

# Creating a New Vision for Public Education: *One District's Journey*

by Shannon Buerk, Mechelle Bryson, and Melody Paschall

“We are not focused on the accountability system,” said Superintendent Dr. Jeff Turner, addressing a group of community members. “If you want us to focus on the goal of exemplary, you need to let us know. We know that we excel in the current system, but we also know that is not enough for our students to be prepared for the world in which they will live, work, and compete. Therefore, we do not pat ourselves on the back for the outstanding ratings we have received based solely on TAKS scores; instead, we continue to focus on accomplishing the mission and objectives you have helped us determine for our students.”

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WHEN TEACHERS, PARENTS, ADMINISTRATORS, SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, AND EVEN STUDENTS ACROSS the state of Texas are asked, “What is the purpose of school?” the answer most often is *to become exemplary*. However, the good news is that the tide is beginning to turn. Visionary, forward-thinking educators, parents, and community members are realizing that the achievement of an exemplary status is not, and should not be, the purpose of education. In fact, in a few districts, the leaders have proclaimed this status attainment goal, or any goal related only to the accountability system, to be in conflict with their real purpose of educating our nation’s children to meet the demands of postsecondary education.

One of these forward-thinking districts is Coppell ISD, a suburban north Dallas independent school district of 10,000 students. Superintendent Dr. Jeff Turner, the Coppell ISD Board of Trustees, and other district leaders have engaged the community in a dialogue designed to garner permission to redefine success and accomplish the district’s mission, which has been created through a collaborative process that included a strong community voice. Over the past six years, this process has been revised several times. The district has used its strategic plan to drive organizational transformation that includes new learning environments, new learning standards and assessments, and a new accountability for learning in Coppell. Interestingly, the TAKS scores are not suffering. In fact, not only did TAKS scores in every subject for every student group increase significantly, dual enrollment increased by 496 percent, Advanced Placement (AP) participation increased by 44 percent (while maintaining performance), and Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP) graduates increased from 11 to 41 percent. These statistics underscore the importance of the strategic planning process and Dr. Turner’s declaration.

So, how was the district able to transform? It began with a single step toward effective community engagement. Armed with the strategic planning process, the district created a new system that focused on learning environments, standards, assessments, and accountability issues in a global context. The end result was a pathway to transformation for Coppell. Interestingly, while leading Coppell through this ongoing transformation, Dr. Turner was also collaborating with several other Texas superintendents to create a new vision for Texas public education. Many of the changes in Coppell mirror the articles declared in the culminating document *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*. So, how did they do it? What does it look like to implement the articles in the visioning document, and how were the leaders in Coppell already accomplishing this while the document itself was being written?

## Organizational Transformation: Why Great Isn't Good Enough (Article V)

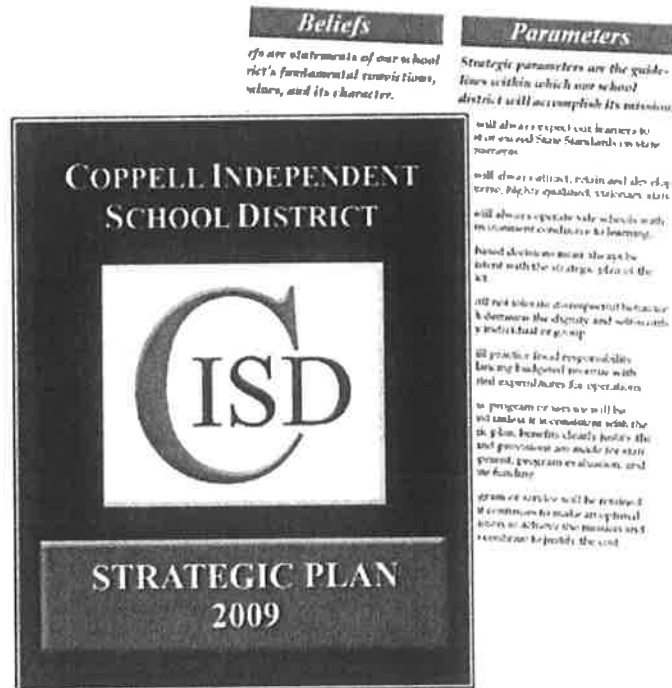
As Fullan describes in *Leadership and Sustainability* (2005), for districts to truly make deep changes, leaders must understand and communicate clearly about how to make the conceptual changes, develop a coalition of leaders throughout the system who also are sophisticated about the process, and develop a demanding culture with universal moral purpose. In Coppell, district leaders used two powerful tools to create and nurture an organizational culture focused on and committed to transformation: (1) stakeholder engagement in shared decision making, and (2) strategic planning at every level of the system. When a district is winning accolades in the current system, it is important to establish a need and urgency for change with all stakeholders. As Bill Daggett, president of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) states, "You have to create more urgency for change than resistance to change." Coppell ISD offered a plethora of opportunities for stakeholders to engage with district leaders in a dialogue about 21<sup>st</sup> century learning prior to making the systemic changes. Some of these venues included superintendent advisory groups, focus groups, open forums, and education summits. In each of these venues, the agenda included capacity building around current context and the need for systemic change. Just as important were the opportunities for input from the participants about their aspirations for students beyond the typical known and measured success on TAKS and other standardized assessments.

Next, the district employed Cambridge Strategic Services to lead groups of students, parents, employees, and community members in a strategic planning process to create a shared mission, measurable objectives, clear strategies, and actionable plans. Between 2003 and 2009, the district, high school, and middle schools all engaged in the strategic planning process, and more

than 1,000 stakeholders were involved in the process. With clarity of direction established through the strategic process, leaders are now freed up throughout the system to contribute to the creation of a new and relevant system on a continuous basis. In addition, the community supports these changes in both tangible and intangible ways because the community was and is invited to the table to make the decisions. In addition, professional learning in Coppell became self-directed as professional learning communities were formed across the district and administrators were engaged in a continual dialogue about the application of these changes at the campus and classroom levels.

course to a student-driven curriculum. Students choose a topic of interest to them (e.g., windsurfing, skateboarding, music), and they learn physics by applying it to their chosen topic. As one student quipped, "The teachers really don't do anything anymore. We are teaching ourselves physics, and the course is so much more interesting, plus we learn the skills we need to use in the real world." Obviously, the teachers are doing a lot more, but their work is in preparation, facilitation, and differentiation while the students are doing the learning.

On a larger scale, at the high school level students now have the following choices for the structure of their schooling: attending a



Conceptually, the organizational transformation moved from autonomous campuses focused on the traditional business of school to a system that revolves around student choice, personalization, engagement, and inquiry. Specifically, that means that students at every level have choices about assignments, coursework, and even schooling. At the micro level, for instance, the physics team implemented a strategic action plan to transform the physics

new choice high school with integrated courses delivered through project-based learning (see *New Tech High @ Coppell*, page 25), or completing a pathway at Coppell High School in a variety of high-wage, high-demand career fields and/or advanced studies, including International Baccalaureate (IB); Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM); dual credit leading to an associate's degree; public services or emerging media and

communication; or a combination of the above with virtual schooling. The College of Engineering within the STEM Academy alone, resulting from strategic planning and funded as a start-up program by city sales tax revenue, has ignited 375 students who are engaged in student-led competitions that provide the opportunity to learn essential technical and project management skills. In addition, the competitions broaden students' ability to communicate, collaborate, and experience success as a member of a team. Competitions include robotics, solar car, and rocketry.

In addition, the elementary schools are currently involved in investigations moving toward open enrollment to allow students to choose from a smorgasbord of engaging options, including IB, STEM, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), and other innovative methods to capture the minds and hearts of students through powerful learner-centered environments. The goal is to improve the academic performance of students through increasing student engagement in meaningful and relevant work.

## New Digital Learning Environment: Re-imagining the Classroom (Article I)

Following the transformation of the system, the next step for Coppell was to transform the learning environment. Students in Coppell are compliant, and generally follow the rules and jump through all the right hoops. However, when surveyed, today's American students state that they are bored in school over 50 percent of the time. Visionary leader Marc Prensky says that the solution is to involve kids with more technology. When Dr. Turner asked his student advisory group in Coppell how to make classes less boring, the students gave a surprising answer. They said that if Powerpoint was banned from the classroom, it would make school more engaging. Clearly, just adding technology is not the answer to making school more engaging, and just making school more engaging is not the answer to creating a robust learning environment, but some thought-provoking leaders like Alan November make the case for creating a new digital learning environment that is both engaging and effective. That was the goal Coppell ISD hoped to realize when writing a strategy for "integrating technology into every aspect of the educational system."

Most recently, following a middle-level strategic planning session, an action team developed a middle school schedule in line with the mission and objectives of the strategic plan to allow students more flexibility within the school day. By creating a modified schedule where one size does not fit all, students will be given some unstructured time at regular intervals to be able to address enrichment or accelerated learning needs, as well as meet with peers on project teams or teachers for mentoring or additional instructional guidance. As the middle level focuses on ensuring that every student is on target for college and career readiness by the end of eighth grade, customizing the time to fit different student needs once again becomes a transformational concept for the organization.



Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) is a comprehensive, experience-based, educational program whose academic focus allows students to learn, experiment, problem-solve, and practice within the realm of engineering and engineering technology. Through the School of Engineering, students will explore the career field in two ways:

- ☞ Elective courses offered within the Engineering Design and Development pathway
- ☞ Concentrated, four year plan of study (EXCITE) for engineering-focused students

EXCITE is taught in the spirit of inquiry within a learning environment that fosters vision, innovation, and engagement. Freshmen students begin the program with an academy instructional experience that includes World Geography and English Language Arts through the lens of an engineer.

Student-led competitions provide the opportunity to learn essential technical and project management skills. In addition, they broaden students' ability to communicate, collaborate, and experience success as a member of a team.

#### Competitions:

- ☞ Robotics
- ☞ Solar Car
- ☞ Rocketry

"The EXCITE program is a stimulating, hands-on learning experience which provided real-world opportunities. I took away qualities of leadership, communication, and a strong sense of achievement."  
—Sid Nivas, CHS Class of 2009



## CISD 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Options



A typical classroom in Coppell in 2003 contained a computer for the teacher, a television, and an overhead projector. Today, a typical classroom contains a variety of technology such as interactive white boards, interactive pads, iPods, mounted projectors, social networking, one-to-one computer access, document cameras, digital cameras, Skype, podcasting equipment, e-Instruction, and printers. With technology's pervasive nature, the list is growing daily as teachers and students find new and innovative ways to explore content and demonstrate mastery of critical knowledge and skills.

One way the district was able to make this leap was through creating a matching funds program. As a result of the strategic planning focus shared by all stakeholders, the district was able to "double its money" by matching funds generated on campus through a "write-a-check" program. These funds were used for hardware and software, and the district could focus most of its dollars on wireless infrastructure.

Another avenue to this new digital learning environment is focused on teacher transformations through Club 21. In our quest to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and student-centered practices, Coppell ISD established an opportunity for secondary teachers to develop the skills necessary to ensure rigorous and engaging learning experiences for our students. Club 21 will build participants' skills such as digital literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration through quality teaching and learning. This initiative will support the successful implementation of both the Coppell High School Strategic Plan and the newly created Middle School Strategic Plan.

This cadre of teachers will be equipped through sustained professional development to seamlessly integrate technology and instruction that engages students. Through the development of model classrooms, we will be able to achieve the strategic plan curriculum strategy, which states we will

effectively deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum using technology, assessment data, and other effective instructional strategies to engage all learners in meaningful learning experiences.

The first cohort will be established this school year. Ten teachers will be selected to begin the journey in the 2009-10 school year. Over the course of five years, we plan to include approximately 40 teachers across the secondary campuses. Each teacher will have the opportunity to attend 10 additional days of professional development that will focus on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, including technology integration. Each classroom will be equipped with the technology necessary to integrate the skills learned, resulting in a classroom that prepares students for the future.

Finally, a model of the new digital learning environment can be found by visiting the new choice high school, New Tech High @ Coppell. In this environment, the students work collaboratively using technology to access resources and content to complete interdisciplinary projects with real outcomes, while the teachers facilitate the deep critical thinking and problem solving. Because the new digital environment is not so much about student to computer

ratio as it is about learner to number of available devices, the range of technology that students can access seamlessly and appropriately for a particular problem is the key. Students may be working in a 4:1 ratio much of the day (one student using a laptop, PDA, data probe, and smartboard, for example). However, the focus is on solving the problem and applying the learning, not just on the gadgets themselves, and that is the crux of creating a digital LEARNING environment.

### New Learning Standards: Changing the Game (Article 2)

Because of the way technology is changing our world, it is imperative that we not only change the system and the environment but the way students interact with each other and with content, which is fundamentally different. At New Tech High @ Coppell, students are assessed on the following learning standards on every project: oral communication, written communication, content literacy, technology literacy, critical thinking/problem solving, collaboration, professional ethics and responsibility, and research skills. Content is delivered through integrated courses and problem-based learning so that students are immersed in a process to solve problems collaboratively

#### New Tech High @ Coppell Graduate

Project Based Learning		Small Learning Community		Trust, Respect, Responsibility			
<b>21<sup>th</sup> Century Skills</b>							
Oral Communication	Written Communication	Content Literacy	Technology Literacy	Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving	Collaboration	Professional Ethics & Responsibility	Research Skills
Language Immersion	Dual Credit	College Experience	Job Shadowing	Internship	Senior Portfolio		

by accessing appropriate resources, applying solutions, and presenting their results. In other words, the time they are spending learning every day is more like the world of work than a century-old school model. These students are developing a “whole new mind,” to use best-selling author Daniel Pink’s phrase, for the soft intangible skills that are fast becoming the new necessary basics. As Wagner points out in *Global Achievement Gap*, “In today’s highly competitive global ‘knowledge economy,’ all students need new skills for college, careers, and citizenship.”

Another way that Coppell ISD has changed the game for students and created new learning standards as a result of the strategic plan is by focusing on advanced academics in a different way. Basically, the concept is that, although some specific programs have been added like the International Baccalaureate program at Coppell High School, all students need to be experiencing the rigor of advanced coursework made possible through relevance. One example is providing training in advanced academic strategies for all teachers, including Pre-AP strategies and Laying the Foundation training in all core areas. In addition, the newly expanded Gifted and Talented (GT) programs at the middle level, which include a math/science component called Advanced Problem-Solving and an English/social studies component called Integrated Research, will be available to all students next year.

### Assessments for Learning: What Really Counts (Article 3)

Once new learning standards are established in a new learning environment within a transformed organization, the way students are assessed has to change as well. Coppell ISD has begun staff development with teachers and administrators focused on a balanced assessment program, moving teachers to use formative assessment to inform instruction grounded in Rick Stiggins’ research noted in *The Assessment*

*Manifesto: A Call for a Balanced Assessment System*. Additionally, discussions and documents focus on the utilization of assessment to improve instruction through reflection on and interpretation of data. Walkthrough data is collected as a means to provide ongoing and specific feedback to encourage and provide evidence of teacher experiences in formal and informal assessment-focused professional development. This process models for teachers the use of formative assessment as expected in the classrooms.

In kindergarten through grade 3, Coppell ISD has implemented a Standards Referenced reporting system. Instead of letter grades, students receive marks that show how well they have mastered a set of age-appropriate skills and where they need to improve. The new grading format more accurately reflects how children are learning under the state’s standards-based academic system. Concrete skills and knowledge are listed on the report card to help monitor whether all students are being exposed to the same curriculum and learning the skills they should develop in each grade level. Standards-based report cards keep teachers and parents focused on the student learning goals from the beginning of the year. This type of reporting gives the parent and teacher more detailed information about how a child is doing in each subject. One other great advantage is that our teachers

are more aware of all the learning standards and are becoming experts in identifying mastery of each objective.

### Conclusion: Accountability for Learning (Article 4)

If Coppell has succeeded in transforming the organization from the environment to the standards to the assessments, does it make sense to then evaluate its progress using the old model accountability system? Well, after Dr. Turner’s question to the community about the true goals for the district, the overwhelming response was NO! The community was hungry for more insightful, complete, and individualized information about the system than the TEA rating. However, even though the current state and federal rating systems are insufficient, that doesn’t mean that the stakeholders do not want to hold the district accountable! In fact, transparency becomes even more important in a new system because there is more risk, and trust is essential to continue to garner support for the innovations.

To that end, Coppell ISD has established a few stringent accountability measures. One clear way to measure progress is continual data gathering and reporting on the strategic objectives established by the 30-member stakeholder group during the strategic planning process.

#### Objectives—Coppell ISD Strategic Plan 2009

*Objectives are the measurable end results that we will achieve to fulfill our mission.*


- Each learner will successfully achieve challenging goals identified within his/her personal success plan related to academics, service, activities, and career aspirations.
- The number of learners who demonstrate success at the highest levels of academic excellence will increase by 33 percent.
- All learners will develop and consistently demonstrate Coppell ISD character traits.

These objectives were the manifestation of what these stakeholders feel is valuable to measure. In fact, the amazing increases in DAP graduates, service learning, and enrollment in advanced academics are just some of these measures. In addition, the administration for the district is developing a profile of a 21<sup>st</sup> century student, teacher, and administrator based on the mission, objectives, and strategies, which will provide the individual accountability and opportunity of growth for leadership as the district continues to move toward the ideal established by the strategic plan team.

As stated earlier, when clarity is established regarding the mission, objectives, and strategies of the district through a collaborative strategic planning process, leaders are freed up throughout the system to act in accordance with this clear mission and find ways to hold themselves accountable for learning. At an elementary school in the district, it has become the mantra that the school will be a “worksheet-less campus” and that anyone wanting to use a worksheet for any reason will have to present that reason directly to the administration and get it approved.

The road to truly changing the system is long and treacherous, but if visionary leaders work and share together through the process, the process is more likely to be sustainable and successful. At the heart of the matter is the student. We must create a 21<sup>st</sup> century system for a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. ■


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