards-aligned integrated curriculum and assessment courseware, JASON is a program that recognizes expertise in the software and information industries.

By virtue of its robust, cloud-based platform—the JASON Mission Center—students are encouraged to explore and develop learning experiences at their own pace through a variety of media resources. JASON’s platform allows teachers to easily and effectively customize and differentiate lesson plans for students of all learning capabilities. The platform allows for seamless integration into district curriculum.

Thanks to a new partnership with Jason Learning, districts who are members of AASA and MASA have access to Jason curriculum and professional development resources at significantly discounted rates. Get connected to the JASON program by visiting www.aasa.org/jason.aspx.
A web-based K–12 curriculum, the program engages students and allows them to follow real scientists and engineers, creating a platform like none they have ever seen—making science or engineering come alive. Isn’t this the kind of learning we are all looking for?

America’s thought leader in the field of STEM, JASON teaches concepts as they apply to the work of fascinating scientists and researchers, encouraging students to envision themselves in these careers. JASON sparks intrinsic motivation to succeed in these challenging subjects where previously students may not have understood their real world applications.

School districts are already seeing positive results. For example, in Alief Independent School District in Houston, Texas, which has been using the program for two years, test scores are improving, and a dramatic approach to STEM learning is being created.

According to the Alief ISD Superintendent, HD Chambers, “The JASON Project, in conjunction with district-designed structures, was a catalyst for captivating more student interest in science. As a robust STEM curriculum, it fostered a level of excitement by directly connecting our students with scientists, honing their digital gaming skills, and increasing their research capacities.”

Through AASA, school districts can purchase access to the entire suite of JASON products for their entire student body at a discounted rate of $6 per student.

We at AASA and JASON are excited about this partnership. We look forward to more and more educators using this powerful integrated learning system for their districts, schools and communities.

We want as to see as many students as possible throughout Michigan take advantage of learning real-life science, technology, engineering and math. That is what the AASA-JASON partnership is all about.

Daniel A. Domenech is Executive Director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association. Eleanor Smalley is President and CEO of JASON Learning.
Engage, Innovate, Educate

By Dr. Gerald Dawkins

It’s not too difficult to find an article or blog espousing the need to “fix” public education, after which we would miraculously see higher student achievement, a more prepared workforce, job growth, and higher wages.

Often, the actual solutions offered are seen by others as the very reason for public education’s problems—more rigorous standards (Common Core), tougher assessments (PARCC/Smarter Balance), ever-changing technology, always-on social media, availability of school choice (vouchers, charters, homeschooling), state and federal accountability measures, college and career readiness, and on and on. And, of course, all of these fixes come with their own funding challenges.

So how do we wrestle with these suggested solutions? Fortunately, there are educational leaders successfully addressing these challenges with a commitment to engage, innovate, and educate.

ENGAGE to Learn: Taking a page out of Jamie Vollmer’s book, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, successful school leaders build support by engaging in meaningful dialogue with parents, staff, and community members to improve student learning opportunities.

Engaging the community is a central goal of the Waterford School District leadership team. Like many communities in Michigan, Waterford has seen declining student enrollment over the past few years. Determined to tackle the issue head-on, Superintendent John Silveri spoke with various stakeholders to identify those areas most in need of improvement. Those conversations have now allowed Waterford to address concerns surrounding its declining enrollment.

INNOVATE to Improve: From virtual collaboration and social media to 3-D printers and computer-aided design, technology is an innovative way for schools to enhance student learning and broaden communication. As social media continues to expand how we network and communicate, school districts are continually exploring innovative ways to improve student achievement without increasing expenses.

To address the issue of summer learning loss, Manchester Community Schools in rural Michigan is engaging in community-wide discussions to consider moving to a new balanced calendar, spreading the 180-day school year across 12 months to provide continuous learning.

Through a series of eight community forums with parents, teachers, students, administrators, and community members, the district is discussing the pros and cons of changing its school calendar. And the
entire community is encouraged to share feedback through a web-based listening tool called “Let’s Talk!” accessible on the district’s website.

“The quality of education of our children is essential to the performance and long-term success of our society. In light of global competition for jobs and a growing demand for more effective, student-focused experiences, we believe that parents and their children must have a portfolio of choices in selecting their educational experience. The Grand Prairie Independent School District is pleased to offer Schools of Choice and Programs of Choice to meet this need.”

— Dr. Susan Hull
Superintendent of Schools
For more information, go to www.gpisd.org/Page/17795.

EDUCATE by Choice:
In today’s public education landscape, “choice” is a loaded word, seen by some as a way to undermine public schools. Not so in Grand Prairie, Texas. Dr. Susan Hull, Superintendent of Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD), embraced the school board’s goal to “promote 21st century learners who are college and career ready” by working with staff to launch Schools of Choice and Programs of Choice. Along with traditional schools, GPISD offers a variety of school and program options (see chart at right).

Common across these three examples is the desire to engage the public in public education in order to identify innovative solutions to educate the next generation. Public involvement is at the heart of new designs for change.

Dr. Gerald Dawkins is a former Michigan superintendent and currently serves as Senior Vice President of Superintendent and District Relations for K–12 Insight, a MASA Presidential Sponsor. Contact him at gdawkins@k12insight.com or 703.542.9557.
The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires all employers, including school districts, to report detailed information about the employee health care coverage they provide. Under Sections 6055 and 6056, employers are required to report this information annually to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). In January 2015, districts should have started collecting this information to be reported in 2016. Although many districts have been aware of the new reporting requirements, there are still several aspects of employee tracking and coverage reporting that districts may not be familiar with; three of the most common are outlined below.

Identifying difficult-to-track employees and using reasonable methods to calculate hours

The look-back measurement method is the most common safe harbor method used to help employers determine their full-time employees. Using this method, districts can determine an employee’s full-time status by using the average hours worked per week over a certain period of time. This is helpful in determining full-time eligibility for employees whose hours were not closely tracked, but it can pose obstacles for districts with employees who are not compensated on an hourly or salary basis. For these employees, districts must use a reasonable method of crediting service hours consistent with the Employer Shared Responsibility provision of the ACA.

School districts should consider how they will calculate hours of difficult-to-track employees, such as concession aides and bus drivers, and determine what may be a reasonable method of crediting hours. Districts should also note that volunteer workers might pose additional obstacles. Under the ACA, if a volunteer receives compensation beyond reimbursement for reasonable expenses incurred during the volunteer’s service, or for reasonable benefits and nominal fees, then they will likely be considered an employee and may be eligible for coverage.

Determining the district’s plan year

A plan year drives ACA-related decisions in primarily two ways:

- It is linked to the timing of many ACA requirements;
- It will drive the district’s look-back-measurement period.

To accommodate health plans with non-calendar year plan years, the IRS made many of the ACA requirements effective as of the first day of a plan year. For example, the ACA prohibition on pre-existing condition exclusions became effective for plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2014. Similarly, the Out-of-Pocket Maximum of $6,600 for individuals and $13,200 for families is effective for plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2015.

Plan years play a large role for districts using the look-back measurement method to determine their employees’ eligibility for coverage. By coordinating the measurement, administrative, and stability periods with the plan year, districts can monitor hours worked during the measurement period, determine eligibility during the administrative period, and administer the mandatory offers of coverage during the stability period.

Many school districts do not have well-defined and documented plan years. For these districts, it is important that they determine their plan year and consult with their legal counsel.

Ensuring the district is using allowable employee segments

Many districts are currently using employee segments that are not allowed under the ACA. The only allowable employee groups are:

- Collectively bargained employees covered by a separate bargaining agreement;
- Salaried and hourly employees; and
- Collectively bargained and non-collectively bargained employees.

These groups are the only allowable segments for districts with varying affordability safe harbors and measurement periods. Segments traditionally used by districts such as teachers, support staff, and administrators may not serve as the basis for differing measurement periods and/or affordability safe harbors.

For districts using impermissible employee categories as the basis for varying measurement periods and/or affordability safe harbors, they should consult their legal counsel on how to rectify their district’s compliance.

The ACA has changed the healthcare landscape and created several new requirements, in addition to reporting, with which districts may have to comply. For school districts unfamiliar with certain aspects of the ACA, they can refer to the IRS website or seek advice and assistance from a third party organization offering ACA-related services.

Jessica Hilliard is the Policy and Legal Liaison at SET SEG. She focuses on helping SET SEG members understand the Affordable Care Act and state and federal healthcare reform laws. Contact her at jhilliard@setseg.org
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