

DESIGN + K12

Designing Principals

How the Principal Impact Collaborative Used
Human-Centered Design to Turn School
Leaders into Innovators

In a typical school, the principal is problem-solver-in-chief. Every day brings new student and staff concerns, even as mandates from the district office pile up. Add to that the perennial challenges urban schools face, and conditions are right for a lot of principal burnout and turnover. And without consistent leadership, urban schools can struggle to build an effective, sustainable culture.

The Principal Impact Collaborative is a leadership development program for principals meant to address this problem in the Dallas – Fort Worth region. A big part of the fellowship program PIC launched in 2015 is training the principals in a design skill set. According to PIC’s Program Director Alejandra Barbosa, “In general, school principals have not been historically incentivized or rewarded for being innovative. But as we know, innovation is increasingly important, so we need to give our school leaders a space to be creative.”

PIC is hoping to change that by giving principals intensive training in Human-Centered Design. “We want principals to feel empowered to design their own solutions for their schools’ problems, implement those solutions, and track results,” Barbosa says. HCD offers all of that, allowing principals to solve problems creatively.

When Barbosa was considering whom to bring in to help with the HCD component of PIC’s fellowship program, she interviewed several potential facilitators from across the country. She ultimately chose a local partner, SMU’s Design + K12 initiative, that was at the cutting edge of design education. “Their simple, streamlined approach to Human-Centered Design really appealed to us,” she says.

Beyond the Comfort Zone

PIC hosted SMU’s Design + K12 initiative team for a series of workshops over six months. At their first workshop, the SMU team led the principals through design experiences that had nothing to do with school. First they designed wallets for each other, and then they went out to the parks and sidewalks of downtown Dallas to redesign the pedestrian experience. The point was to get the fellows used to HCD “before they put on their principal hat,” as Barbosa puts it.

It immediately pushed the principals beyond their comfort zone. When she first experienced HCD, Aleia Mims of Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School admits, “I wasn’t quite sure what I was getting into. I didn’t know what the outcome was going to be, and that was very frustrating for me.”

Sonia Loskot, principal of David G. Burnet Elementary School in Dallas, likewise found the open-ended, experimental nature of HCD unsettling at first. “I overanalyze a lot, and I want everything to be perfect,” she says.

Discomfort and uncertainty are essential to the early stages of the Human-Centered Design process. To develop innovative responses to people’s actual needs, you have to give up assumptions about what’s going to work; you

have to let go of the “right” answer flowing from you alone. You also have to empathize with people before you really know them.

To redesign the pedestrian experience in Dallas, the principals had to do literal person-on-the-street interviews. Sherry Williams of Runyon Elementary in Dallas says that “Having to walk up to and talk to complete strangers about an idea you had come up with an hour ahead of time was totally different from what we normally do in education.”

Once the principals built their prototypes out of “low-resolution” materials like Bristol board and tape, they went back to the streets to see what the users thought. Out in the park, a crowd gathered to try out Loskot’s prototype of a combined charging station, music player, and bike-sharing hub. Two teenage girls told Loskot they were excited about the prospect of impromptu downtown dance parties. That set Loskot at ease. “People didn’t just think we were crazy.”

More user information led to new iterations of the pedestrian experience design. Williams says that “Seeing people willing to try the prototype was really good. And listening to their ideas and thoughts and opinions and then going back to refine what we were doing was extremely beneficial.”

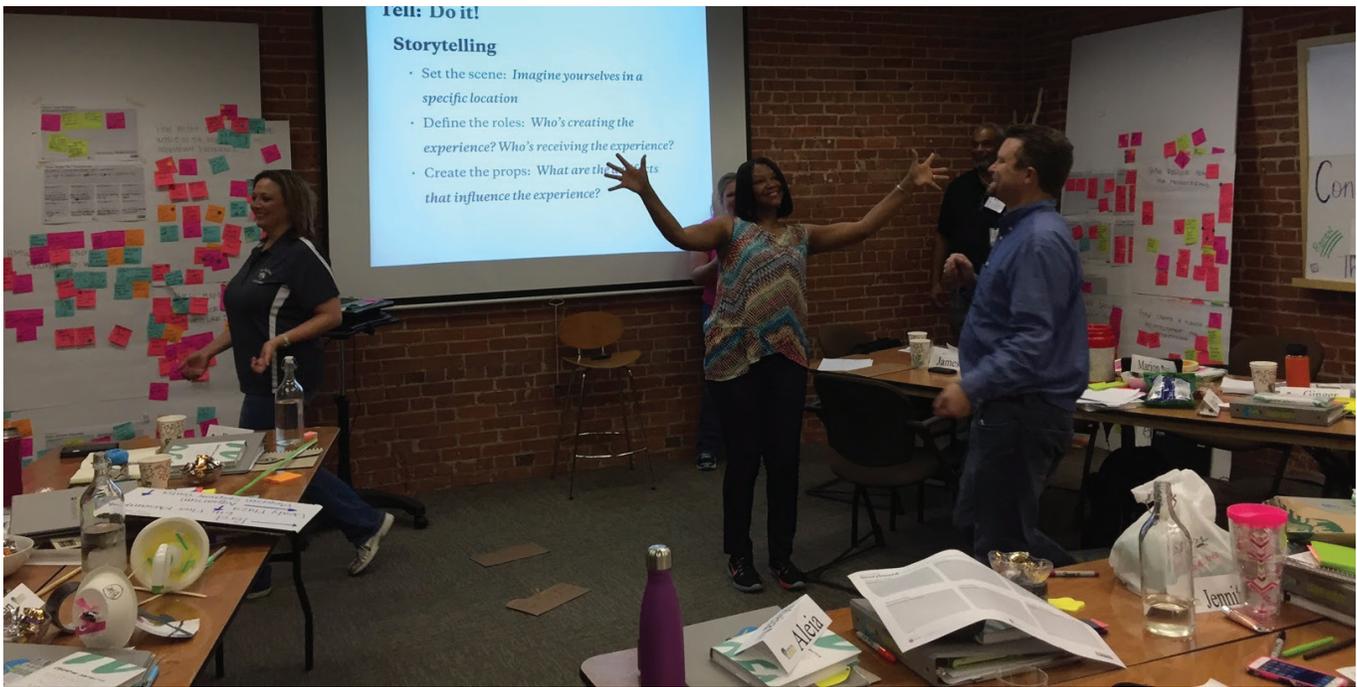


Back to School

After their Human-Centered Design training, PIC’s fellows were ready to begin the process of designing solutions to problems they encountered in their schools. But they didn’t begin by seeing what other schools had done in similar conditions. To respond to local needs, designers need to break out of their natural path dependency – the human tendency to follow tradition for its own sake, which often recreates old problems in new contexts.

To create real innovation, the principals started with the human conditions of the people school is meant to serve: their students. So each principal shadowed a student for a day, walking the halls and experiencing first-hand how it feels to be a student at their school.

Williams says the HCD process – doing research, prototyping, tweaking the prototype through iteration, and developing an idea to pilot – went against the tendency of principals to develop a school-wide initiative without much testing, and then roll it out all at once. “Initially, you just want to do it full scale. But doing it on a smaller scale, getting feedback to see if it’s going to be successful, and then tweaking it, is more beneficial,” she says.



A principal practices Storytelling through an immersive activity.

Reigniting Passion

Barbosa says she saw Human-Centered Design training “reignite the fellows’ passion for the work” and give them new skills for their leadership toolkit. “Design thinking [HCD] gave them a space to be creative, to put the student’s perspective first, and to have a bias toward action. It gave them a chance to test a concept and get feedback so that the end solution was better informed, rather than being something they spent months planning before knowing if it works,” she says.

Barbosa believes HCD can complement traditional approaches to managing an institution. “Strategic planning is more effective if it’s coupled with Human-Centered Design. The initial solution you’re creating a strategic plan for will be more thoughtful and intentional because you’ve gone through the design process.”

For some principals, learning HCD transformed their whole approach to leadership. They no longer see themselves as chief problem solver. Amanda Dudley of Uplift Summit International Preparatory School, Primary School says HCD “is changing my mindset. When I see a challenge or problem I approach it through asking a lot of questions about the people involved. I say, ‘Tell me about your experience.’ I want to understand what the human experience is before we begin brainstorming solutions. It opens up a different kind of conversation.”

Focus On: User Experience

Aleia Mims, Principal of Uplift Summit International Preparatory, Middle School

When Aleia Mims first encountered Human-Centered Design through the Principal Impact Collaborative, she was skeptical. “Ordinarily, I just want to get stuff done and get some results,” she says of her work solving problems at her school. At her first HCD workshop with SMU’s Design + K12 initiative team, she recalls thinking, “You want me to color and paste and make stuff? This is nothing like my type A personality.”

She began to understand the process of learning about users’ experience, prototyping, and iteration, but her skepticism persisted. She doubted she would learn anything new by shadowing a student for a day. She recalls asking herself, “What am I going to see differently than what I see in my classroom walkthroughs?”

Then the shadow day came, and her skepticism evaporated. “I got to see a lot of eye-opening stuff that I didn’t expect at all,” she says.

For instance, the student she shadowed kept his head down for 45 minutes at the start of a two-hour final exam in science. He stared out the window, and other students started to mimic his disengagement. “This kid was setting the whole tone of the classroom, and the teacher had no idea,” she says.

But then during the next period, in a special education resource room, the student’s behavior switched completely. “He was doing exercises on a computer. The questions were hard, he didn’t give up, and he kept going and getting questions right. He started getting really excited. I watched him persevere for two hours,” Mims says.

The student who earlier the same day was the model of disinterest told Mims how much he liked school and wanted to be there.

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Her shadowing experience led Mims to ask herself, “How can I make being in class just as fun and interactive as playing a video game?” She wondered, did he do better in the resource room because his teacher seemed to care more? Or because it was self-paced? Did the technology make a difference? Or the fact he could listen to music on his phone while he worked?

Mims wanted to engage students like him, the ones she calls “benchwarmer kids.” They don’t misbehave, but “they’re checked out. In any other school environment, they would become dropouts because they’re so disengaged with the learning experience.”

She prototyped a blended learning unit to target the benchwarmers. In select classes, students worked in seven-person learning communities, rotating through a set of activities. With more interaction with each other and the teacher, the students “didn’t have the opportunity to opt out, and the teacher didn’t have the opportunity to ignore them.”

The initial results of the prototype were encouraging. Fifty-seven percent of Mims’s students reached the top level on state exams in 2017, up from 10% the year before.

Mims’s skepticism about Human-Centered Design is long gone. Now she wants to teach HCD to the teacher-leaders at her school. “Looking at things from the user experience is such a game-changer,” she says. “It should be part of Leadership 101.”

Focus On: Empathy

Sonia Loskot, Principal of David G. Burnet Elementary School, Dallas Independent School District

As a principal in one of the country's largest public school districts, Sonia Loskot is used to thinking in terms of policy. "We're always thinking, 'What if?'" she says. What if something unexpected happens at the school? How do the district's policies apply?

But as she and other PIC participants learned, through their training in Human-Centered Design, "what if?" is not always the best response to the unexpected. With SMU's Design + K12 initiative team's help, she says, "We went into 'Yes, and' and 'How might we?'"

In other words, what Loskot learned was the role of empathy in designing solutions for her school. Without empathy, designers cannot understand users' experience.

But empathy can seem scary at first. As part of the Human-Centered Design training for PIC participants, SMU's Design + K12 initiative team had the principals spend a day designing a better pedestrian experience in a downtown Dallas park. Loskot and her teammates created a prototype of a music, device charging, and bike-sharing station out of Bristol board. Then she had to take the prototype to the park's users for feedback. "We were embarrassed to ask people what they thought about our product," she says. "It was a very humbling experience."

Loskot soon found out she had nothing to fear. "To my surprise, people were attracted to it," she says. Her team explained and demonstrated their prototype. "People were gathering around. We drew a crowd."

By beginning with an empathetic understanding of users' experience, Loskot now finds better and often simpler solutions at school. For example, she wanted to change the school's master schedule. She drafted an idea, and then, she says, "I took it to two teachers who were just walking by. I didn't plan it, I just went and immediately asked teachers" for feedback.

"Before, I wouldn't do that," she says. "I would probably just call the leadership team, get their ideas, and push it out. But the leadership team is not the user. Human-Centered Design has helped me go to the people it's really going to affect."

Loskot speaks of the profound change HCD has had on her as a leader. She says she no longer sets out to "fix a problem" but rather to "listen with empathy and test solutions."

Even when the end product is a relationship with a teacher, "If you empathize with a user, you get a better product," Loskot says. "It gets people excited, because you involve them. It makes all the conflicts easier."

Now that she has learned how to bring HCD to her role as the head of the school, "I manage more by listening," Loskot says. "I take more risks in the area of being innovative and being more open-minded and accepting of people's feelings... Knowing that can bring about a great idea."

The impact of her new approach has been positive. Loskot's campus climate survey results went up, earning a commendation from the district. Her school's parent survey results were the fifth highest in district.

Students, the school's ultimate users, have noticed her openness, too. She says they come up to her at recess and say, "Ms. Loskot, we have ideas about our playground."



Gray Garmon helps principals synthesize their ideas.



The group practices rapid prototyping.

Focus On: Iteration

Amanda Dudley Principal of Uplift Summit International Preparatory School, Primary School

People in school, whether students, teachers, or principals, avoid failure at all costs. But as Amanda Dudley learned, the Human-Centered Design cycle of iteration – starting with empathy, designing a prototype, getting user feedback, making changes, and rolling out another version of the product – puts failure at the center.

Dudley learned this early in her introduction to HCD. As part of the Principal Impact Collaborative's partnership with SMU's Design + K12 initiative, Dudley and the other principals were assigned to spend a hot summer day designing improvements to the pedestrian experience in downtown Dallas.

Dudley's team built a prototype of a cooling, charging, and information station that would attach to light poles. The station would have a fan and mister to cool people off in the Texas heat, an electrical outlet and music player, and signs indicating the number of steps to Dallas landmarks like the art museums or Dealey Plaza.

"It was a flimsy prototype built with household items," Dudley says. But she and her teammates approached people on the street to ask if their prototype might make their day better for them. "We said, 'Here is this thing, what do you think about it?' And as people gave suggestions, we changed it in the moment. We were able to iterate multiple times even in one experience." She says SMU's Design + K12 initiative team "really led us through the process."

When Dudley took the design process back to her school, she shadowed a student in summer school. The student was compliant, perfectly behaved, but he was bored. "He was off in space," Dudley says. She hypothesized that the teacher needed to develop the skills to engage well-behaved students. "The gaps we see in learning may have to do with teacher skill gaps and professional development," she says.

To brainstorm ways to improve professional development, Dudley started with the How Might We statements. "One of the most important strategies we learned is how to transform challenges into How Might We's," she says. Given her sense that teachers would need to hone their skills in order to close the gaps in their students' learning, Dudley asked, "How might we make professional development exciting and engaging? How might we make professional development personalized and individualized for every teacher?"

Part of her project to personalize teachers' professional development incorporated the iteration she learned in downtown Dallas over the summer. She created what she calls a "Fail Faster Board."

Dudley put up giant poster boards in the school to serve as communal sites for sharing pedagogical ideas. The boards invited reflection: What are you trying? How did you fail? What are you retrying? Dudley says that the teachers "liked the idea of being able to share with one another. The boards certainly sparked a conversation, which was a really cool place to start."

So Dudley's school is learning how to fail in order to learn. "If we all fail more often and faster and share our failures with each other, we create a culture of vulnerability and build success on that," she says. "That then leads to having more success more often. You have to fail before you can succeed."