A System Defined for Success

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Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

Located between the major South Central Indiana cities of Columbus and Bloomington, and just 40 miles south of Indianapolis, Brown County is known for its rustic beauty and artisanal charm. Within this small rural community, Brown County Schools serves just under 2,000 students in three elementary schools, one intermediate school, one junior high school and one high school. The students served come from varied economic and social backgrounds with 50% of our students receiving free or reduced lunch and 20% of students being considered "food insecure." We know Brown County residents want children to have a quality place to live, learn, work and play; but data was not indicating that parents or other stakeholders were being asked how they felt about the corporation's work towards this attainment.

Data from the Marzano's High Reliability Schools rubric indicated that students, parents and teachers did not feel opinion data about the district had been generated or archived. As a result of opinion data not being solicited from our stakeholders, the sentiment was that stakeholder input was not informing decisions and that strategic planning was based solely on educator input. The cycle of not asking stakeholders how they defined success for their children resulted in a lack of stakeholder engagement and ultimately a one-sided voice for system development of programs and initiatives.

Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to seek to involve all stakeholders in decisions related to new programs and initiatives in the district through a design thinking process that valued stakeholder input and led to a strategic plan for the future.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose, we wondered if the input from all stakeholders could provide consensus and support for new programs and initiatives within the district. We wondered whether this input would ultimately result in a strategic plan for success as defined by our stakeholders.

The team wondered what programs people wished we had in BC Schools. We wanted to know what 21st century skills people felt should be taught in our schools. Finally, we wondered what role the community and industry could play in designing new programs and initiatives aimed at success.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wonderings we decided to follow a one year, design thinking framework that involved a five step approach: Discovery, Synthesis, Ideation, Refinement, and Implementation. In order to be true to this process we had to develop a team, so we started by organizing a Design Team who would oversee the research cycle. Then we included all stakeholders from the community and region through the formation of an Education and Workforce Advisory Team who would meet at each phase for update and advisement of the process.

We felt it was important to keep the larger community apprised of this work, so we organized a community event to share the plans for the design thinking process and invite participation in the teams.

First the teams performed some historical data finding by engaging stakeholders in conversation about what programs and initiatives had been successful in the past, which ones had failed and why. Next, the Education & Workforce Advisory Team and Design Team generated interview questions for six stakeholder groups including students, parents, community, teachers, administrators and other school personnel. Then I, along with the Design Team, engaged our stakeholders in meaningful dialogue about how they define success for our students. We shared data and statistics about graduation rates, 21st century skills, workforce needs, certifications, colleges, etc. Once we had defined why we need to look at our current programs and consider new programming and initiatives, we solicited input via interviews as to what these new programs and initiatives should look like. All data from the interviews and surveys were archived during the synthesis phase and then shared with the Education Workforce Advisory Team, Design Team, School Board, and other local and regional entities.

Throughout the process we arranged site visits to school districts here in Indiana and across the country to give us a birds eye view of successful & innovative schools in action. This allowed us to generate ideas about what would work best for Brown County. In the ideation phase, we spent an entire day reviewing all of our ideas and discussing how these plans could result in implementation.

Beyond the generation of ideas, we looked for ideas that created a theme and would lead to system development. In the refinement phase we matched the six themes with three pillar approach to building our system. During implementation, we'll be working to implement the initiatives and programs over the course of the next three years of our phased strategic plan.

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data, three important things we learned include:

- Success of programs and initiatives within a system must involve stakeholder input.
- Our system needs to be for all learners and all ages (PK-Adult)
- Our graduates need to be prepared for college or career and need to leave with a plan for what's next.

The success of our programs and initiatives within the school system must involve stakeholder input. When six stakeholder groups were asked about what programs should be in our schools, what 21st century skills should be taught, and what are the workforce needs of our community and region; over 130 people involved in 115 interviews responded with answers that were synthesized into the six main themes.
- Involve students in the community
- Expose students to entrepreneurship
- Teach soft skills and employability skills
- Offer more vocational education
- Develop our preschool to adult partnerships within the community
- Teach STEAM

We learned that our system needed to be for all learners and all ages (PK- Adult)so we designed a system that honored this. We formed three pillars on which we built a PK- Adult system. These pillars are The Ready

Student, Innovative Teaching and Learning and Community & Regional Engagement. We will also now utilize our Career Resource Center as an Educational Hub for PK- Adult programs in the community.

Finally, we established that our graduates needed to be prepared for college or career and need to leave high school with a plan for what's next. The output of this work is the creation of a Graduate Profile. Our students, teachers, parents and community will now have a target for what every graduate will exemplify when they graduate from Brown County High School. This Graduate Profile includes five dispositions and several exemplars at each grade level that provide experiences related to each of these dispositions.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

The design thinking process has led us to the establishment of an Education and Workforce Advisory Team and a Design Team that has listened to and acted upon the needs of our community and region. Collectively, these stakeholder teams have formed our new narrative. Brown County Schools will provide a system that supports all learners, at all ages, in achieving their academic and career goals as they align with the wealth of opportunities in the Indiana Uplands Region. Our conversations, mindset, and strategic plans have been forever changed to reflect a preschool to adult systemic approach for learning.

The design process caused us to investigate what teaching and learning looks like when you focus on growing the strengths and talents of students with the needs of the community and workforce. We know that innovative teaching and learning is not about a single subject, grade level, test score or degree. Our newly established partnerships with industry has provided real purpose to our preschool to adult system that was solely focused on those students who plan to pursue 4-year college degrees immediately after high school. We now know that "local industry" for Brown County is also "regional industry" and that our relationships stretch not only southwest to Cook Medical and Westgate but northeast to Camp Atterbury and east to Cummins Engine, Toyota Forklifts, and NTN Driveshaft. We have students, parents, and grandparents that need good paying jobs and we have a community with an emerging vision for its own economic development that includes regional prosperity.

Our greatest challenges result in students without plans after graduation. In 2018, 19.8% of graduates did not have a post graduation plan. For this group of students who do not plan to pursue post-secondary education there are tremendous opportunities for employment within the region. We have a responsibility to expose them to these opportunities. In fact, this exposure needs to extend to parents, grandparents, counselors, teachers, principals and the community.   The high school diploma should be a starting point and each job, certification, credential and degree obtained iis on their continuum of success. Our challenges can be addressed as part of a well-designed plan to market "work" as an outcome and afford industry the opportunity to promote and recruit our youth early on. We will need to assure that we have students who are ready for whatever post-secondary plan they choose.

We will provide opportunities and experiences that align with our sector needs. Designing a system in which Brown County students can keep test scores in perspective as pieces of data that can inform a choice but not predict a future will be a complete shift in their mindset and the mindset of parents, staff and community. Because of this shift, we will need to pay close attention to teacher training and make sure that our staff has ample time and support to "skill-up" as new courses are needed. Preparing a Ready Student, through Innovative Teaching and Learning that Engages our Community and Region are the foundational pillars for which our entire system has been built and we look forward to involving our stakeholders in this system for many years to come.