



Summary of the NCREST report: Bells Elementary School’s Journey of Change: A Beacon of Light on the I-95

Case Study research conducted by:

Jacqueline Ancess and Tina Kafka | National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST)

About NCREST

NCREST works to advance education stakeholders’ understanding of the complex and challenging work of restructuring schools. Founded in 1990 by Linda Darling-Hammond and Ann Lieberman, NCREST’s current Co-Directors are Jacqueline Ancess and Thomas Hatch. NCREST is affiliated with the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Ancess is author of *Beating the Odds: High Schools as Communities of Commitment* (2012) and co-author of *Authentic Assessment in Action: Studies of Schools and Students at Work* with Linda Darling Hammond and Beverly Falk (1995; 2017).

About this research

Funded by the ECMC Foundation, the case study on Bells Elementary School is one product from the research initiative for the New Tech Network (NTN) South Carolina Learning Network (SCLN). At least once each year over the three years of the project, the NCREST researchers spent up to a week at the school observing classrooms and professional development events and interviewing teachers, school staff, and students.

A culture that empowers

At Bells, creating a culture that empowers, meaning that relationships are based on trust, respect, and responsibility, has come to mean a school that sees itself as a family, where there is closeness and connection. According to one teacher, as colleagues nodded in agreement, the school “feels like a family atmosphere.” Bells Elementary School is located in Colleton County, South Carolina, near the town of Walterboro (pop. 6,000), is designated as rural, and serves a student population that is 100% free/reduced lunch eligible.



Organizational and professional development for transformation



Rigorous student learning environments



Teacher professional learning experiences enabled authentic student learning environments



Organizational and professional development for transformation

NTN’s professional development process, including on-boarding events, New Tech Annual Conference, Leadership Summit, SCLN Convenings, and especially coaching has guided and continues to guide Bells in developing its capacity to implement, adapt, sustain, and own the NTN instructional model and a culture based on the values and goals of their NTN partnership.

- NTN’s system and Bells’ already existing structures for PD interacted in a dynamic way
- Bells persisted through challenges by developing a culture that empowers: Mutual trust generated a sense of collective responsibility and internal accountability, which reinforced organizational capacity.

- Bells’ own professional development has taken on the characteristics of NTN’s approach to PD and teacher learning by using the conceptual framework underpinning NTN’s project planner, which begins with the end in mind, then creates a learning path that includes individual scaffolds and benchmarks, and concludes with feedback.
- Strong virtual and in-person supports enabled site-based coaches and teachers to persist and deepen their practice. Repeatedly, the Bells staff commented on the crucial role played by the NTN school coach and overall responsiveness, even though her presence was largely virtual.

This summary was prepared in August 2020 by New Tech Network. To cite the full report please use the following:
Ancess, J. & Kafka, T. (2020). *Bells Elementary School’s Journey of Change: A Beacon of Light on the I-95*.
New York, NY: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching.



Rigorous student learning environments



NTN coaches provided expert literacy support when Bells noted the need for phonics support in both upper and lower grades, resulting in an improved literacy plan in place for every classroom.



Site-based coaches worked with teachers to understand ways that they could meet state mandates on math and science

by integrating them into their projects instead of teaching them separately. Teachers were supported in integrating reading, writing, and math into projects.



Teacher professional learning experiences enabled authentic student learning environments

Teachers have applied NTN's value for teacher ownership of their practice to their students' learning, as one teacher explained: "As far as learning and PD provided by NTN coaches, it was very deep in terms of learning targets/ outcomes and rubrics, but they left us ample room to make it our own... a lot of reflecting and the confidence that they would be there if we needed them... And that's pretty much how our projects run in the classroom; leaves a lot of room to make it your own, but then as a teacher, we're still there when they need us."

As individual teachers gained experience in implementing PBL and their capacity to implement and manage PBL increased, their commitment to the approach also grew.

Echo is NTN's learning management platform and was designed specifically for project-based learning



Bells students shared that they appreciated that their access to Echo lets them know on a daily basis how they are doing in their class and what they can do to improve. The platform also functions as a repository for the toolkits, protocols, and rubrics that support the design and assessment of projects as well as a library of projects, designed by colleagues, which teachers can adapt for individual settings and students. Most students' discussion of technology noted frequent use of computers for research and technology was a "way to learn that they [had] never imagined before."

One teacher credited Echo with allowing them to "get out of the way more and let students guide their own learning. Echo allows teachers to give the reins to students. Teachers are still in control, but kids think they are."

The pedagogy of project-based learning with its integrated practices and values of collaboration, agency, authenticity, knowledge building, inquiry, and communication has affected the school community not only professionally but personally.



"Teaching is more meaningful to me because it is more meaningful to the kids. I am focusing on students being life learners—not just memorizing for a test." —TEACHER

"I think of myself more as a facilitator. You let the children guide you in what they need to know, which makes it more enjoyable to teach." —TEACHER

"[With projects] it's easier to learn. You think more; spend a long time on things; learn about that thing, especially in a group." —STUDENT



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT:

Rock and Roll: What would be the best design solution for the standing water in our playground?

This 3rd grade project emerged because students observed water drainage problems caused by the rusting of the school building's metal gutters and standing water on the playground. In year three, that project evolved into a student-generated plan to pipe standing water to a nearby fire station to aid in fighting fires.