



# How to Innovate:

## Options for School Districts

Getting Smart  
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*Districts choose to partner with school networks for a variety of reasons; finding the right fit can be challenging. The following profile features the New Tech Network, a non-profit school design organization that has a long-standing track record of effective and successful paths to support district innovation.*

## District Dilemmas

School district leaders know that standardized tests are a narrow view of learning outcomes. Many want to embrace a broader view of career and citizenship readiness, and want to engage young people in active learning to promote these important outcomes—but these changes come with a variety of challenges. Typical school district dilemmas include:

- **Skepticism:** An innovative approach is better for preparing students for college and career success, but teachers may resist the imposition of a new learning model.
- **Capacity:** There is not enough administrator or teacher capacity to support new learning models beyond one or two schools.
- **Disruption:** Parents may perceive that a traditional school worked for them and worry that change will leave students less prepared for college.
- **Cost:** The district can't afford to change or work with outside partners.
- **Measures:** It is hard to assess the skills that really matter, including critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and persistence. What if short-term reading and math test scores don't improve and there is limited evidence of improvement in other areas?

With all these dilemmas, how do you innovate at scale? There are as many solutions as there are challenges:

- **Contribution:** Engage students in local problem solving and boost the school contribution to [community agility](#).
- **Readiness:** Career and civic readiness demand new outcomes and new approaches from districts.
- **Equity:** Some students leave school well prepared, while many aren't as fortunate. Scalable innovations, especially those aimed at all students, can close the gap.
- **Learning Science:** Learning facts and procedures is no longer enough. Learners need opportunities to develop conceptual understanding and flexible reasoning skills—opportunities that are not available in many schools and communities.
- **Successful models:** A growing number of new and transformed schools demonstrate what success can look like.
- **Talent brand:** Distributed leadership and innovative learning models make it easier to attract and retain top leadership and teaching talent.

# Innovation Opportunity: Inspired and Engaged Students

Two skills that have always been important are priorities in the innovation economy—the ability to manage your work and learning, and to work productively on a team. New Tech Network (NTN) refers to those abilities as Agency and Collaboration and they are two of five learning outcomes. The other three learning outcomes are Knowledge and Thinking, Written Communication and Oral Communication. Schools in the network assess all of these learning outcomes in every project-based assignment.

[NTN operationalizes agency](#) as a mindset and learning habits:

	
<b>GROWTH MINDSET</b>	<b>TAKE OWNERSHIP OVER ONE'S LEARNING</b>
Use effort and practice to seek challenge, grow from setbacks, build confidence, and find personal relevance.	Meet benchmarks, seek feedback, tackle and monitor learning, actively participate, build relationships, and impact self and community.

[Collaboration at NTN](#) elementary, middle, and high schools adopting the NTN school model include setting and respecting group norms and roles, using a respectful tone and style, and supporting the team with work ethic, timeliness, and quality products.

Building student agency and collaboration requires [high-quality project-based learning](#) including authentic multi-step challenges, deep inquiry, and a public product.

Group-based projects can create strong engagement with a sense of purpose but, to ensure that all students continue to meet their individual needs, it is useful to embed group projects with personalized learning. Personalized learning supports including playlists of assigned content and small group workshops that can be delivered as part of the project design.

Schools in the NTN combine personalized and project-based learning to gain the benefits of both strategies.

Benefits of Personalized Learning	Benefits of Project-Based Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gap identification and rapid skill acceleration</li><li>• Detailed tracking and reporting of individual student progress and performance against multiple learning objectives</li><li>• Instruction and assessment of critical individual student college and career skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Empowers students as designers and engages them in learning how they learn</li><li>• Connects student passions and interests, develops agency and creativity</li><li>• Authentic tasks create meaning and context for learning and promote critical thinking</li><li>• Develops collaboration and project management skills</li></ul>

The combination of personalized and project-based learning strongly supports student agency and collaboration skills. While personalized learning may be directed by a teacher or adaptive learning algorithms, project-based learning almost always incorporates student voice and choice. Most projects involve students working together to solve a complex problem, and individual projects are often layered with purposeful structures for students to collaborate, share learning, and provide each other feedback. When students regularly work with a wide variety of peers, it builds school culture and



relationships, helps them see diverse perspectives, and enjoy learning as a social enterprise.

A positive school culture and sustained relationships also contribute to the development of agency and collaboration. Good schools are systematic about making sure that young people are known and cared for, that their social and academic growth is monitored, and that they receive thoughtful advice on what's next.

### DISTINCTIVE BENEFITS OF THE NEW TECH NETWORK

When visiting a New Tech Network high school, you first notice the double classrooms where traditionally separate subjects—math and science, English and social studies—are often combined. Teachers work together to design relevant projects that combine learning objectives from different subjects. Students work in teams directing projects that may last for weeks and result in publications and presentations. Each project is assessed against the NTN Five Learning Outcomes, Knowledge and Thinking, Collaboration, Oral and Written Communication, and Agency.

Four design principles are at the center of the New Tech school model: Outcomes that Matter, Teaching that Engages, Culture that Empowers, and Technology that Enables. A common learning platform, Echo™, allows teachers to adopt, adapt, or author standards-aligned projects and use common rubrics for assessing student work. Teachers have access to a variety of in-person and digital experiences and resources with a badging system that helps educators demonstrate and document their development. Even with a common learning model, schools in the New Tech Network express diverse missions and themes.

The Network illustrates the power of rigor, relevance, and relationships in neighborhood schools and schools of choice.

## Comparing School Development Options

Engaging students in projects is relatively easy, but doing it in pervasive ways that promote agency, collaboration and other priority outcomes is a challenge. Ensuring that all students have the requisite knowledge and skills to contribute to each project adds to the complexity. Accurately assessing growth during and after each project is also difficult.

In thinking about the learning model challenges, also consider the complexity of building professional learning on-ramps for all staff members and creating supporting schedules, structures, and systems.

Combining personalized and project-based learning is promising but challenging. School and system leaders need to carefully consider the cost and capability to develop, adapt, or adopt a school model—whether the task is transforming an existing school or new school development.

### School Development Strategies

Ranging from small self-designed pilots to large managed school networks, school systems have a variety of options for increasing access to personalized and project-based learning.



#### TEACHER DESIGNED PILOTS

Encouraging teacher leaders to develop pilot units or pilot programs is an easy way to get started. [Pathways to Personalization](#), a new book from Highlander Institute, urges the development of pilot programs around problems of practice. With success, these pilots can be refined and grown to school-wide initiatives or multi-school networks.



#### DIY WITH COMPONENT PARTNERS

Schools and systems can piece together do-it-yourself (DIY) school model improvements by prioritizing practices, selecting a learning platform, phasing in improved access to technology, and partnering with a professional learning provider. A planning and/or design partner may be added for larger and more comprehensive projects.



### MODEL PROVIDER PARTNERSHIP

Schools and systems can partner with one or more proven model providers. Most provide a school model, platform, and professional learning experiences (see illustration on page 8).



### MANAGED NETWORKS

Some systems and regions, like [Denver Public Schools](#), have incubated and scaled managed school networks. While some are authorized as charter schools, other innovation schools remain in the district but are granted charter-like autonomy.

Each of the school development strategies have unique benefits and potential concerns.

Strategy	Potential Benefits	Potential Downsides	Traits of Successful Districts
Teacher designed pilots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leverages teacher leadership</li> <li>Yields a variety of approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May yield improvement rather than innovation</li> <li>Slow to develop and may not be equitably distributed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small systems with an aligned vision</li> <li>High level of teacher leadership beyond pockets of innovation</li> <li>Community expressed urgency</li> <li>History of building and sustaining home-grown programs</li> </ul>
DIY with component partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flexibility to assemble components</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of coherence</li> <li>May be less effective than integrated models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustained multiyear vision, low leadership turnover</li> <li>Tools to author projects and track student progress</li> <li>Implementation benchmarks</li> </ul>
Model provider partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coherent and proven model</li> <li>Bridges leadership transitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consolidated pricing appears to be more expensive than DIY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple school implementation</li> <li>Interest in speed, quality, and reduced risk</li> </ul>
Managed networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slow to develop and scale</li> <li>Impacts district enrollment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large systems developing a portfolio of options</li> <li>Philanthropic support</li> </ul>

## Comparing District DIY and Model Providers

District-led innovation efforts appear attractive for many reasons: opportunities for willing and eager school leaders to apply design thinking, setting up innovation schools as laboratories for learning, and emulating successful schools. From a cost standpoint, not partnering with external organizations saves money, while potentially increasing stresses to effectively manage change.

Few districts find themselves with surplus funding. When looking closely at how districts are paying for work with model providers, a trend emerged around districts tending to pull from local, state, and federal revenue sources to create a cohesive strategy that reduces risks and increases the likelihood of strong starts to a multiyear change effort.

A partnership with NTN to implement their school model costs a school approximately \$70,000 per year for two to four years, and thereafter has a minimal fee to continue to be active in the network and utilize the Echo™ platform for teachers, students, and parents.

At first blush, \$70,000 per year for an initial period of time may seem too costly. When taking a closer look though, NTN provides a top-to-bottom suite of services designed to support three unique school-based staffing groups. School leaders, individual teachers, and the whole staff receive personalized and differentiated supports aimed at building their capacity to sustain the innovation over time. At the same time, NTN provides comprehensive school transformation professional development. NTN has been doing school transformation work with existing leaders and faculty with district-operated schools for nearly 20 years, and are experts at finding effective solutions to many of the predictable challenges that schools encounter.

NTN services include: teacher and leader coaching, professional development, a subscription for all teachers and students to state-of-the-art learning management platform Echo™, professional learning opportunities like badging and certification, access to NTN events and annual conference, and access to a network full of educators who are engaged at all phases of implementing personalized project-based learning.



*President Obama engaging with students working on STEM-related projects at Manor New Technology High School during a 2013 visit.*

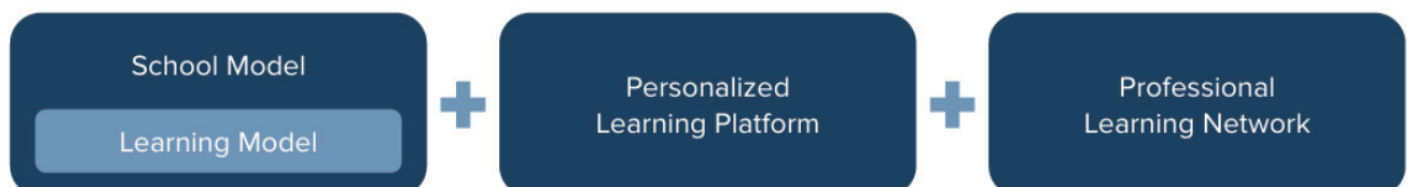
## Why Districts Join Networks to Scale Impact

Schools and districts join networks to access expertise, tools and resources, to reduce risk, and to build teacher and principal capacity. Networks range from informal collaborations to comprehensive partnerships:

- **Principle networks:** informal affiliations around design principles ([Future Ready](#))
- **Design networks:** membership networks around specific designs ([Big Picture Learning](#))
- **Voluntary networks:** brand and service agreements sometimes supported by grants ([ConnectEd](#))
- **Platform networks:** brand, software, and service agreements around a comprehensive school design ([NTN](#))
- **Portfolio networks:** decentralized operations with common funding or back office ([Chicago International Charter School](#))
- **Managed networks:** charter management organizations with a common school model and support system.

School Model	Tight	<b>Design Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Open to innovation</li> <li>+ Tight on key variables, loose on others</li> <li>- Quality varies</li> </ul>	<b>Platform Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Scalable quality</li> <li>+ Microschool opportunity</li> <li>- Challenge to build</li> <li>- Whole school models slow and expensive to build</li> </ul>	<b>Managed Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Implementation fidelity yields quality at scale</li> <li>- Challenge to build</li> <li>- Can repress innovation</li> <li>- Slow and expensive to scale</li> </ul>
	Loose	<b>Principles Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Low cost to scale</li> <li>- Low fidelity</li> </ul>	<b>Voluntary Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Flexible, moderate cost</li> <li>- Low/moderate fidelity</li> </ul>	<b>Portfolio Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Open to adaptation/themes</li> <li>+ Provide options</li> <li>- Moderate fidelity</li> </ul>
		Support/Control		
		Loose <span style="float: right;">Tight</span>		

Platform networks offer the distinct advantages of a proven learning model, technology tools, and professional learning opportunities. For NTN, that means integrated team-taught project-based learning with a customized learning platform, Echo™, and a suite of learning experiences including training and coaching, peer learning, online tools, events, and an annual conference.





One of the biggest threats to school district innovation is leadership turnover. More comprehensive affiliations like platform networks build a bridge that provides continuity during leadership changes. They also build internal capacity around proven practices and avoid “drive-by” professional development.

Smaller districts often pick one school development strategy. Winton Woods (featured below) wanted a high engagement, instructional approach that would support its diverse population. After reviewing options, they selected NTN as the district-wide model provider.

### WINTON WOODS: DISTRICTWIDE PARTNERSHIP

In the northern suburbs of Cincinnati, the [Winton Woods City Schools](#) serve a high-poverty population. With support from a state-level innovation grant, the district leadership converted the entire district into New Tech Network (NTN) schools to boost engagement and achieve more equitable outcomes.

“After an extensive evaluation of project-based learning in conjunction with the New Tech Network, it was a natural progression to offer this experience to all of our students. Educators have a daunting task of leading reform efforts while working with students to promote equity. This is exactly what the New Tech Network experience will do for our students,” said Superintendent Anthony Smith. “We have a golden opportunity to teach our students how to become problem solvers while exceeding state standards. We are excited about our educational framework that will help to develop well-rounded learners.”



Starting with the Academy of Global Studies in 2011 as a school of choice, the NTN model has become the instructional approach for every student in every school.

NTN leaders share Superintendent Smith’s enthusiasm. “We are humbled and thrilled to partner with Winton Woods Schools,” says NTN CEO Lydia Dobyns. “We appreciate their commitment to invest in teachers and administrators so that every student experiences deeply meaningful educational experiences to prepare them for an unknown future.”

Larger school districts face a number of challenges including aligning multiple initiatives, rationalizing school options, and promoting equity at scale. Meeting these challenges often includes participating in several networks—some regional, some thematic, some comprehensive.

### EL PASO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT (EPISD): KICKSTART MODEL PARTNERSHIP + DIY COMPONENTS

In one of the best turnaround stories of the decade, [EPISD](#) recovered from a narrow test preparation focus and cheating scandal to a great example of the benefits of active learning. A new graduate profile and a commitment to good schools in every neighborhood were their foundation.

The vision of active learning was brought to life through a partnership with New Tech Network, which supported the development of two new high schools on existing campuses. Over the next four years, seven more New Tech schools were added including a 6-12 single-gender campus and a K-12 feeder pattern in one of the most economically challenged neighborhoods on the border.

For the other 90 schools, the district phased in laptops for every student, open digital resources on New Tech Network’s learning platform, and professional learning experiences (a DIY with partners approach).

## Choosing a Model Provider

Some charter management organizations achieve consistently high test scores by promoting fidelity to a proven instructional model. Like programs of [managed instruction](#) in school districts, teachers are expected to deliver a standard curriculum at a specified rate to promote grade-level proficiency in basic skills. These models often don't promote agency or collaboration in students or teachers.

With a variety of model providers and potential school network partner, districts should consider:



### OUTCOME ALIGNMENT

Which student learning outcomes are a priority? Do model providers have a track record of delivering priority outcomes?

If student agency and collaboration are priorities, then extended challenges are required. A model provider like NTN that specializes in team-taught integrated projects would be a good fit.



### TEACHER FRIENDLY

Are teachers supported as implementers or designers? Are they encouraged to contribute to the model?

New Tech teachers are able to adopt, adapt, or author projects—the model meets them where they are. Projects are contributed to a common library. They have access to extensive training and ongoing coaching, and professional learning opportunities. It brings back the joy in teaching.



### CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Does the network provide planning support including school visits, readiness assessment, and strategy workshops? Does the network provide on-site and virtual coaching as well as scheduled implementation workshops and conferences?

NTN offers extensive planning and implementation support that guides schools toward lasting change and ongoing improvement.

A robust school model well-implemented and well-supported quickly delivers results and develops a constituency. The combination provides a bridge of continuity across leadership changes in school districts. As a result, investing in networks rather than DIY approaches can yield a stronger return on investment.



### SMART NETWORK

Does the network engage in active improvement? Are teachers encouraged to contribute to network intelligence?

The NTN model engages in improvement cycles that consider leadership, culture, and structures.

## Network Partners Pave Paths to Better Outcomes

It's time to move beyond traditional test scores as the primary measure of school success. Different outcomes take a different approach, one where every student experiences deeper learning every day.

To make agency and collaboration primary outcomes, it is necessary to move from occasional projects to extended challenges as the driving pedagogy for learning.

To transform the learner experience, we need to transform the educator experience by embracing broader aims, making time and support for integrated team-taught projects, and providing personalized learning for teachers as well as students.

Building a system to support personalized and project-based learning is complex pedagogically and technically, and it can be challenging financially and politically. Many school districts benefit from working with networks to reduce innovation risk and improve teacher supports and student outcomes.

The right network partners have outcome alignment, are teacher friendly, provide change management, and are dynamic enough to keep learning.

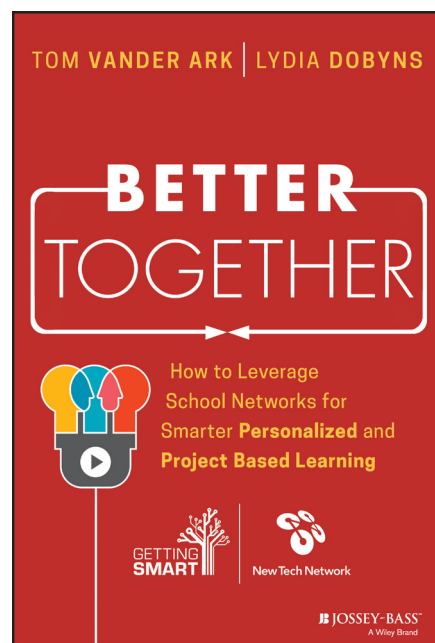




## Read More

All students need to become expert problem solvers. Parents, teachers and school leaders know that developing critical thinking skills along with communication, collaboration is critical for all post-secondary paths.

*[Better Together](#)* offers compelling evidence that school networks provide inspiring examples and practical ways to innovate education. Meet teachers, principals and district leaders who have re-imagined hundreds of schools with the support of networks.



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