



# The Innovation Project ROADMAP

## MISSION

The Innovation Project (TIP) brings together **forward-thinking North Carolina school district superintendents** to find and **implement innovative and transformative practices** in public education so that students and their communities can thrive.

## BELIEF

The work of the organization is premised on the unwavering belief in the **intrinsic worth of each and every child and each and every community**.

Placing the highest value on each student and each community fundamentally shapes the work we do and the way we do it.

While TIP superintendents hold many shared convictions about public education, our certainty of the innate worth of all of our children and our communities is our lodestar. This one ruling principle shapes our efforts to help district leaders insure equity, eliminate structural barriers to opportunities, and recognize and address the ways in which race and class have affected accessibility to education.

*"This is the best reason to learn history. Not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies." – Harari, Yuval Noah. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (p. 64). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.*

Because school systems serve their communities, we also hold high our recognition of the worth of every locality, whether rural or urban, small or large, relatively well-resourced or not.

## VISION

Our vision is that **TIP will strengthen public education** in and across member districts, create scalable models of successful initiatives, and reinvigorate North Carolina's commitment to public education.

Our vision is that by being true to our core belief and following our mission and goals, we will change public education in North Carolina. The words "in and across member districts" reflect not just a mission but a strategy: we believe that by working together, we can create a better educational system. While we will focus our

energies primarily on meeting the needs of our member districts, we give credence to the importance of the state strongly investing in public education.

*"TIP holds vast promise for the children of North Carolina as it demonstrates the power of innovation, collaboration and capacity building. Of equal importance, TIP by its example will provide constant proof that traditional public school districts can serve the needs of all children as well or better than any other model." - Gerry Hancock, Co-Founder, Report to the Board, Sustainability Plan, January 18, 2018.*

## THEMES

We focus on **three themes** for our work:

1. **Redesigning** schooling and learning
2. Making it possible to have **capable and entrepreneurial leaders and educators** in all of our school systems
3. **Reimagining** the role of school systems so that they will continue to be **the hub** of their communities

*"In the knowledge-based economy that Peter Drucker foresees as our future, the real value of an organization will lie in its people's ability to think, to process information, to evolve creative solutions to complex problems." - Helgesen, Sally. The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership (Kindle Locations 3207-3208). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*

We hear critics say that schools and classrooms look the same as they did fifty or a hundred years ago. In some ways, that is simply false: technology is far more integrated and accessible to our teachers and students than ever before. Options for learning have vastly expanded, ranging from

language immersion experiences to vocational academies to associate degree programs before graduation. Nonetheless, we are committed to discovering everything we can about how students best learn and the barriers to their learning. We will use that knowledge to create the structures to make success possible for them. To accomplish this, we will rethink the best use of time and space and technology for learning; for expanding the range of opportunities; and for responding to the social and environmental conditions that challenge our students. In short, we understand that our task is to find and implement strategies that make it possible for each and every student to be a successful learner.

We are fully aware of the pipeline challenges for educators and leaders. We simply lack enough leaders and educators, especially in some of our communities. And, over time, our needs have changed. We now require a different skill set and aptitude – including a more entrepreneurial mindset. Creation of new strategies is necessary for developing our existing staff and training the next cohort.

School systems have a unique place in their communities. A robust school system is essential to the local economy and to our democracy. Other schooling choices continue to expand – publicly-funded vouchers for private schools, accommodations for home schools, policy preferences for charter schools, statutorily-created options of university lab schools and "innovative school district" schools - but only the school system stands as a beacon for all children in a community. If that role were ever taken for granted, we now understand that it is ours to better lay claim to and to nurture. We can do this, but we need focus and creativity to help our schools – and our systems - truly function as hub of their community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

# THEORY OF OPTIMISTIC DESIGN

We approach our work based on **theories of optimistic design.**



## Theory of Change

<https://vimeo.com/groups/479420/videos/225127006> [9:35-11:01]

*“‘Theory of change’ is a relatively new concept – it evolved over the last decade as a tool for social entrepreneurs to evaluate the impact of social programs. Now, according to research by the Innovation Network, more than half of nonprofits use a theory of change and almost 80 percent crafted (and re-crafted) one in the past year.” - Smith, Suzanne. Theory of Change: Mapping Your Own North Star, (2017): <https://socialimpactarchitects.com/theory-of-change>*

Every significant effort needs a theory of change - how we move from where we are to where we want to be. TIP has adopted a model of “optimistic design” or “dynamic optimism.”

This is not a head-in-the-sand version of optimism. We begin by fully understanding the many challenges and changes. We identify the following as fundamental to understanding the context in which we work:

1. rapidly evolving technology as a challenge—and an opportunity
2. the profound social and economic harms within our communities that affect our students and the ability of our communities to respond
3. the insufficient support from the state in providing funding and a structure for a successful system of public education.

## “[W]e can always (and only) greet our obstacles

- With energy
- With persistence
- With a coherent and deliberate process
- With iteration and resilience
- With pragmatism
- With strategic vision
- With craftiness and savvy
- And an eye for opportunity and pivotal moments.”

Holiday, Ryan. *The Obstacle is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph*, (p. 70) Penguin Group (Random House). 2014.

In TIP, we approach optimistic design in five ways. We **inspire, empower, connect, innovate, and transform.** What follows is a fuller picture of each of these vital elements.

## (1) Inspire

TIP inspires by creating a culture of innovation, a keen interest in new ideas and possibilities, and momentum towards looking around the corner. This is crucial: school district leaders – superintendents and their cabinets – face innumerable problems and challenges every day. To look beyond the immediate tasks, these leaders must have a place to be inspired by each other and the possibilities presented by the TIP team.

## (2) Empower

TIP is not just a think tank. Nor is it just a service-delivery organization. We focus on empowering superintendents and their colleagues to innovate and transform. As a part of a theory of change, this means providing tools, resources, structures, professional development or whatever else is needed to empower superintendents to do what they see as needed in order for their students and community to thrive.

### (3) Connect

TIP creates opportunities for connections – among superintendents, with dedicated staff, and through supporting strategic alliances. We are creating, within TIP, focused networks where, across school districts, we offer means of collaboration and support. Through connection, we capitalize on the ability of our small districts to act quickly to make use of opportunities to leverage resources in our better-funded districts. In this way, our more challenged communities both benefit from being networked with more advantaged districts and contribute by sharing their approaches to barriers to educational opportunities. This is not a zero-sum scenario. The goal isn't even for every district to get the same benefit from every project. It instead reflects a fundamental value and ability to grow programs and possibilities by working over the long-term together.

*Anything worth doing is worth doing with others. Dream big. What can you imagine accomplishing that would require more than you can do on your own? What kinds of teammates would you need to accomplish it? How might the trip benefit them as well as you or the organization? - Maxwell, John C. The Leadership Handbook: 26 Critical Lessons Every Leader Needs (p. 9). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.*

### (4) Innovate

When we innovate, we don't simply come up with ideas, we act! We take the steps nurtured through inspiring, empowering and connecting. And while "innovate" or innovation might mean many things, here we ascribe to the simple explanation that it means to add value. An innovation is an act that allows us to do things better.

*"An algorithm is arguably the single most important concept in our world."*

*- Harari, Yuval Noah. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (p. 83). Harper Collins. Kindle Edition.*

### (5) Transform

When we transform, we create a more fundamental shift in public education. We recognize that for public education to serve its rightful and necessary place in society, we need to be able and ready to transform public education. This comes about in a couple of ways. First, we should never underestimate the value of incremental reforms – the innovations that one by one add up to a far better system of education. Transformation also occurs when some obstacle becomes the path to innovation.

*"We have various abilities, present in all rational creatures as in the nature of rationality itself. And this is one of them. Just as nature takes every obstacle, every impediment, and works around it—turns it to its purposes, incorporates it into itself—so, too, a rational being can turn each setback into raw material and use it to achieve its goal." Aurelius, Marcus. Meditations: A New Translation (Modern Library) (Kindle Locations 1893-1896), 8.35. Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*

## TIP INITIATIVES

TIP develops initiatives that are based on our mission, vision, beliefs, and theory of change.



### Enterprise – Values and Strategies

<https://vimeo.com/groups/479420/videos/225127006> [2:38-4:24]

We begin with our major initiatives, those projects that continue year to year and require a commitment from our districts and the team of the project itself. We more closely scrutinize these programs for the benefit they provide to each member district relative to the use of resources (both people and funds), for their potential in helping us reach our goals, and for the need for iterative design to continually readjust the “hows.”

Each major initiative is evaluated at least every two years, with the TIP board making the decision whether to continue, discontinue or modify the initiative. TIP also will have action plans that identify and track progress on key elements of the project.

**Our current major initiatives are:**

**Restart Schools Collaborative**

TIP superintendents want to have flexibility to utilize resources and make programmatic and staffing decisions that best meet the needs of their students. This is especially important in schools that serve disadvantaged students. Our work on restart schools has been an important part of this effort by helping our districts obtain restart status for continually low-performing schools, thereby gaining the same freedom from state laws and regulations as charter schools. TIP then supports the TIP superintendents and their districts in redesigning schooling and learning in these schools, and in training leadership and educators.

**Virtual Academy Consortium**

The virtual academy, allowing online and blended learning education, is a window into new ways of understanding schooling and learning. Our modular course development is especially adaptive to the needs of students who struggle or of systems that have difficulty putting a high-quality teacher in every classroom. This focus is the

beginning of developing modalities of learning that work for students rather than making students attempt to fit into a uniform system.

**Innovative Classrooms**

We begin by understanding the current constraints of classrooms and knowing that students need more: they need classroom settings that engage them and that foster particular learning approaches, such as inquiry or project-based education. We help TIP districts create these 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms and bridge connections between our teachers.

**TIP-NCSU Teaching Scholars**

While the pipeline issues are vast, we have begun our work in a concentrated way. A pilot project involving five TIP districts and North Carolina State University offers a two-year \$10,000 bonus to encourage NCSU students to choose to teach in one of these communities. To support and encourage these teachers to stay, TIP is developing cohort activities, enrichment and support activities, and a vision of teaching that leads to the next level of scholarship and leadership. As an initial step, this project also places TIP in a position to develop further strategic alliances that will expand our work.

**Re-engaging Homeschool Families**

Within the increasingly complex world of education, we see homeschool families as a part of our community with whom we should better connect. The relationship starts by our better understanding their needs and learning how we can better work with them. In addition to better serving these families, this initiative challenges us as we consider redesigning schooling and learning and the role of the school system as the hub of the community.

In addition to these significant initiatives, we have an array of other services and activities

that allow us to make sure that we are addressing our mission, goals, vision, and theory of change in a variety of ways that help our TIP superintendents.

**They include the following:**

**Brief topic explorations:** We learn about challenges when we meet with individual TIP districts. From various sources, we hear of new topics on the horizon. We learn of a potential new partner. We throw the idea out to a few TIP superintendents and if they say yes!, we move ahead. We put together a research paper, a ZOOM meeting, a topic for a TIP membership meeting. In other words, we explore.

**Member meetings – statewide, regional, in the district:** The work of TIP requires collaboration – which requires building trust. And so we meet. We gather in full TIP member meetings where we go over our work, explore new possibilities, and are inspired by being together. We get together regionally, where there are shared interests and trusted relationships; some conversations go better in these settings, this home turf. We also meet in individual member districts, learning about the system and its community, its innovations and its challenges. We facilitate conversations. We present ideas and share what TIP is about – from our core beliefs to our projects.

**School site visits:** We believe in the power of observing innovation. One part of the culture of optimistic design is to “actively seek better ways with curiosity and openness to evidence of what works.” We go to schools within our member districts as well as other schools – whether they are state-chartered, private, or in other systems - that might have ideas worth exploring.

**Tool kits:** To move into action – to innovate and transform – requires resources. TIP is committed to not only being a place for

imagining the future but making it happen. The fullest expression of TIP’s mission is our work in developing practical tool kits, templates, or other resources that a superintendent can take to his or her district to help them adopt an idea and make it their own implemented strategy.

**Market share tools:** If TIP school systems are the hub of their communities, they need to understand what their education landscape looks like. TIP updates resources annually for our member superintendents to give them up-to-date information on their community.

**Leader consultations:** The TIP model is fully engaged in supporting superintendents of public school systems in their very difficult and challenging jobs of leading a school system for the benefit of that community. TIP is uniquely focused as an organization on supporting superintendents in developing innovative and transformative strategies. We also recognize the need to be responsive to urgent issues facing TIP superintendents. Leader consultations build relationships between the TIP team and member superintendents by supporting our members in both implementing TIP initiatives as well as addressing other critical issues faced in the superintendency.

**Communication platforms:** As an organization focused on inspiring, empowering, and connecting (in order to innovate and transform), TIP will invest in various communication platforms that allow members to engage with each other and easily draw on resources available from TIP.

## TIP RESOURCES

Every organization needs to identify the resources it has to apply to its mission, vision, goals, and strategies. The Innovation Project has extraordinary assets to make it possible to achieve its purpose. They include the following:

**Engaged Board:** A board is essential for having the long-range view for the organization, bringing together viewpoints broader and more diverse than can be expected from the staff, and establishing accountability and transparency for the staff and the organization as a whole. The bylaws establish a board that brings together these fundamental elements. The board meets frequently throughout the year. Additional elements will be added, as needed, through board policy and culture.

**Involved, entrepreneurial superintendents:** Our members are not only recipients of services but are crucial to the model: they inspire each other and connect in a variety of ways with each other. Their ability to innovate and transform makes it possible for TIP to serve its purpose. For this reason, decisions on membership - size, qualifications, and responsibilities - relate directly to the function of TIP and are made by the membership, along with the board.



### Theory: Front Runners

<https://vimeo.com/groups/479420/videos/225126940> [Around 6:30-8:09]

*Having a group of smart, capable superintendents working collaboratively to improve public schools in North Carolina provides a tremendous opportunity for their schools to move forward to becoming places where each student thrives. The commitment of these superintendents to working together to use currently available resources as well as they can is noteworthy, commendable, and a very significant step in the right direction for public schools and their students and for North Carolina's communities. The capacity of TIP's staff, regular independent contractors, and other experts to support this effort by encouraging innovation, providing technical assistance, and building internal capacity, all while staying nimble and affordable, is equally noteworthy and commendable." - Leslie Winner, The Innovation Project: Report and Recommendations, January 18, 2018.*

**Nimble, talented staff:** The staff must have numerous qualities to meet the goals and fulfill TIP strategies. They must have persistent flexibility. They must be able to manage projects while continually scanning the horizon and adapting to the immediate needs of TIP superintendents. So far, the membership and board have expressed a desire for a lean staff: they do not want to be build significant infrastructure that would slow the organization in shifting when needed. TIP recognizes the tension between this goal and the potential complexity of managing projects and creating the capacity within TIP districts to innovate. Strategic alliances and philanthropy will help ease this tension.

**Efficient, effective application of member funding:** TIP is aware that the member funding is paid by public entities and that this demands the most care possible of these funds, both in regard to transparency and effective use of the funds. The board holds an important role in establishing the budget and reviewing TIP's finances.

**Focused philanthropic support:** The mission and vision of TIP fits well with many philanthropies. Further, our ability to effect change across many school districts and create scalable models makes TIP an attractive investment. Philanthropic support can be used to bolster membership funds and address needs that otherwise may be difficult to address, including evaluation of efforts and capacity support to TIP districts.

**Strategic alliances:** Alliances can come in a variety of networks and partnerships with organizations that share a focus with TIP. These relationships can be a powerful way to extend the reach of TIP without needing to build infrastructure and seek funding for those opportunities. They also can help TIP stay focused on its primary functions while seeking and using alliances to build our projects.



<http://lapiana.org/insights-for-the-sector/insights/collaboration-and-strategic-restructuring/collaborative-map>

## ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS

This document establishes what The Innovation Project is, its mission, values, beliefs, strategies, and major initiatives. This material is accompanied by a graphic representation of the organization and its functions. In addition, strategic plans will describe each of the major initiatives, regular CEO reports will report progress on these initiatives, and board bylaws and policy will create and show the governing platform for the work of TIP.

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