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*Futures Reimagined*



# A JOURNEY INTO EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

with Edgecombe County Public Schools and Transcend

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## WELCOME TO OUR STORY.

For three years, Edgecombe County Public Schools in eastern North Carolina has been on an innovation journey. Frustrated with discouraging performance and graduates leaving the rural area to find opportunities elsewhere, the district set out to reinvent itself in the fall of 2017. Edgecombe partnered with Transcend, a national nonprofit organization that supports communities in creating and spreading extraordinary, equitable learning environments. This is the story of the Edgecombe-Transcend partnership and how the two organizations are collaborating to prepare the young people of Edgecombe County for success in a rapidly changing world.

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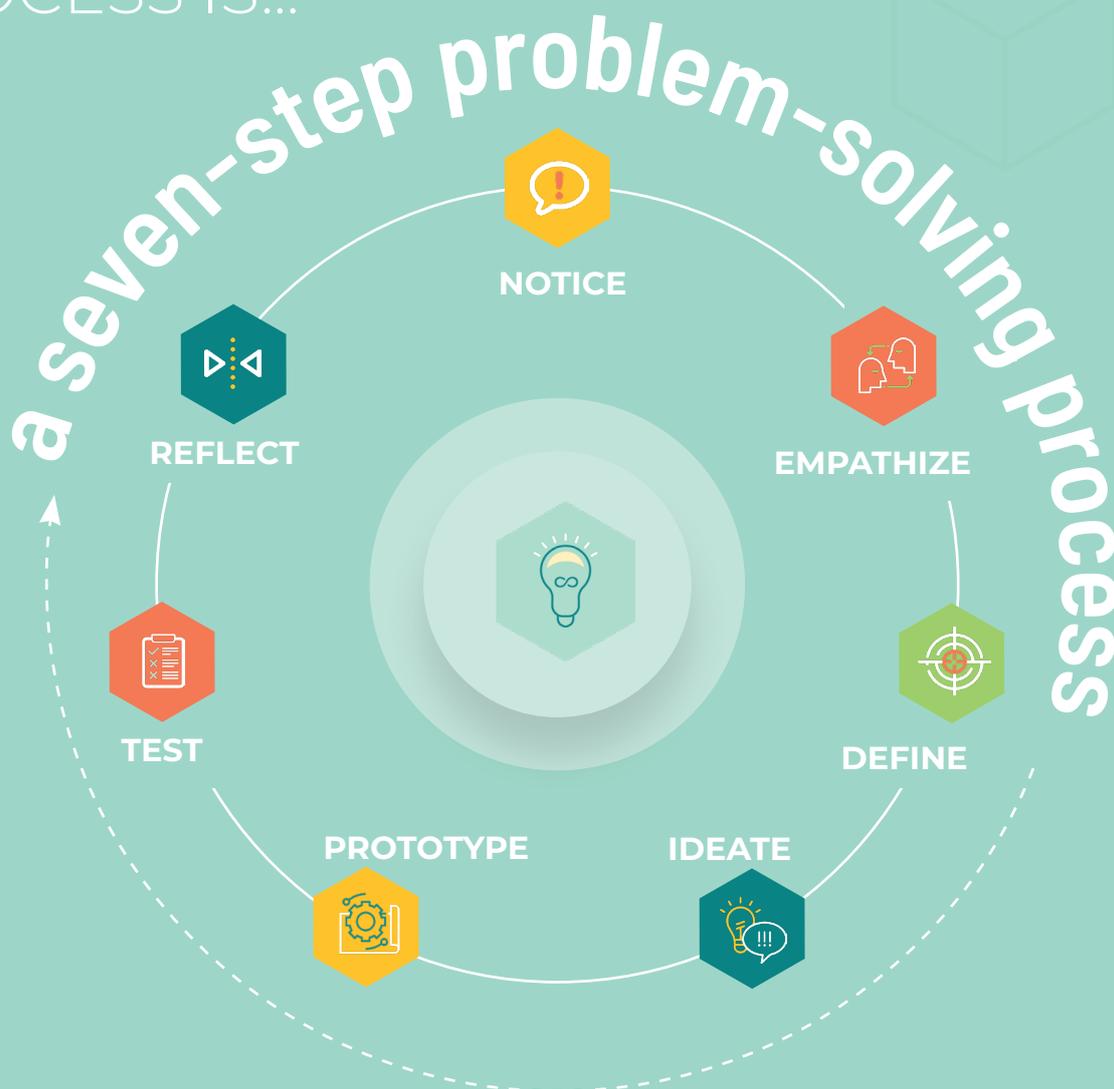


**New ideas zip around the North Phillips School of Innovation (NPSI) like snitches at a Quidditch match.** Students, teachers, and administrators in grades 6 to 12—drawn from Phillips Middle School and North Edgecombe High School—are constantly asking questions, coming up with solutions, testing out approaches, and refining practices.

The school’s conversations are constant and energetic, filling the building and sweeping out into their rural North Carolina community of Edgecombe County, pulling public officials and private businesspeople into the work of asking, What can we improve and how can we improve it?

The work of learning and innovating is rich and busy. Students study math, English, and science. They spend time understanding themselves and their community. They learn how to use the liberatory design process—a seven-step-problem-solving process—following the seven multicolored signs high on their classroom walls, spelling out the steps: notice, empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test, reflect. It’s a highly structured experience, but one full of choices. Students are called on to dig deeply into themselves and to form strong bonds with their friends and teachers. It’s a groundbreaking journey into educational innovation.

## THE LIBERATORY DESIGN PROCESS IS...



**Edgecombe’s innovation schools were born out of frustration and discouraging statistics**, among them lagging standardized test scores, high poverty rates, and lots of young people leaving the area to find opportunities elsewhere. Parents spoke out, asking why their schools were getting less attention than other schools, and pointing out that their children deserved rigorous academics that would close the opportunity gap between wealthier and less wealthy parts of the county.

“We wanted to do school differently. We knew that kids deserved better,” Donnell Cannon, the principal of North Edgecombe High School, says. Cannon graduated from NELA, the North Carolina State University’s Education Leadership Academy, which trains principals to work in schools in high-poverty areas, so he was particularly hungry for new ideas.

Doing schools differently and better were worthy goals, but Edgecombe was in desperate need of a plan. So Edgecombe County decided to enroll in a 10-month school redesign program run by Transcend, a national nonprofit organization that provides schools with the research and development capacity it takes to create educational innovations. Alongside educators from nine other schools from across the country, the Edgecombe team worked with a coach, Brittany Erickson, to turn their hopes into strategies. The work was supported by the NewSchools Venture Fund, a national nonprofit that invests in teams of educators and entrepreneurs who are reimagining learning.

“Those first ten months were about translating the team’s optimism and curiosity into a tangible long-term vision. The first step was to convene students, families, and community members so that they could help collectively co-lead the design process,” Erickson says of the work done during the 2017-2018 school year.

“Together, we explored local and global education trends as well as the latest research on the science of learning. We also visited innovative schools and programs across the country—all of these experiences helped the team rethink the student experience. Almost immediately, the team began putting ideas into action, starting with small prototypes and going through iterations to build the muscles that it takes for educational transformation.”

“We knew that Transcend could help us rethink how we were doing school and help us develop new strategies,” Cannon says. “So many schools are caught up in the hustle and bustle of our work, but Transcend helped us as teachers and administrators step out of that day-to-day context and become real learners. And those were the most powerful lessons I’ve ever had.”

“Learning more about how the brain works changed how I show up for kids at school,” Cannon says.

The Edgecombe team studied human-centered and equity-centered design thinking. Cannon says visiting other schools through the Collaborative program, such as the Roses in Concrete Community School in Oakland, California—which “prioritizes the needs of youth and families as the pathway to building healthy and sustainable communities”—helped shape his vision of what he could do. The Edgecombe team also did a great deal of “empathy work,” listening to what students and families wanted from school.

“We went in with the understanding that school as it is currently designed does not work for every kid, and especially not students of color,” Jenny O’Meara, principal of the North Phillips Middle School, says of the work with Transcend. O’Meara is another graduate of the NELA principal training program.



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- Donnell Cannon, Principal of North Phillip School of Innovation



“We were toying with the idea of pairing identity development—giving kids the space to think deeply about who they are—with trauma-informed practices. Transcend pushed us to think bigger, and we ended up designing an even larger model that incorporated feedback from students who were saying that their classes didn’t feel relevant to their lives.”

Parents spoke up, saying they wanted their children to feel they could graduate and continue to live in Edgecombe County—essentially asking the school system to engage with the potential and limitations of the local economy.

“That was a tall order,” Cannon says. “We can’t bring companies to Edgecombe County, but if we do a better job of educating students, we might be able to attract companies.”

The result of the work with Transcend was a new school design—the North Phillips School of Innovation—which has four components:

- Personal identity exploration and development.
- Membership in smaller communities, including “houses” in grades 6-8 and advisories in 9-12, to foster belonging.
- Design-for-change projects embedded in the curriculum and connected to state standards that build on academic content learned in class.
- Personal passion projects fueled by the liberatory design approach.

NPSI believes these experiences will help students to graduate and achieve the key outcomes set by Edgecombe County Public Schools so that, by the time they are 25 years old, they can say:

- I possess global awareness and agency.
- I can return to or stay in Edgecombe County.
- I engage productively in my community.
- I know my purpose and what I’m passionate about, and I’m living this out.
- I am resilient in the face of challenges.

“The process was life-altering for me as a school leader and a school designer,” O’Meara says of the work with Transcend. “It has transformed how I think about school transformation.”



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- Jenny O’Meara, Principal of Phillips Middle School

# EDGECOMBE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS GRADUATE AIMS



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## CORE STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT NORTH PHILLIPS SCHOOL OF INNOVATION





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- Valerie Bridges, Superintendent of Edgecombe Public Schools

**Once the design work was done, Edgecombe and Transcend sat down to ask if and how their relationship should continue.** The answer was yes: Transcend would help with implementation. Erickson became the lead coach and helped run community design teams so students and families could contribute to the implementation work.

On paper, the model was exciting, and it promised to deliver real transformation. But implementing that much change felt daunting. The Edgecombe team talked about starting with pieces of the new approach. But county superintendent Valerie Bridges said, let’s launch the whole model.

“The timing was perfect. We had two visionary principals who were ready and hungry to see change happen,” Bridges said. “They had selected staff members with similar visions and goals. So I said, let’s move forward and do something new and powerful for our students.”

That was in the spring. The team spent the summer finding teachers and recruiting students who represented the school’s larger African American and Latinx population as well as students with special needs, athletes, and students who are academically gifted. The goal was to have true diversity.

Recruiting racially diverse teachers was also a priority and so was hiring teachers who had grown up in Edgecombe County and teachers who hadn’t. Teachers who were new to the county had come from Teach For America and brought a fierce commitment to equity and innovation. Teachers who had gone to

school in Edgecombe County themselves brought deep local knowledge of the people, the culture, and the potential.

“The collaborative work that our teachers do has created an amazing experience for kids,” Erin Swanson, Edgecombe County’s Director of Innovation, says. “Our teachers have created the space for students to design projects that are focused on their own unique interests, but that also challenge students to read deeply, communicate effectively, and solve hard problems.”

The microschool opened in the fall of 2018 in its own building with 30 students in 8th and 9th grade students.

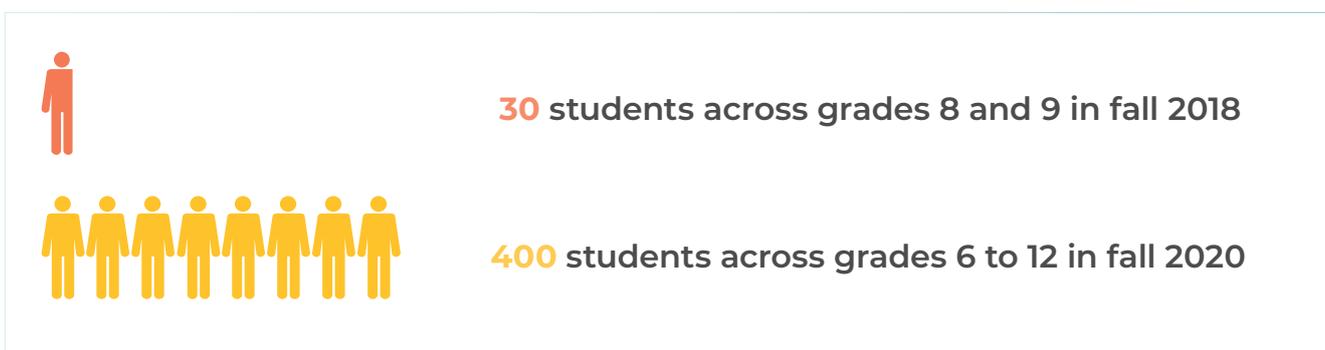
“We just got started,” Hillary Braden, the microschool’s former math and science teacher says. “We took the model and the ideas we were getting from school leadership, and we started implementing and iterating the model and designing curriculum as we went along.”

There were three houses—not actual buildings, but rather small communities that are conceptually similar to the ones at Hogwarts and Harvard. The house names: Spero, the Italian word for hope; Isibindi, the Zulu word for courage; and Amistad, the Spanish word for friendship.

To track the microschool’s work and effectiveness, Transcend helped Edgecombe set up three-week learning cycles, so that methods were constantly being reviewed and assessed. Students and parents provided feedback on what worked and what didn’t.

The microschool was a massive learning experience for students but also for Edgecombe’s faculty and staff.

“We learned things we already knew, but never understood how to cultivate in our schools,” O’Meara says. “We learned how critical it is that every kid really feels like they belong, because the kids who felt like they belonged at the microschool thrived. Emphasizing that sense of belonging became a priority when we expanded.”



That expansion happened the following school year, when the microschool became the North Phillips School of Innovation, serving 150 students in grades 8, 9, and 10. Now in year three, the model has grown to serve nearly 400 students in grades 6 to 12.

A key feature of the microschool and then of the innovation school were the design-for-change projects.

“We started by encouraging students to notice opportunities for design change in their own lives, in other people’s lives, and in their communities. We talked about having empathy for other people and designing with their needs in mind,” Sayre Man says. In years one and two, Man was an English teacher. In year three, she became one of the Design Multi-Classroom Leader, responsible for curriculum design and coaching and supporting teachers as they implement the curriculum.



**“We had wanted to embed agency and advocacy in the work students do. And that’s what the design projects did. They added a community-centered component, and they showed students that their work mattered. The projects connected students’ passions and purpose to the real world.”**

- Sayre Man, Design Multi-Classroom Leader at North Phillips School of Innovation

Students conducted surveys and interviewed community members. Then they came up with proposals to solve the problems they had identified.

One student, whose project was to improve shopping opportunities for local residents, reached out to the owner of the local mall and learned more about the impact that online shopping was having on physical stores. The project grew into an effort to create more common spaces for the public. Another student researched the possibility of creating a club where teenagers could hang out on the weekends. And a student who was concerned about homelessness and food insecurity designed a community garden.

Sharing their proposals—with other students and community members—was empowering. It also meant that when they saw a problem, they learned to look for design opportunities for change. They experienced themselves as leaders who could work with people beyond their families and schools.

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There have also been academic improvements. On average, students at the innovation school:



Out-performed their peers on state reading & science assessments



Had increased attendance rates



Experience a decrease in discipline incidents



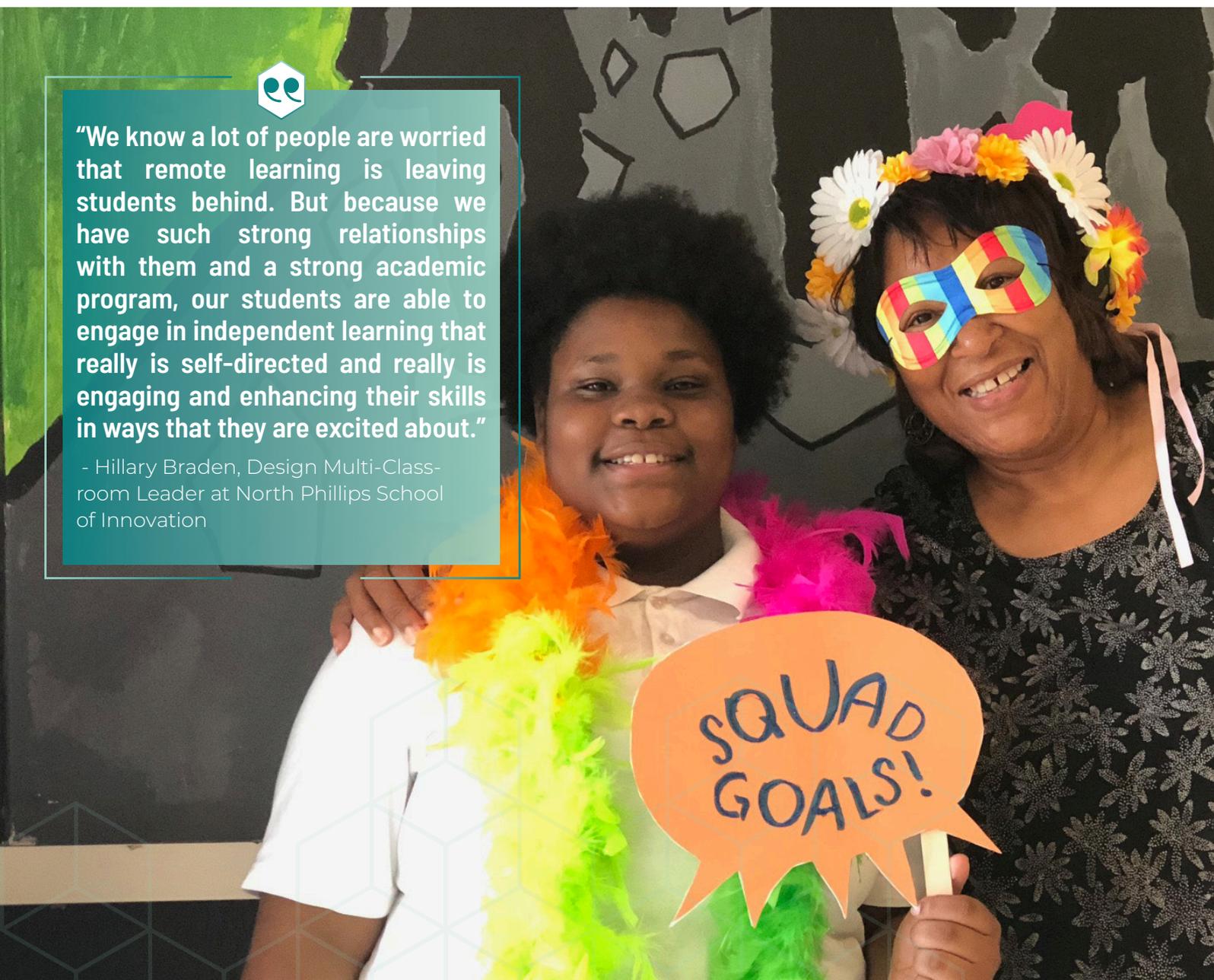
Were more likely to say they felt safe & like they belong

**The arrival of COVID-19 in the United States could have derailed the school.** Instead, the pandemic revealed the Innovation School's strengths, including strong relationships between teachers and students that made moving online less daunting.

"We're being mindful about giving teachers the tools that they need to continue building our culture. We're telling them what to ask about during check-in calls, how kids' families are doing and whether the kids are getting enough sleep. We're not just asking about assignments and schoolwork," Braden says. She's moved on from teaching to become one of the other Design Multi-Classroom Leaders.

And because Innovation School students are used to seeing challenges—even a pandemic—as problems they can tackle, they've brought a can-do attitude to online education. On Wednesdays, which is an asynchronous "offline day," students are working on their design-for-change projects, interviewing teachers and community members.

"We know a lot of people are worried that remote learning is leaving students behind. But because we have such strong relationships with them and a strong academic program, our students are able to engage in independent learning that really is self-directed and really is engaging and enhancing their skills in ways that they are excited about."



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## What's next? More thoughtful and impactful growth.

"One thing that stands out for me is the importance of iteration, of being in perpetual beta," O'Meara says. "We never see anything as being final anymore. We're always piloting and testing and measuring. If something works, we build on it. If it doesn't, we do better. We're committed to getting better all the time, and because of Transcend, we have the strategies to do that."

Braden is doing this work formally, working with Transcend to answer the question: What does good teaching look like in the innovation school model?

"We're looking at what it means to be a teacher in this space: what mindset and skills teachers should have or be able to develop," Braden says. "We need clear descriptions and a clear framework so that we can bring new teachers into the program."

"We can do really thoughtful professional development presentations. But just sharing theories isn't enough. We have to train teachers to implement our model. Teachers have to know, for example, how to have conversations about environmental racism, and they have to understand the internal work they have to do for themselves to have that conversation with a kid."

"It's hard, because teachers like to plan. And while there are things you can prepare for, in our model there is a lot of learning that can be facilitated, but it can't be strictly planned."

The North Phillips Innovation School is also reaching out beyond its campus. It has shared elements of the model and its design process with four other schools in its district. North Phillips staff led these schools through their own design process, helping them craft their own unique models that will achieve these schools' goals for their graduates. This is part of Transcend's mission, to help communities develop extraordinary designs and then share them widely so that more students will benefit from these innovations.

"Transcend's support has been invaluable in helping us go through our own design process and our own implementation, which has given us the insight and experience to share innovative design thinking with other schools," Swanson says.

"The team at Edgecombe County exemplifies what we believe matters in education innovation: strong leadership at both the school and district levels, community-driven design processes, ongoing iteration of the model in ways that respond to data, and most importantly, a bold and creative vision of relevant, equitable opportunities for ALL young people," Jeff Wetzler, Transcend's co-founder says, "Transcend is honored to partner with the Edgecombe team, and we believe their work—both their design and their process—will be helpful to many other communities."



The take-home message from Edgecombe County's partnership with Transcend: Education won't change until communities are equipped to lead local design processes. Teachers and administrators need access to new research. They need room to dream and study and experiment; the opportunity to listen to their community; time to try; room to fail; and encouragement to try again.

Gordon-Bray also says that Edgecombe students, particularly its 12th graders, are learning the skills they need to have a local, national, and global impact. To facilitate this, the Innovation School is developing its own Genius Bar—like Apple computers—with a collection of business leaders whom students can interact with. It's another way to pull the community and the schools even closer together to form more creative partnerships.

"In our state, we're that little district that keeps surprising people," Superintendent Bridges says "People ask, 'What's Edgecombe doing now?' We continue to lead strategically, putting kids and their education first. Regardless of where they live, we provided opportunities for students to grow beyond ordinary expectations.

"When people in our community see this they feel uplifted. When they see large districts visit us to learn about our work, it's validating. It makes our students realize how special they are. It makes all of us—students and staff—want to work even harder and be successful."



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Edgecombe County Public Schools is a rural district located in eastern North Carolina that is serving the educational needs of over 6,200 students in grades Pre-K through 12. The district works collaboratively to ensure that all students graduate ready to achieve success in a rapidly changing world.

To learn more about Edgecombe County Public Schools, reach out or visit the Edgecombe County Public Schools website.

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Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. It supports communities in creating and spreading extraordinary, equitable learning environments.

To learn more about partnering with Transcend, reach out or visit the Transcend website.

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