



Schools Produce What They Are Designed to Produce

A Design-Thinking Approach to Organizational Improvement in K–12 Education

Every school leader has faced the same frustrating pattern: a persistent problem, a genuinely committed staff, and results that don't move no matter how hard everyone works. The default response is to look for who isn't performing. This paper argues that the more useful, and more often correct, question is different: what is this organization's design currently producing, and is that what anyone actually intended?

The Default Diagnosis, and Why It Fails

When a school's results disappoint, the instinct in most conference rooms is to look for the person responsible. A teacher isn't managing the classroom well enough. A coach isn't pushing hard enough. A principal isn't holding people accountable. This instinct is understandable — it's simpler to fix a person than a system, and it feels like action.

It's also usually wrong, or at least incomplete. Individual blame treats a symptom as if it were the disease. It rarely explains why the same problem shows up across multiple staff members, multiple years, or multiple schools with different people in the same roles. When a pattern is that consistent, the more honest explanation is structural: something about how the work is organized is reliably producing this result, regardless of who is doing it.

“If outcomes persist, examine the design before assigning blame.”

The Core Principle

Organizations are not accidents. Every school has routines, expectations, and structures that were either deliberately built or allowed to form by default — and those structures are, in a very real sense, producing the results the school gets. A school where instructional coaching happens on a deliberate, sequenced plan will tend to produce more consistent instruction than one where coaching happens reactively, no matter how talented any individual coach is. The design is doing real work, whether or not anyone chose it on purpose.

This isn't a claim that individual skill and effort don't matter. They matter enormously. It's a claim about where to look first when a result is disappointing and persistent: not at whether people are trying hard enough, but at whether the system around them was built to produce success or was simply inherited, assumed, or left to chance.

A Closer Look: Two Schools, One Population

Consider two hypothetical elementary schools serving nearly identical populations: similar demographics, similar funding, similar teacher credentials on paper. One consistently produces stronger instructional results than the other. The difference isn't a mystery once you look past the roster and at the design underneath it.

Riverside Elementary	Hillcrest Elementary
New teachers are paired with a mentor for their first year, with a shared, written observation protocol both use.	New teachers are paired with a mentor informally, at each mentor's discretion, with no shared protocol.

Riverside Elementary	Hillcrest Elementary
Instructional coaching follows a six-week sequence built around one schoolwide priority at a time.	Instructional coaching addresses whatever a coach notices during that week's visit.
Grade-level teams review student work together every Friday, using a shared set of questions.	Grade-level teams meet weekly, but the agenda is mostly logistics and pacing.

Nothing here is about talent. The teachers at both schools may be equally capable, equally dedicated, equally new to the profession. What differs is what each organization built around them — and that difference, compounded across a school year, is often enough to explain results that would otherwise look like a talent gap.

Telling the Difference

Not every disappointing result is a design problem, and not every design problem looks the same. A few honest signals tend to distinguish the two:

Signals That Point to Design

- The same problem recurs across different people in the same role, year after year.
- New hires struggle in predictable, similar ways, regardless of their prior experience.
- A strong individual's practices don't transfer when they move to a different role or leave.
- Fixing the problem in one classroom or department doesn't change the pattern elsewhere.

Signals That Point to an Individual

- The pattern is genuinely isolated — one person, one classroom, not repeated elsewhere.
- Other people in the same role, under the same conditions, produce clearly different results.
- The gap closes quickly with targeted, individual support, and doesn't reappear.

In practice, most persistent, organization-wide problems turn out to be design problems wearing an individual's name. That's not a comfortable conclusion for anyone who has already spent a year trying to coach a specific person harder — but it's usually the more accurate one, and the only one that actually prevents the same problem from reappearing with the next person in the role.

What Redesign Actually Requires

Once a problem is correctly understood as a design issue, three disciplines tend to separate organizations that actually fix it from those that just talk about fixing it:

Evidence Before Assumption

Redesign built on what a leader assumes is happening, rather than what real evidence shows is happening, tends to solve the wrong problem well. Direct observation, real documents, and honest conversation almost always surface something the assumption missed.

Sequencing, Not Everything at Once

Organizations that try to fix every system simultaneously usually fix none of them well. The organizations that see real, lasting change tend to name the single highest-leverage design problem, address it deliberately, and only then move to the next one.

Authority to Act

A well-designed plan handed to someone without the authority, time, or resources to implement it will not produce the intended result, no matter how sound the design is. Redesign has to be matched with real capacity to carry it out — otherwise the gap between plan and practice becomes its own kind of design problem.

Conclusion

The instinct to look for who is responsible when something isn't working is natural, and sometimes correct. But for the problems that persist year after year, across different people, in the same roles — the more honest and more useful question is almost always about design, not effort. Schools produce what they are designed to produce. The organizations that improve fastest are the ones willing to look at that design honestly, and redesign it on purpose.

If this way of thinking about your organization's results resonates, we'd welcome a conversation. Reach out through edurizonconsulting.com.