An Inside Look

Leander Independent School District

Location: Leander, Texas • Type: Suburban

Impetus for Change

As a fast growing, suburban district situated just thirty minutes north of Austin and adding up to 1,000 students per year, Leander ISD is high-performing compared to other schools in the state — but the community wanted more than just high test scores for their students. Parents, students, and community members wanted authentic, relevant and applicable learning experiences, and their feedback made it clear that student choice and higher levels of engagement were important, which led the district to explore innovation in deeper learning.

Chrysta Carlin, Assistant Superintendent of Pathways and Innovation at Leander ISD, recognized what the community was looking for and worked with other district leaders to guide Leander ISD to an instructional model that supported the community’s wishes for Leander schools. “At the beginning of our innovation journey, we held a board meeting where we engaged our board members in activities designed to use deeper learning and understand the experience we were seeking for our students. Our board is foundational to helping us expand deeper learning district-wide,” stated Carlin.

Engaging with NTN Services

Carlin explained how district leadership worked with Mark Koller, who wanted “to do something different instructionally,” when he accepted the position of principal at Danielson Middle School in 2020. “We conducted research together and identified project-based learning as the best match for our school and its students, and the district leaders coached us to consider what measures we’d need to take to make the work sustainable and viable.” Carlin shared the importance of finding a partner in the work that provided not only initial training, but extended the coaching opportunities for both leadership and staff to build capacity.

“We strongly believe that deeper learning is the vehicle which allows these students to grow and flourish.”

Assistant Superintendent Chrysta Carlin
The district identified New Tech Network as the partner it wanted to help reach the goals of Danielson Middle School and other Leander schools and was also clear that the innovation measures wouldn’t be limited to one school – it was important to the district and community to implement deeper learning in all schools across Leander while maintaining choice at the site level. “We didn’t want to mandate that any campus had to choose one specific model; we wanted them to lean into the question, ‘what is deeper learning?’ and explore what that means for each campus and build structures to support implementation and sustainability,” said Carlin.

In addition to the induction process, NTN staff also worked directly with district leaders to ensure they developed expertise in deeper learning and the New Tech school model. Jude Garnier, NTN Senior Director of School and District Leadership, worked with Leander ISD leaders to provide teacher and staff support to build a strong foundation for sustaining the innovations from the beginning of the implementation of the New Tech model at Danielson Middle School. “A significant part of why the first year of Danielson’s New Tech implementation was so successful (even in the midst of a pandemic) was the clear vision Mark and his team held for the school,” said Garnier. “Their ability to lead from purpose (deeper learning for every student) and help teachers understand how the New Tech model could support this goal helped to build the shared ownership of commitment to this work.”

**Where the Work is Now**

In addition to crafting a new district mission and vision statement, Leander ISD updated its Graduate Profile, which features New Tech Learning Outcomes like collaboration and communication, and provides support to schools to shape their own profiles.

Notably, the district adopted a set of Core Beliefs which focus on the individual student and deeper learning. “Our Core Beliefs have been a driving force in our work, helping us to better evaluate what focusing on the individual looks like in the classroom and what that means for a student’s educational experience,” said Carlin. “We strongly believe that deeper learning is the vehicle which allows these students to grow and flourish.”

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**Leander ISD’s Core Beliefs:**

- Each and every student is at the heart of our decisions. This requires a focus on students and all elements that impact their overall student experience in order for them to reach their maximum potential.

- LISD life-changers (each and every staff member) should be empowered so they can inspire our students to own their learning.

- Our LISD family, which includes our students and their families, life-changers, board, and community members, thrives when we ensure a welcoming, safe, and caring environment in which we treat one another with integrity, respect, fairness, and acceptance while appreciating our differences.

- A deliberate and intentional focus on relevant and deeper learning for each student will optimize individual outcomes and personal growth.

- Developing and maintaining meaningful, collaborative relationships between all our LISD family is vital for a whole child, student-driven experience.

**Hopes for the Future**

Leander ISD’s commitment to this work is apparent in the intentionality that district leaders, staff and community members have put into the lifespan and sustainability of pervasive and long-lasting change.

“We’re adamant that this isn’t just another initiative we’re spreading across the district,” said Carlin. “That’s why we’ve specified that we’re spreading deeper learning instead of a stringent instructional model for every school. By asking each campus and its leaders to define what deeper learning means for them and how they can help their students achieve goals related to that, it creates buy-in from the school leaders and staff, because they were involved in developing the plan they’re adopting,” said Carlin. “Our goal at the district level is to meet each campus where they are and support them in this process, building capacity with them to sustain this work long-term.”

*Photos Courtesy of Leander Independent School District*