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COLUMN

America's most influential innovators (it's not who you think)

"Teachers are already brilliant innovators. They innovate all the time, and yet teachers feel like they have to innovate in the shadows. ... They should be innovating in the light," said Angela Uyham, Cambridge Public Schools design and innovation coach.

Every successful organization has concrete goals. The most successful organizations create space for innovating outside of those boundaries – for taking risks and even failing.

When most of us think about inhovation, it is common to think of the tech industry. But if innovation means responding to challenges in new and creative ways, then I would argue that some of the most important innovation taking place today is happening inside our public schools classrooms.

When CPS was developing an ongoing strategic plan, a laboratory for outside-the-box thinking was also forming in our district. Dedicated to bringing educational innovation into the light, the Cambridge Educators Design Lab (or dLab) has emerged as a source of inspiration for ongoing work to nurture equity and excellence in our school system.

Supported in partnership with the Center for Artistry and Scholarship, the dLab applies the principles of design to tap into the creative insights of educators and other members of the CPS community. Design teams enroll in dLab courses where the subject of inquiry is the problem they would like to solve.



Dr. Kenneth Salim

Applying techniques pioneered by Min Basadur and institutionalized by international design firm IDEO, design teams engage in a process of discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation and evolution. The teams use this process to find solutions to challenges posted as opportunities through what Basadur defined as a "How Might We" methodology.

Recent design challenges have asked:

- What would engaging, productive, meaningful work look like for mathematicians that would both move students forward in their math thinking and content knowledge, while enabling teachers to pull other small groups?
- How might educators with different expertise in reading come together to create a cohesive and impactful reading plan for students on Individualized Education Plans?
- How might we empower and educate teachers to be comfortable and confident teaching in different digital ways?
- How might we create an integrated, standards-based curriculum that incorporates the interests of students?

As solutions are prototyped and tested, both successes and failures bring more information back into the process. Of course in the end, the goal is to find an effective solution – one which has been strengthened by the rigors of iteration, testing and refinement.

Design thinking is human-centered. Instead of basing decisions on bureaucratic certainties, this human-centered process opens up the creative possibilities that come from not knowing. The Cambridge dLab views educators, students, families and community as the energy that drives the learning process.

Too often, national political debate around education seeks to characterize public schools

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as static, outdated and uninspiring. Some even argue that the best hope for education is to bring private dollars and corporate models into public education.

Cambridge is proving this view to be false. One look inside a CPS classroom will show you the challenging demands of a multicultural learning environment — and the creativity already demonstrated by our educators. As Angie Uyham remarks in a video posted on the dLab website, educators innovate inside their classrooms every day. While our national politics devalues this form of innovation, through the dLab, Cambridge seeks instead to elevate it.

Our CPS District Plan names five overarching strategic objectives that we view as driving our transformation: Equity and Access, Engaging Learning, Whole Child, Partnerships and Progress Monitoring. Fundamental to these strategic objectives is an express commitment to avoid stagnation by engaging in risk-taking and innovation. In the words of our plan's Theory of Action, we strive to "work as a flexible and adaptable learning organization."

The dLab is just one method for building flexibility and adaptability, but one year into its existence it is influencing the culture of our school district. At the same time that we seek to institutionalize equity, rigor, and joyful learning, the dLab provides strategies for avoiding rigidity and stagnation. Just as we want our students to become lifelong learners, our organization is learning what it means to be learning.

Please join with us in embracing the most pressing design challenge yet: How do we ensure that rigorous, joyful and culturally responsive learning takes place for every student, in every classroom, every day?

Dr. Ken Salim is the superintendent of Cambridge Public Schools.