



SCHOOLX

JETHRO JONES

How principals can design a transformative school experience
for students, teachers, parents – and themselves



First published 2020

by John Catt Educational Ltd,
15 Riduna Park, Station Road
Melton, Woodbridge IP12 1QT

Tel: +44 (0) 1394 389850

Fax: +44 (0) 1394 386893

Email: enquiries@johncatt.com

Website: www.johncatt.com

© 2020 Jethro Jones

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the publishers or the editors. We cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

ISBN: 978 1 91362 211 4

Set and designed by John Catt Educational Limited

Reviews

Actionable, urgent insights for any principal ready to re-engage in the work that brought them to the field in the first place.

Seth Godin, author, *Stop Stealing Dreams*

The evidence is clear. The learning experiences happening at a school are highly correlated with the effectiveness of the school's principal. In *SchoolX*, Jethro Jones outlines a highly impactful, human-centered design model to support principals in becoming the leader they want to be, and the role model their students and staff so desperately need.

Thomas C. Murray, director of innovation,
Future Ready Schools, Washington, D.C.

The phrase "school transformation" has never felt more attainable. Jones has done something I have not seen before: he's illuminated the link between design thinking and principalship in ridiculously helpful terms. *SchoolX* is the path to improving how all stakeholders experience your school.

Dr. Brad Gustafson, award-winning principal and author

As a veteran classroom teacher, I appreciate Jones' all-encompassed focus on the teacher, student, and parent experience taking place each day inside the classroom. His work gracefully weaves theory and practice, equipping school leaders with tangible next steps to enhance the school experience for all stakeholders.

Mitch Weathers, founder, Organized Binder, Inc.

The job of a principal is constantly changing and the pressures are evolving. *SchoolX* takes you through practical ways to transform any school to make it better for students, parents, and the community. Jones has examined many different facets of leadership and the transformation process, while explaining them to the readers so they can implement tomorrow. *SchoolX* will help new and seasoned leaders grow exponentially.

Ryan Sheehy, educator/author/speaker

Jones masterfully frames the school experience from multiple perspectives and provides valuable suggestions on how to collectively transform schools. Now, more than ever, we need innovative school leaders that have the capacity to listen, learn, and lead real change in our schools. *SchoolX* is the perfect guide to achieve those goals in a holistic approach to school improvement.

Dr. Greg Goins, director of educational leadership at Georgetown College (KY) and host of the *Reimagine Schools* podcast

Jones takes the reader through the experiences of school leaders, teachers, students, and families. I found it illuminating that he focused on the “experiences” of each group, as it is our experiences that make up our point of view and shape our approach to education. In each section, he demonstrates ways for educators to transform from managers and leaders to designers, with the focus always remaining on our students. Drawing on his own experiences as well as nuggets of wisdom from educators across the country (many of whom are inspirations to me as well), Jones provides a vision for educational leadership and practical steps to turn the vision into a reality.

Jonathon Wennstrom, elementary principal, Michigan

SchoolX is a must-read for every school principal! Jones does an amazing job of presenting rich and effective ideas that are based on research and from savvy leaders.

Thomas R. Hoerr, scholar in residence, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Schools make up the fiber of a community. Students, parents, teachers, and the community either feel pride in their schools or they don't. So much of it is about the daily experiences people have from the minute they enter the building, to the emotions people carry when they leave the school building. *SchoolX* is an essential guide for anyone who wants to be part of an organization that embodies learning.

Anthony Kim, author and entrepreneur

Contents

Introduction	9
Part 1 The leadership experience	21
Part 2 The teacher experience	71
Part 3 The student experience	107
Part 4 The parent and community experience	143
Conclusion	163



Introduction

The role of school principal may be one of the most unique positions in any organization. There aren't many other roles that require a leader to interface with so many stakeholders, with such drastic and diverse expectations for success in different areas. The expectations from one stakeholder group often completely oppose the expectations from another group. For example, teachers want higher pay and lower class sizes, but the community wants lower taxes, and the district wants a recent school board initiative followed through on, while the state legislature (hypothetically) has mandated that all classrooms have at least two standing desks for students. And, no, they didn't allocate extra money for this.

What is the school experience?

The school experience (SchoolX) is how the school is experienced by anyone who interacts with it. It is imperative for school leaders to think about what all stakeholders experience, but it may be a challenge for you to find the time to do all the things we will talk about in this book. If you are stuck in what the leadership guru Chris LoCurto calls the "leadership crazy cycle", you won't have the time to do anything!

If you feel like you're in a crazy cycle, I would encourage you to go to part 1 and establish your mission and vision, to make sure your time spent is worthwhile and meaningful. And remember, you're not alone!

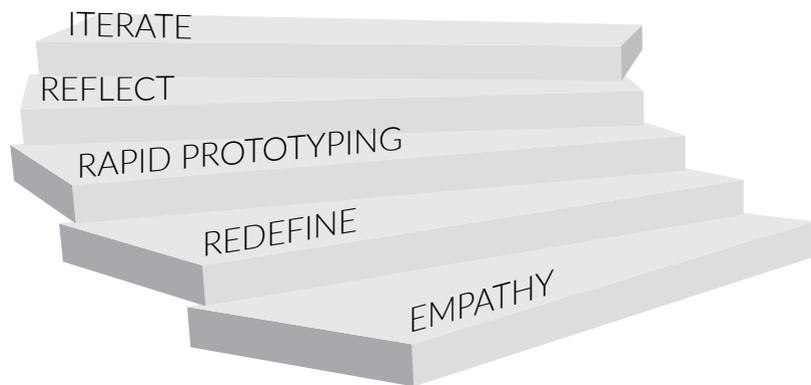
The design-thinking process

You're reading this book because you want to be a designer – you want to design your school to meet the needs of the people there. We are going to

discuss a lot of the problems that you face every day as a principal, so let's define the process by which you, as a designer, will solve those problems.

The design-thinking process is a problem-solving process. It all hinges around the idea of attempting to solve problems quickly and efficiently (but not necessarily perfectly). When you examine the experiences of your stakeholders, anything that you need to change will be considered a "problem".

Below is a chart describing the design-thinking process. I also refer you to my interview with Susie Wise from Stanford's d.school (also known as the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design) to learn more about how it applies to education, specifically. You can find the interview on my website: schoolx.me/susie



The first step in the process is to gain **empathy**, in a human-centered way. When a stakeholder interacts with the school in a way that decreases the enjoyment or quality of their experience, you need to find out how they feel about that. Saying, "I think they feel this way" isn't good enough. You must *feel* what it is like to be in their shoes. I'll weave in a specific story to teach the ideas in a broad sense. In my school, we had a small cafeteria and 200 kids at lunch. People kept telling me that we needed a third lunch sitting because it took kids too long to get their meals. But we needed to feel what the kids were feeling to figure out why lunch was taking so long.

When you gain empathy, you are seeking trouble spots or pain points. You are looking for things that aren't contributing to a positive school experience for that person (Susie Wise created the #shadowstudent movement, which involves principals and teachers experiencing what a school day is like for students).

Once you have empathy, **redefine the problem**. It's important to gain empathy first, because you may not really know what the problem is, or the problem may be disguised on the surface. Sometimes you may spot a problem, but before you can define what it is, you must gain empathy to uncover the issues behind it. At my school, we knew there was a problem with lunch, but we had to gain empathy to figure out *why* the problem existed, and only then could we define the problem accurately.

After empathy and defining the problem, it's time to think about some solutions. The solutions are much better when you know what the actual problem is, so don't skip the step of gaining empathy. We thought our problem was that we had too many kids in the cafeteria at once, so we needed either a third lunch sitting or a longer lunch. When we had empathy, though, we found that the real problem was that the line moved too slowly.

The next step is **rapid prototyping**. Once you have a prototype for the solution to the problem, you try it out. Our prototype solution was to make the kids get in line first, not sit down. The challenge with prototyping is that education is typically very slow in any kind of change. This is where it is awesome to be a school principal, because you can make an immediate change and see if it works.

The next step is to **reflect**. What went well or didn't go well? Did the problem get solved? If it didn't, we were wrong in our first prototype. So, we **iterate**. We change our focus and see if we can solve the problem with our next prototype.

Now let's delve a little deeper into the design-thinking process.

Empathy

To start with empathy is to build an understanding of what a stakeholder feels and experiences. Gaining their perspective is vital. You can gain perspective in many ways, all of which involve action.

Let's look at this a little more closely. In my school, we noticed that the cafeteria staff were cleaning up lunch before all the kids were served. To gain perspective, we asked the cafeteria staff what they thought was happening. They said that they started cleaning up when the line ended. To gain empathy, we asked the kids why they didn't get lunch. We found out that they didn't want to wait in line, so were sitting down with their friends until the line was shorter. But they got distracted talking with their friends and took too long to get in line, and the cafeteria staff were so efficient that they saw no more kids in line and got to work cleaning up.

After you gain empathy, you need to go deeper. We knew the line moved fairly quickly and the cafeteria staff had many of the lunches prepped and ready to go. So we spent an afternoon in the cafeteria monitoring the situation, and saw that it took about 45 seconds from the time kids got their lunch to the time they were able to leave the lunch line. This doesn't seem like that long, but all that is left after getting your lunch is entering your number in the computer.

Through gaining empathy, we had identified the problem. We defined it as this: how do we get the kids their lunch fast enough that they don't mind waiting in line?

Rapid-prototype

In this key part of the design-thinking process, you need to rapid-prototype. This stage is not about getting everyone onboard; it is about simple, forward-thinking steps in the right direction. We're not talking about school-wide initiatives that will be big changes, although this process also works for those larger initiatives. What we are focusing on here is ensuring that we are making incremental improvements to the experience.

Our first prototype in solving our cafeteria problem was to not let the kids sit down until they had their lunch. We made this decision based on the perspective of the cafeteria staff. But the students didn't like this

Empathy-gaining strategies

- Surveys.
- Shadow a student (or teacher, parent, community member).
- Go through the process yourself.
- Just talk to people.

prototype solution and it quickly turned into a nightmare to manage kids who were not getting their food fast enough and were standing in line for too long. The result was annoyed and hungry kids.

Reflect

After we prototype, we need to see if we have solved the problem. Sometimes, we solve problems that we didn't know we had. Other times, we create new problems with our solution. Neither of these are bad. The idea here is to continue to improve.

Our first prototype didn't solve our lunch problem. So, after reflecting on the experience of the kids, we installed a second computer for collecting their lunch numbers. What we saw was a reduction to 11 seconds per student to get their food. That was significantly better than 45 seconds! And guess what happened? The kids stopped waiting for the line to go down before getting their lunches. They knew they wouldn't have to wait long for their food. With this prototype, the last of the 200 kids had food and was sitting down after just 10 minutes.

Iterate

When we reflected further, we realized that there were still things we could do better. We now have an aide stationed at the computers to make sure the right kids get credited with the food purchase, ensure we meet federal regulations, and assist if there are any issues. Initially, the aide was just looking on, waiting for the kids to enter their numbers, but we found we could streamline the system even more by having the aide enter the numbers for the kids, so they can get through even faster. This important additional change removed all bottlenecks from the system. Now, students get their food and, most of the time, go right to their seat after receiving a smile from the aide assisting them.

Why go through this process?

When you go out of your way to make the experience better for students, they understand that you are there for *them*. Kids often feel invisible in the adult world, and even though schools are about kids, they are run by adults. That makes it difficult for students to know how to improve their

own experience. Many schools are making great efforts to include kids in the process of making the school better, but many students still feel like there is nothing they can do to change their situation in their school.

As we will see, making a school focused on kids is important, but changes need to happen in order for our schools to truly focus on students.

The leadership experience

Didn't I just say that schools need to be focused on students? Shouldn't I focus on the student experience, first?

Sadly, no.

As a school principal, can you make a significant change to the student experience if you are constantly running around putting out fires? Can you seek empathy if you are constantly running from one emergency to the next? You can't. Chris LoCurto calls this the "leadership crazy cycle". But it doesn't have to be crazy. We will delve more into how to solve the leadership crazy cycle in part 1, but I want to touch on it here.

There are two major roles that a principal fills in schools: manager and instructional leader. We'll save the roles of mediator, confidant, coach, supporter, nurse, and so many more for later. The work that is in your job description is really about being a manager or an instructional leader.

In order to improve the student experience, you need to improve your own experience first. This means carving out time for tasks that are important and urgent, and delegating the things that aren't (the Eisenhower matrix is a useful tool for this; see page 32).

Two key ways of getting out of the leadership crazy cycle are learning to say no and scheduling your time, thus gaining control over your managerial duties. Here are a few things you can do to achieve this.

1. Define what is an emergency and what can wait. This is a challenge, because many days seem like they are full of emergencies.
2. Block out time on your calendar for specific tasks and ensure this is respected by your secretary and staff. Include classroom observations in your blocked-out time.
3. Prioritize kids being in class. When kids are sent to the principal's office, they are missing out on class. I have found success in dealing

with this by having students who come to the office put their issues down on paper. This gives the principal something to refer to, in order to see if the issue is urgent or not.

The second part of being a principal is instructional leadership. In order for you to be an effective instructional leader, you have to find ways to make sure your managerial duties do not overshadow your instructional duties. To improve your experience as an instructional leader, you need to:

1. Be in classrooms!
2. Pay attention to best practices in instruction.
3. Improve your ability to coach teachers effectively.
4. Provide opportunities for teachers to learn from each other.

If you are stuck in the leadership crazy cycle, you won't be able to focus on these priorities. And if you're going to improve anyone else's experience, your school experience cannot be that of the crazy cycle. Here are some questions to help you consider your experience as a leader.

- Do you have the time you need to make effective plans?
- Do you enjoy coming to work?
- Do you have time to work *on* your school instead of just *in* your school?
- Do you have time to accomplish all the tasks that are before you?
- Can you make timely decisions where you are not rushed or pressured into a choice?
- Do you work more than 40 hours a week, not including supervision?

The teacher experience

Teachers need support! Plain and simple. Their workload is ever-increasing and a study has shown that the teacher experience is leading to 44% of new teachers quitting within the first five years.¹

¹ Madeline Will, "5 Things to Know About Today's Teaching Force," *Education Week*, 2018, [tinyurl.com/y3zcg7](https://www.edweek.org/technology/story/2018/07/16/5-things-to-know-about-todays-teaching-force.html)

Teachers are overburdened with rising class sizes, slashed budgets, unfunded mandates, and standardized testing. But the main reason why teachers need support is that they are human beings. Everybody needs support to be more successful. (An aside about support: supporting someone doesn't mean you give them whatever they want; it means you give them what they *need*.)

The educator and author Jeff Zoul has talked to me about how there are more bullying incidents among students in schools where teacher are bullies, and we can extrapolate that to suggest that there are teacher bullies where there are principal bullies. People often joke that leaders are on the “dark side.” This phrase always annoys me, because it sets up the adversarial relationship from the word go and we don't need that in education. We are on the same team.

What the teacher experience means is that a teacher comes to work where she is appreciated, respected, and given the opportunity to do the things necessary to help kids achieve at high levels in all areas of their development.

At Chris LoCurto's Next-Level Leadership LIVE Event 2017, I heard that many employees leave their profession because of their leaders. With so many teachers quitting education, school leaders must take a hard look at themselves and see where they can improve. One of the most beneficial things we can do is to gain insight into the personalities of the teachers in our buildings, and then communicate with them in a way that will help them to be the best they can be. The type of personality test doesn't matter. What matters is having a framework for talking about these issues. I like using the DISC test because it focuses on communication, which I believe to be at the center of nearly every problem we have as humans.

It is vitally important for you to know your own personality profile, in order to be self-aware, but it is incumbent on you to also train your staff and students to be self-aware. You do this by knowing their personalities and adapting yourself to meet their needs.

The student experience

Schools are not designed for kids. There, I said it. They are designed for adults. There are so many things that get in the way of schools being for

kids: negotiated agreements, board policies, bell schedules, curriculums, grades that are used to control students, and so much more. When parents ask kids what they learned at school that day, they typically respond, “Nothing.” Sadly, this is not far from the truth. Many schools are not focused on what kids are learning, but instead on how compliant they are.

Rather than focusing on what is good for adults, today's school leaders need to gain empathy for students and figure out what works for *them*. Often, what works for kids is harder to enact than what works for adults. The factory model of education was great when we needed factory workers, but our kids' futures will be more different from this than we can possibly imagine.

In the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic closed schools all over the world. The factory model of education that was based on the “sage on the stage” standing in front of 30 kids was no longer possible. Suddenly, students, teachers, and parents were all working and learning from home. The system was completely unprepared for this change, which was immediate and revolutionary. Educators reacted quickly and did their best to support students. Most importantly, millions of children *still learned*.

Back in school, we need to take the time to actually listen to students and *hear* what they are saying. It is possible. There are leaders out there who are connecting with their students in a powerful way and making school more meaningful for them. I talk about a few of these leaders in part 1.

Many buzzwords exist around this topic: standards-based grading, personalized learning, Genius Hour, 20% time, growth mindset, grit, perseverance, co-teaching, and many more. These need to be more than buzzwords. We need these ideas to be the basis for how we teach our students. The skills our students require to be successful are much more aligned with soft skills than they are with the curriculum maps put out by your curriculum department.

I invite you to truly listen and find out what the kids in your school need. Not what the Department of Education, or state commissioner, or even your local school board says they need. Listen to your students – and adapt.

The parent and community experience

Want to know how to really distance yourself from the people in your community? Judge them. They don't even need to hear you say anything bad about them. Judging your parents and community creates a divide between you and them that can rarely be bridged.

Your community needs communication. Don't give up on that. Focus and make sure your message is getting out in a multitude of ways. Be on all the social media you can handle and send out as much information as possible. Spend a lot of time celebrating the great things you do. Joe Sanfelippo, superintendent in Fall Creek, Wisconsin, has created a movement around #gocrickets. In fact, in Fairbanks, Alaska, I am wearing a "Go Crickets!" shirt while typing this. I couldn't be much farther from Fall Creek, but Sanfelippo's branding has reached all the way up here and had an impact on me. Do we all need to be like him? No. But our communities deserve to hear about the great things that are happening in our schools every day. And it has to be about more than just sports. If it is only sports, we are promoting a very small segment of our school.

Think about what it looks and feels like to enter your school from a parent or community perspective. One door signifies that "all are welcome," while the other door lists all the things you can't do in the school. I'm sure risk management was involved in that decision. Somewhere, in a room far away from any school, someone said, "We need to make sure that people know drugs aren't allowed in our school. I know, let's make sure that nobody within 50ft of the building can misunderstand that by plastering it all over every entrance."

Is that really necessary? Probably not. Let's make sure that school is a welcoming and inviting place for parents and the wider community.

Designing a better experience

There are three types of school leader:

1. **Managers.** They try to make sure nothing breaks and spend their time putting out fires.
2. **Leaders.** They seek to have a vision and lead the school to achieve that vision. They try to solve problems before they exist.

3. **Designers.** They try to break things that aren't working, regardless of who those things are not working for. They design their school to meet the needs of the stakeholders.

I want to show you how to create and adapt your school according to the needs of your school community; to show you how to become a *designer*, not just a manager or a leader. This book will help you to design a transformative school experience for the teacher, the student, the parent/community, and the leader. That's you! Because if you improve your own experience, then you will be able to radically transform the experiences of others.

Much of the research for this book came from my *Transformative Principal* podcast and the Transformative Leadership Summit: School Experience. The Transformative Leadership Summit is an online learning conference designed to explore and expand ideas about what is possible in education. In the Transformative Leadership Summit: School Experience, Danny Bauer and I interviewed more than 30 specialists to figure out how to improve the school experience. Many of the illuminating quotes that you will read in this book came out of those interviews.