



LEAPinnovations®

Innovation Spotlight!

Collaborating to Redesign
the High School Experience

The Opportunity

How might we **redesign** high school learning activities to **better prepare** students for life after graduation?

District 49 wanted to build on successes they've achieved in redesigning learning in their K-8 classrooms, by strengthening the high school student experience at Falcon High School and Patriot Applied Learning Campus.

"Students need an education for their futures."

–Roland Marcello, Teacher, Falcon High School

How LEAP Innovations Helped

In fall 2025, LEAP led a High School Design Lab for District 49, guided by the LEAP Learning Framework™ and design thinking. Small teams of teachers, students, and school leaders from both Falcon and Patriot campuses participated in the series of design sprints.



We guided teams to develop "problem statements" exploring the most important skills young people in high school need today, how students learn, and how teachers teach.



We gave the teams tools and strategies to develop prototype solutions using data from empathy interviews with students and teachers.



We supported teams to create action plans for trying out their prototypes, collect data to see what worked, and develop approaches for scaling.

"Sue [Holmes, of LEAP] helped challenge us to think outside the box and not just go with our gut instinct. She asked clarifying questions and pushed us to go back to our initial identified problem of practice or challenge to make sure that what we were putting together would really address that key question."

–Brian Smith, Zone Superintendent, District 49

"It is clear that an evolution in learning is happening in our society; our schools must adapt to remain relevant to the future of our youth."

–Seann O'Conner, Principal, Falcon High School



Snapshot

- 31 schools
- 26,423 students
- Pre K to 12th Grade
- Free/Reduced Lunch: 41.9%
- Special Education: 13.5%
- English Learners: 5%
- American Indian or Alaskan Native: <1%
- Asian: 2%
- Black or African American: 5%
- Hispanic or Latino: 33%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: <1%
- Two or more races: 10%
- White: 49%



How the High School Design Lab Supported Educators & Centered Learners

Students and teachers are the closest to the learning. Engaging them directly to design and implement solutions cracked through some of the biggest stumbling blocks that high schools face when they try to modernize learning to be student-centered, relevant, and engaging.

- ☀ Focusing on empathy and iteration generated creative solutions that directly responded to the school community's needs.
- ☀ Student voice was essential to better understand what high school is like now and to contribute to solutions that will make a difference.
- ☀ Teacher ownership of the redesign process increased the likelihood that they and their colleagues would implement solutions.



"Student participation was VITAL! Having the student voice there was helpful to bring forward ownership and urgency with the work as we were hearing about the needs of the students to enhance their learning. The student voice helps bring clarity and focus to the forefront to guide educator thinking."

–Brian Smith

"I would say that the ideate phase of the design thinking process had the biggest impact on me and the team I was in. Since the ideate phase required each member to brainstorm and think about various aspects of what must be dealt with, how, when, and why, I was able to better realize my understanding of the school."

–Jackson Cooney, Student, Falcon High School

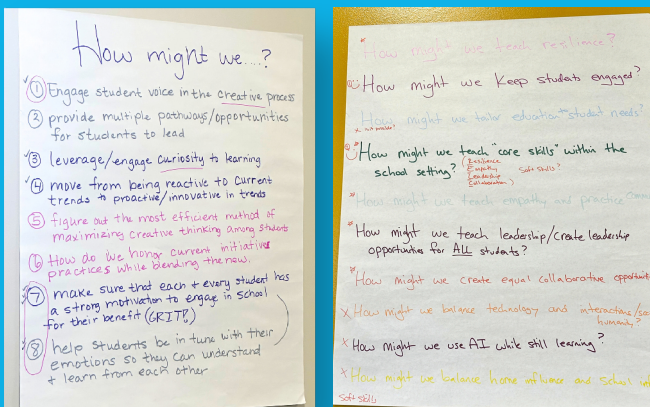
What We Accomplished Together

20 Students, Teachers, and School Leaders were active participants on 5 Design Teams. Teams developed 5 prototype designs.

- ☀ **Life Skills Development:** Strengthen career readiness by augmenting life skills lessons in Freshman Seminar.
- ☀ **Exit Ticket/Check In:** Students complete an exit ticket to improve belonging, engagement, and resilience
- ☀ **AI Professional Development:** Teachers learn practices to teach students to use AI ethically as a thinking partner to expand their critical thinking.
- ☀ **Empowering Learners through Choice:** Professional learning for teachers to provide students with meaningful choice in learning to increase engagement, ownership, and equity.
- ☀ **Pathway Courses:** Replicate the high engagement of Friday Pathway courses by embedding student choice and purpose into traditional Monday–Thursday instruction.

"The standard operating procedure (SOP) helped our team maintain momentum. We would review our action items and then decide what the next steps would be: reevaluate, redirect, or go forward."

–Roland Marcello



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Impact

The teams developed solutions that created actual impact and built momentum that continues today. Several prototypes are continuing and scaling.



Exit Ticket: One classroom immediately implemented the Exit Ticket prototype to improve belonging.



Life Skills Development: After testing and iteration, Life Skills Development launched in the next school year.



"My team's prototype will increase engagement for learners/students by providing new course material that is directly tied to life skills, especially life skills that are going to stay sought after or increase in demand as the job landscape progresses into the future. By providing more life skills for the students to learn, they will feel a greater sense of relevance and value in what they are learning."

–Jackson Cooney

Recommendations & Advice

Student Jackson Cooney recommends the following to others interested in community-based high school redesign.



Keep an open mind and **gather evidence** from people you don't normally interact with.



Create a plan with deadlines and a way to **evaluate progress**.



Use a shared document for all members of the team to **collaborate and share information**. Use this document broadly to keep "the overall staff community in a **healthy communication web**."



Introduce yourself to team members and have **respect** for each other, reflecting the **overall healthy behavior** of the school.

LEAP Innovations is a human-centered education design partner helping schools, districts, and communities nationwide transform learning for a rapidly changing world. Find out how we can help you create, deepen, and sustain the learning innovations students need and deserve.



Contact us!