

Will Richardson: Ben I wanted to start with this. I saw a quote in one of the articles that you emailed me that I thought was pretty interesting. The quote is this: "Rather than shop for technology and hand it out, Ray decided to do something innovative. He formed a committee, opened it up to staff and asked, 'Where do we want to go?' That question generated much more than requests for tablets." Quote, "There was a lot of discussion about the power of technology to amplify human potential," says Grey, and quote, "We made that our baseline." I think that's really interesting that you started with that question, and that you started with the amplifying human potential piece of it, and I'm wondering what conclusions or what answers did you come to in terms of technology's ability to do that? In an education setting, then, what does that look like?

Ben Grey: That's one of the pieces I'm most proud of, and the way our process unfolded was that we didn't start with saying, "What's the device?" When you talk about the amplification potential of technology, I've really come to love that phrase because that's really what technology can do for us. It amplifies who we are as humans, on both sides of it. That's all of it. That's the good and the bad. That's all the bits of who we are, so when we think in terms of what can that do for learning, what can that do for students and their learning opportunities?

That leads us to a much richer dialog, and by way of a little bit of context, we created a committee last year to pursue the question of what do we want for students and how do we want to leverage technology in our district? We're a K-8 district. We have about 6,700 students, and we were in that process of really casting a vision, and then working to make it a reality with our board and superintendent, who have both been unbelievably supportive of the work we're doing. Through that process with a group of about 60 staff, and that had representation from all different levels, from support staff to teaching staff to administrative staff.

All are different groups within our organization. When we pose that question, that led us to think in terms of as we cast a vision forward, what do we hope to see is different or amplified in the next year? That dug us into saying more than just content regurgitation, and we want more than low-level cognitive work from our students. We want more than, I think there's a great model of learning, that's the dated information/knowledge/wisdom pyramid that talks about for so many years knowledge was that highest level on our pyramid. It sounded good, it sounded noble to say, "We want our students to be knowledgeable students," but we know that the advent of technology and the democratization of information has completely changed and should change. Unfortunately, it doesn't always change an education the way that we hoped it would, but it really fundamentally should change our approach because we're not moving anymore to just the acquisition of knowledge. We're moving to the application of knowledge, which is wisdom. We were able to

start our conversation there as a group in the first two meetings we had.

Which set us off on a path that I think I was extremely pleased and excited and inspired by the work that the group did to move us, like I said, past that idea of let's use technology to amplify everything we've done in the past, meaning the old pedagogy of we have rote learning, and we have worksheets, and let's make those just transposed in digital contexts. Let's really move past that. That's where the approach started, and there's all kinds of other stuff I can talk about in and out of that, but I'll let you guide how you want it to go.

Will Richardson: Did the district have an articulated vision or belief around learning that guided them before, or was something? Because I know you came in I think, what, about a year and a half ago?

Ben Grey: Yeah.

Will Richardson: With the superintendent who you'd worked with before, right?

Ben Grey: Right.

Will Richardson: When you got there, was there an articulated vision? Was there a belief in how kids learned best that was guiding the work, or was there this absence of any vision?

Ben Grey: We had staff, and we continue to have staff, who are passionate and believe deeply that they want to offer kids the best opportunities for learning, but when we came in a year and a half ago, which was July, 2013, the district had a mission and a vision, but it wasn't uniformly really being implemented across the 14 buildings that we have. There was a little bit more of a site-based approach, and again, our staff was working really diligently to try to provide the best for that, but from a leadership standpoint, there had not been a clearly articulated vision of what we want for the future.

My superintendent really engaged that process right from the outset and said, "Where we want to be and what our core mission is, is we want to prepare students to be successful for life." He has been tremendous in saying that's not a test score. That's not shallow metrics that don't really measure how we know a student can be successful for the life beyond their formal education, because we know that the landscape of learning and the landscape of the modern workplace has changed so much in the last ten years that when our students emerge and go out into that place, and they're done with their time with us, it's going to look so different even now than it has looked ten years ago, than it will look ten, fifteen years from now.

He cast that vision to say, "We're preparing students to be successful for life, whatever path they pick."

Will Richardson: If that's not an assessment, what is it?

Ben Grey: I think it's a number of things. It's a skill set. It's a capacity. You hear it, and I'm afraid it's become a little cliché, which is a little unfortunate that lifelong learners, OK, but really that they are built and they have the capacity to dynamically change and pursue any path that they so desire. That's being able to effectively communicate in any context. It's one of the four Cs of what we're calling 21st century learning, but it's that thinking critically, it's communicating, it's being creative and collaborative. Certainly, there is still a knowledge base you want to develop, because that's something that you want your students to be able to speak from and have, a foundation.

You also want them to be able to know how to access the information when they need to access it. The way I like to put it is when you and I were in school, when we were back in our more formal education and grammar school and middle school and even high school, the Internet isn't what it is now. We didn't have the availability of information, so school was the Internet. That's where we went to get the stuff, and that has changed now because anywhere our kids go, they will have access to all of this information, so how do they deal with an information-rich world, and how do we develop within them the capacity to be able to do that? Because we have this time with kids in our classrooms. If we're not maximizing on their collective thought, and Steven Johnson's "Where Do Good Ideas Come From?" If we're not setting up those environments where ideas are colliding, and you have a piece of the puzzle, I have a piece, and we're bringing together as thought incubators, and we're letting kids wrestle with that idea of, "When I go out into the world, I may have a piece of a puzzle that I need someone else to bring, and how do I work through those collisions of ideas?"

Really, it's the capacity and dispositions that we want our kids to have when they go out.

Will Richardson: How do you know that they have them? Is it something that you pretty much know it when you see it, type of thing? Or is it based on ... are you giving teachers pretty much the responsibility to be able to say, "Yes, this kid does have the disposition, whereas this student maybe needs to work on these particular things?" How does that work?

Ben Grey: That's a wonderful question, because we're now in the process of ... we've sated out core, or vision. Our mission is preparing students to be successful for life, and then the question that

naturally flows from that is, what does that mean? How do you define success? You talk to different people, whether it's parents, staff, administration, whoever, and they are likely to get different definitions of what they think success means, and so now we're about to embark on this really awesome journey of clearly articulating that vision.

Over the course of the next year, we're going to create collectively as a district that idea of this is what it means, and this is what we mean by success, and this is what it looks like. We're in the process now of beginning to completely rework our entire curriculum, so that is becoming core to the foundation of what it is we're doing. I'm so lucky, I'm so fortunate to have as I said a superintendent and a board, but also a team, our curriculum team, our instruction team is awesome because they're working toward this end, as well.

I'm not working in a silo. We hear so much in education technology of people who are frustrated because they feel like they want more from what's happening in the school district, and I'm in a place where I have that, and I have that team, and our staff are working through that transition. As you said, what happens when we a student who doesn't have some of this dispositions? It's been the question for a long time. Are all kids equally equipped to personify all of those different dispositions? We're working all those pieces through.

What does that mean for assessment? Because we don't want low-levels. As I said, we don't want that low-level cognitive task of memorization. We want performance assessment. We want authentic assessment. We want kids to be creating bodies of work that we can look at that show, or certainly using understanding by design and the idea of transfer, where they're actually transferring that learning into unique contexts, and we want to see what that looks like when they apply it into a new setting. That really becomes central to all of our curriculum work and all of the vision that we're creating.

It's a messy process, but it's an awesome, awesome process.

Will Richardson: I definitely want to get back to that process piece, the from vision to practice piece because I think that that's something that very few people really have a handle on, but I want to step back just briefly to something you said in terms of not working in a silo, that everyone in your school, in your district seems to be pulling in the same direction. How do you get there? How do you get a culture? Was required to have a culture where people, they get to the point where they feel like they are a part of something bigger, that they are willing to set aside maybe their nostalgia or their past experience and buy into this different vision?

Is it just a dynamic leader who comes in and can make that happen, or is there more to it than that?

Ben Grey: To be totally candid, I think first and foremost it's courage, because what you're doing is not what has been done before.

Will Richardson: On whose part?

Ben Grey: I would say everyone.

Will Richardson: How do people, and I wrote a post about this the other day. I'm sorry to keep interrupting you. How do you instill courage into people so that they feel like they can take that step, and they can put themselves at their take a risk and do something really different? Where does that come from?

Ben Grey: Sure, I'll talk about our process, and again feel free to jump in any time, because if I talk too long on this, just cut me off and let me know. That's fine to redirect. That's totally fine, but I think an important part of that is having a visionary leader, and it is unfortunate that not everyone enjoys the luxury of having that, and we definitely have someone who came in and was very clear from the beginning that we're going to create the best conditions for learning and for students, and that means that there will be change, and change is not a comfortable process.

We have a board who supports that, and we have a staff who supports that, but it is a process. We have been upfront that it will take three to five years for us to work through this process because as I said, courage from staff to realize I'm taking a huge risk. None of us likes to do things, and this is from a learner to an adult, anybody. No one likes to do things that they don't feel like they can do really well, and teaching is an incredibly personal craft, and so to have and ask people to try new things and risk, and embrace a new narrative for teaching and learning, that is very challenging.

One of the things we did last year, we suspended our evaluation for our tenured staff. We said, "Last year and this year, we're doing no evaluation of tenured staff because we don't want anyone to feel like we're asking you to take risks and change, but then we're going to evaluate on all of this." We have not put any framework in place that says, "We expect have to use technology this often." We implemented a pretty significant technology deployment this past fall, which was a big change for our district, but we said, "Use this first year to get comfortable with the presence of the device."

It really is your leadership empowering your staff and sustaining that empowerment, because our staff, and rightfully so, we have changed at a fast rate, at a very quick rate of change, and the pace has been brisk now, to say the least. We have some staff who have said, "We really love the direction we're going, we believe in it, but we're trying to navigate the waters of this pace," and we said, "We

totally understand and empathize with that. It's a three to five year process, and let us support you through that, because we will get there."

Even with our leadership. Last year, we spent last year really developing the capacity of our core leadership, meaning all 40 of our administrative team. That's principles, assistant principles, directors, coordinator, assistance supes, the whole team, and we went through what we called and are calling a 21st century leadership academy, where we spent seven full days with our leaders. We partner with Scott McCloud, who is fabulous in this area, and he worked with us to ... Scott and I partnered together to create a program for this and say, "Where do we want to go? Where do we want our leaders, and what do we want them to demonstrate the end of the time together?"

I had seven two-hour follow-up sessions in between the time that we met for the full day, so we basically had 63 hours with each of our administrators over the course of last year to built their capacity to understand what is the new narrative for teaching and learning, and then what are some of the ways that we can develop and support our staff? I ran a one-to-one program in my previous district, and I'll be very open and honest and say that my biggest shortcoming in that department was I neglected the develop of the capacity of our leaders.

I was so excited and caught up in what was happening with the students, and then what was happening with the teachers, and focusing on supporting them that I did not take the time I needed to develop in principles the leadership skills they needed to be able to support their teachers and their students in that new environment, because anybody who's been in a school knows how difficult it is. When you have a great school leader, you know how far you can go. You know that the ceiling is just raised up exponentially. Conversely, anybody who has been in a situation where they have not had a good, strong school leader knows the oppressive feeling that can be when someone is inhibiting innovation and inhibiting you to grow. We knew how important the principle was for this, and the district leadership role was for this, so last year, we really invested a lot of time in that. When you say how do you do that? Who's courage is it? It's everyone's. It's everyone in the institution from the board to the superintendent to the staff.

Through the process last year, I told our committee we'd understand. Stay the course, because education has built within it some very, very strong self-preservation mechanisms that does not want to see change happen, and that's from outside forces. That's from internal. That's from all these different influencing factors, and I told the team, "Stay the course. Stay the course because we're going to go through bumpy patches, and we're going to hit areas of the road where there will be resistance and fear." Rightfully so,

because people are saying, "Is this the right direction? What's going to happen? What am I going to lose next year because of this?"

We work diligently, not just from a leadership team, but even from our staff working through to say, "This is the right direction. Now let's cast, not just a vision, but let's implement it." As you say, I think that's the hardest piece, and it will still be the hard piece. We're not done with this work. We have a long way to go. Take the vision, and we're really proud of the vision, but now make it a reality so we see it, so when you come in and work with the kids, you can feel what that means for kids to have ownership and agency, and for kids to be empowered to take control of their learning in ways that just wasn't possible with a knowledge economy that we worked from in the previous model of education.

Will Richardson: You've said a number of things already that I think a number of other schools might struggle with. You said that you eliminated evaluations for you teachers because you wanted them to innovate and not have to worry about doing something that may be, whatever. There's a high level of trust in doing that, obviously, and that comes back again to the whole culture piece with school, which I find really interesting, by the way. The cultural aspect of how you create the conditions for teachers to innovate and do all that. I've never heard anyone who's done that, who has taken away evaluations. Then the other piece of it is finding seven full days for your leadership team to just be immersed in these ideas and conversations and contexts. I think that a lot of schools would look at that and go, "How in the world were you able to do those things. How in the world were you able to find it, find the time to carve out that space?" What would your advice be to school who might, or leaders who might be listening to this going, "Yeah, that sounds great, but I have no idea how we would do that in my school?"

Ben Grey: We didn't have any special situation where we were set up to be able to do that. When my superintendent started, he told our administrative leadership team, and that is all of our principles and coordinators and directors, every Tuesday morning we meet for two hours as a team, and we're going to use that time to focus specifically on instruction, and how do we get better with teaching and learning?" He set that stage right from the beginning with that expectation.

Will Richardson: It was just a commitment?

Ben Grey: Yes, absolutely.

Will Richardson: It sounds like you guys just made a 100% commitment to realizing this particular process.

Ben Grey: Yeah, and it's again having the courage, like I said before, I think that's it is to say, "Listen, this is important enough," and it's so interesting because we just went through this this morning as a administrative leadership team were going through a resource allocation process right now. It's that time of the year, and we talked this morning about when you do an evaluation of yourself, and you say, "These are my priorities, and this is what I believe." Even your personal life, when you say, "These are my principals as a person," when you look at how you're allocating and spending your time and your money, that really says you can say one thing, but it's how you spend the time and the money that really shows and speaks to what are your true priorities?

In this case, we had a board, and again our superintendent who said, "This is too important to leave to chance, and we have to develop that capacity, and so we're going to do this. We're going to make this a reality, and we're going to make it happen." I think people would be surprised at how achievable this is. It can be done if you make that commitment to doing it and saying, "This is too important not to make happen."

Will Richardson: How did you get a board that was that supportive? Did that just happen to be in place?

Ben Grey: As we know, in education, we don't have the luxury of picking our boards, so it's who is elected.

Will Richardson: Did you get lucky?

Ben Grey: I think we did, and I think part of that was we have a board who is a visionary board. They want to see this happen, and there was a reason why they picked our superintendent to come in a year and a half ago, because they have that desire. They knew his portfolio of work, and they saw what he had done before, and they said, "This is where we want to go. This is the direction we want to head as a district, because we have," go ahead.

Will Richardson: Did you get any sense as to where that came from on the board? That might be a tough question to answer, but I'm just curious as I hear you talk about why or how did they come to that worldview that they needed to do something really different?

Ben Grey: It's a very great question. I think at the heart of it, I like to believe in the goodness of humanity, that everyone truly wants what is best for all of us, and education is such a big part of that. You still have people who will look through a certain lens of they want that, yet they are very fiscally mindful. You have that people who want that, but yet there is an agenda that they have in some other area, and that's why they ran on the board. We are fortunate to have really by



and large, a board who believes that they want to create the best learning opportunities for kids.

Even board members who may not know what that means or how we get there, they're willing to ask the questions, and that's then on us as leadership team to present them not just, "This is where we want to go," but, "This is why, so let's present the case, let's present the rationale behind that." We have some progressive and open-minded board members who want, and we have a whole board. They voted unanimously to adopt this technology scenario and moving forward, and they believe that this can truly make a difference for kids and understand that.

Will Richardson: I think a lot of board members that I've come up against who are good human beings and who want what's best for kids, but who identify what's best for kids by some very traditional measures and standards and narratives. That's why I think that's really interesting. Let me get back to your process, because we did something similar at my old school about ten years ago, and I think that the vision creation piece obviously is important, but it's then the putting it into practice piece that I think was the toughest part, without question.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you said you're embarking on that now, and that you've got a period of time whether your going to be trying to figure out what does this actually look like in classrooms, and what do we want to see, what should teachers be doing, and what should kids be doing? Do you have a group that is having these conversations regularly, and if so, who's on that group? Which of your constituents are a part of this process, I guess is what I'm asking?

Ben Grey: Sure. We are doing this largely now at this point. Last year, we had the technology committee who came together and said, "Here's the environment we want," but now we're moving more to that curriculum level in the classroom, so we have what's called a curriculum design team, which is a representative group of staff through our district and has about 150 or so members on that team. They get together by grade level and have started re-working all of our curriculum. As part of that process, our instruction team, we have an innovative learning team, and I'll talk about that in a second.

We have innovative learning coaches and instructional coaches, and then our staff and our assistant supe for instruction, and myself. We all come together and we start talking about what should these units have in them? What should it look like as we're building out? Specifically thinking of opportunity for the structure of the curriculum, and certainly have to be mindful of some external pressures like Common Core and some of those accountability measures but that doesn't mean that we can't still do really great, innovative work and work beyond.

That's what happens with that group. As I said, it will be a three to five year process as that team comes together, and then as that spreads out and scales throughout our district. It won't happen if we as a leadership team go out and say, "This is what you have to do and how you have to do it, and here are our arbitrary numbers of three hours a day kids have to be on technology, and three hours a day, kids have to be in learning," or whatever it may be.

It needs to be more of a capacity building and understanding by staff to begin to see the possibilities that not just technology, but empowerment and ownership of some of these foundational learning dispositions that we want to give to our kids. When staff begin to embrace that and explore that and experiment with that, then that spreads. It just grows out across our organization. It becomes a part of our DNA of who we are, and again, I can't stress enough, it's a process.

We told our board, we were very, very specific and upfront to say, "This past fall when we implement our technology, we're not going to come back in October and give a report of how successful it's been, because it takes more time than that." It will take time for us to get good at this, but we will get good at this, and it will transform who we are and what we're doing, but we need to stay dedicated. As I say, we need to stay the course and make that happen.

Will Richardson: You're convinced and comfortable with the idea that you can do, and stop me if I'm putting words in your mouth, but that you can do more progressive, technology-rich, student-centered authentic learning in a classroom and still have your kids do well on the Common Core exams?

Ben Grey: Yeah, and that's the piece. Common Core's interesting, and I liked the metaphor that the Common Core is really the building code for learning, meaning you don't take the Common Core and say, "This is the curriculum." I just redid the base of my house, and I didn't take the building code and say, "Here's how I build my basement." There's the art and the wonderful part of me getting to design what the basement looks like, and me working with the materials, and in the end I looked at the building code and said, "OK, now I need to make sure that there certain things I'm aware of, and I have addressed those within the way I've designed this."

The beautiful part of learning and teaching is in the art of designing the experiences for kids, and really authentically. When you design that way, when you don't start with the Common Core and say, "I'm going to walk through this like a checklist, and I'm going to hit each of these individual standards." It's not something that I would say is as scary or as troubling as some people would make it out to be because you can still design wonderful learning opportunities and do everything that you want to do with kids, too.

There isn't this dichotomy between being able to empower kids, and then having to worry about the standards. Two can marry together still fine, and make great progress, and be a progressive school district and classroom with the two. It can happen, and there are some good things in the Common Core still. You want kids to be picking which tool is right for them as they're working through. The only thing I didn't mention, our technology scenario, our students in grade three through eight have two devices.

There have a Chromebook and they have a tablet, and that's been really fun to watch because as adults, we have at least two devices, if not three or four or five in some cases. How do we move through in between the different devices we use, and what device do we pick for what purposes? Our kids are learning that, and they're working very seamlessly between those two, and it's always great. I love going to school and sitting down, saying, "Why did you pick this tool for this purpose?" To hear them explain it and their thought behind it, that's awesome opportunity for those kids.

Will Richardson: Just really fast, how did you fund two tools? How did you fund two?

Ben Grey: Absolutely, that's the question that comes up all the time, "OK, that's great, but how did you make it happen?" We had, and this goes back to, and there was some level of good fortune in this, in that he was a long-term technology plan. Before I started, our district had a one-to-one at our three junior highs which laptops, with full laptops, but our elementary schools didn't even have wireless, so there is this huge void between our two levels. We had a long-term technology plan that was in place that accounted for the refresh of those one-to-one laptops at the junior highs, and then a lab at each of our elementary buildings.

We took, and through the process of our technology committee, that's the reason why it all came together the way it did with the timing, because we were on the refresh cycle, so we were going to refresh whatever it was this past fall. As the groups are working through, first picked our drivers, what do we want our to accomplish as a result of technology, and what does that look like from pre-K through eight? Through that process, we started thinking about what are the benefits of a tablet, of a laptop, of a Chromebook, of all of those?

It just really naturally came through that the tablet and the Chromebook is a great solution, and the wonderful thing was because of the price, we still were able to accomplish actually under the budget. Again the original budget was one-to-one of each junior high, and then one at the elementary buildings. What we did with our two to one and three through eight, plus a Nexus 7 tablet for students in K through two still came under that long-term refreshment, with a long-term refresh plan because we're not using full laptops.

Those two devices together combined are around half the cost, if not depending on what model, sometimes less than the expensive up-brand laptops that could be used and were planned. It's a possibility, and I won't get into brands of things like that, but there's ways to do it when you look at the cost of what you can actually get for that.

Will Richardson: And if you're committed.

Ben Grey: That's it, too. Our board said, "Yes, we were going to commit resources to this because we believe this is important," and yeah, obviously we're going to talk long-term efficiencies of can we do things like reducing overall print costs over time and some of those pieces. Yeah, you'll have some return on investment, but it is a commitment, and the board said, "Yes, we want that." We have definitely had parents on our Facebook page, we've had people comment on whether it's the videos we produce or whatever when they see kids using technology, "This is why I'm moving in this district," or, "I'm excited to move into this district because I see what's happening with the kids and what they're able to do." The more we're doing and the more public that's becoming, the more people in the community are realizing ... we had to spend time educating parents and spending time with them, having town hall meetings and open house meetings, and communicate out, and even still, that's something we continually need to do on a regular basis to help parents understand why. Why two devices, and why is that not too much? Is it superfluous? Should we have two devices? We explain and can break down what each device does that the other doesn't, and how those two work together in unison so well, and how the cost is actually still cheaper than you would think.

It just all came together in a really nice way, and the tight plan, and the tight plan that I was incredibly proud of the group for where they got us.

Will Richardson: That was where I definitely wanted to spend a little bit of time at least, was talking about your outreach, because I've seen very few school districts who have done it as effectively as you seem to have done it, and your videos are beautiful. I'm going to post a couple of those as links with this podcast. I wonder, who does all that? You have a team? Because to me, that outreach is crucial, but it's only effective if you are demonstrating the use of the technology to show the potential of the technology. You know what I'm saying?

Ben Grey: I do.

Will Richardson: I think in way too many school districts, there's not that capacity almost, because they just don't have people who are really fluent

and have expertise. How does that work for you? Is that something you're doing in-house?

Ben Grey: Yeah.

Will Richardson: Talk about that.

Ben Grey: I would love to, and all of these areas obviously I get really excited about and passionate about, so again, you just cut me off I'm...

Will Richardson: That's OK. I just find it fascinating. Go for it.

Ben Grey: I'm so excited about the work that we're getting to do because we have had that question. Real quick, I'll talk about our structure as, my role is assistant superintendent for innovative learning and communication, so I oversee three different departments. I oversee the informational systems and services, which is a typical IT department. That's the team who makes all of the network run. They're the box and wires people. They're the troubleshooting when something is broken, isn't working, bandwidth, wireless, all that. We have the IT department, and we have some incredibly smart people in that group who do wonderful work there, and then would have our innovative learning department, which is new this year. We have a director of innovative learning who oversees six innovative learning coaches. Those a new position for us, as well, and I can't say enough how important having effective and strong coaches are for any implementation, because they provide the job-embedded professional development that isn't everything we've talked about, what we shouldn't have in education professional development.

The sit and get, those short shots, the if you make it all. We're trying to do all this front loading, someone said, "When you do all this front loading on building teachers' capacity before we do the one-to-one, but when you do that, it's all theoretical." Teachers have nothing to actually apply it to because their kids don't have devices. When you provide more of an ongoing, continuous, and job-embedded professional development model with coaches, you can reach and expand and help support staff in a way that, you can't do it any other way as effectively as you can with coaches.

That's a team we have that is awesome, and they're making it work out in the classrooms because they're supporting staff. The third department we have is communications. This gets to specifically your question about how do you do it with messaging and with sharing, spreading the word. We have a coordinator of communications and design who is brilliant with design, and what we started off, when we first started, and he was hired in October of last year, so a few months after I started, we restructured what the department would look like, our resources, everything.

One of those pieces that I don't think schools do have the courage or commitment on is a very strong, powerful communications department, because what we started from is saying, "Why can't we make everything as awesome as we can make it?" That sounds oversimplified, but what I mean by that is so many school districts are afraid to do really high-quality, excellent graphics and visuals and websites and all of that because there's this fear that everyone's going to say you shouldn't have spent money on that, or that was too expensive, or it's too corporate.

There's all these reasons why people think you shouldn't, but when you don't ... everything you do communicates, everything you don't do communicates. We've seen districts and we've interacted with districts who don't spend a lot of time on the website, or they wear a bad website like a badge of honor. "It's free. This is a free website, and we're really proud of that," but that says a lot to a parent. You're saying I'm worth free? You're saying I'm worth no investment in how you communicate with me, because the website is one of your most powerful ways you can communicate and ongoing, up-to-date way with your parent group, with your community.

When we started, we said, "Let's make things as beautiful, as appealing as we can, and let's make our kids our central focus." If you go to our website, we have big images, rotators on all of our pages that are our kids. Those are our kids that we take pictures of when we go out, and we do do all of that work in-house.

Will Richardson: That's amazing.

Ben Grey: Thanks, and that's something we're actually been one of the biggest areas that I've mourned the loss of in my assistant superintendent role is in my previous district, I was able to do all of the photos and videos and all of that work, and I'm fortunate to have someone who came in who was actually the person who got me started in photography to begin with. He's incredible, he's incredibly artistic, and so to have someone like that be a teammate who can go out, and who I know will produce the kind of quality, and who sees things in a way that other people don't always see. We do get frequent questions about, "How did you guys make the video?" It's funny because we laugh because everyone says, "What software did you use?" It's not so much the software as this story is central. Your story is paramount to any video you do. You can have beautiful images, but if the story isn't there, it's empty, and no one sees or hears what you have to say. If we can tell a compelling story about what's happening and do that through beautiful visuals and moving pictures, then that's something that connects and resonates, and people see that.

The reaction and traction and all of that that we get from creating those videos, and the pride, and that's the other piece. When we

create a website or a video, or take photos and do those pieces that staff say, "I'm so proud of that. That's my district." When you go out, and when you have a bad website, you almost get this apologetic, "That's our website, and I'm sorry it's so bad, and I'm sorry it's so hard to navigate." When you have something that people want to share, and they want to send that message out, branding isn't a bad thing in education.

So many people feel like that's corporate and that's a bad thing. It's not at all. Your brand is what people expect, and the promise that you are giving to your community. We want a strong brand. We want people to feel like, "Yeah, that's my district, and I'm so proud of that." We want our staff to be proud. We want our students to be proud, our community to be proud. We want that to be in the fabric of who we are so people see us and have an emotional positive association with who we are.

Obviously, as I said, I've talked a lot about that, but it's something that I love all three of those departments that were working on because it's exciting to see all three of those things come together in a way that a lot of time districts silo those. You have a communications department that's disassociated with your technology, with your professional development, and have all of those roll together in a way that are connected, and we can work together as a team is incredible.

Will Richardson: I want to congratulate you, too. I know you made a video for the US Department of Education, and the president was involved in that in some way, I know. That's a really, really cool thing, and I'm sure it's a source of pride for your district, as well. Listen, I want to finish with this. You've got a visionary superintendent, you've got a board that's supportive, you've got teachers who are willing to take risks, you've got parents who are supporting you, you've got a marketing or a branding, or whatever you want to call it type of program that seems to be just over the top amazing. Are you good or are you lucky?

I know what the answer is, but I think that a lot of people probably, when they hear all that probably think of you and go, "Well, jeez, come on. They're just an outlier. They just happen to have all the stars align, and everything fell into place." I don't think you feel like that. Do you?

Ben Grey: No, we don't. We don't, and I won't say that every step of the way has been totally easy. I will say that I'm so, so proud of who we are and who I get to work with every day, but it also takes effort and time. Our staff understand that, our board understands that. They have taken risks, and I think it's Goden who said, "You can't do anything. The safe road is the easy road, but it's when you take real risk that's when you do great things." Everything we've done has

involved risk and trying to get people to understand, yes, there is a reason behind every action we're taking.

There could have been any number of times along the road where there were bumps or road blocks or drastic turns that we had to navigate to say, "We could have given up at any time." I don't want anyone to mishear that to think we had, whether it's parents or teachers, or a board, or whoever who was challenging that, but they were asking I think really good questions of, "Why is this the right thing for us to do? We've never done it this way before. Is it worth investing in this?" I think that's the piece that, if you can inspire people to see a bigger picture, and just see actually who they really are inside, and turn them loose to do the great things they're capable of doing, it's just like our students.

They will exceed our expectations every time we give them that opportunity, and so I think of my own role as what I mentioned with technology. Hopefully, my role is as an amplifier. Hopefully, I'm allowing people to do that great work that they're capable of doing, and feel empowered to do that because as you went through that, we have a super board and all of these pieces in place, but each of those groups has had to work really hard through this whole process, and they've been willing to have the courage to say, "Yes, let's keep moving. Let's keep trying this."

I guess what I hope people see in our district is not, "Well, yeah, it was easy for you guys," or, "Yeah, you guys got lucky." No, this is possible for anybody. This is the realm of possibility for any school district across the United States. Yes, some people will have different challenges. Some parts will be easier than what we had, some parts will be harder, but it is all possible and doable, and I'm excited to see where we continue to head over the next several years, because we are only embarking. We're only in our first year really of making this happen.

We have many years ahead of doing this, and I can't wait to see where we end up as a result of that.

Will Richardson: It's inspiring stuff, Ben, and I really appreciate taking some time today, and I'm hoping maybe a year down the road or so, we can reconnect and see where you're at at that point.

Ben Grey: Yeah, absolutely.

Will Richardson: Thanks so much, Ben. I really appreciate it.

Ben Grey: Yeah, no problem. Thanks, Will.







