

Our Design Challenge Story: Reimagining Schools of Hope in Middle School Spring 2019

by Lauren W. Morris

Summary

ROCKiT supported a Design Team through stages found in human-centered and liberatory design projects (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test) as well as the additional notice and reflect stages of Liberatory design. The team interviewed over 40 students despite school closing due to weather. With the stories collected, a target client was defined and the challenge statement reframed. From there, the ROCKiT team facilitated the brainstorming of ideas and tested for assumptions. Monthly council meetings were held to inform and gain insight from Middle School's Schools of Hope stakeholders before preparing for larger, full scale prototyping.

During the process, the Design Team learned that "Dion" (a persona for the target student)

- Wants to be recognized.
- Wants to be seen and heard by teachers and other school staff
- Wants to have leadership opportunities
- Is motivated by helping others
- And wants to refine their study skills through binder organization, homework help, more time, quiet spaces, and 1:1 time

In order to feel academically successful.

In the end, the Design Team decided to try a larger, full scale prototype at one current Schools of Hope Middle School site with ROCKiT support. We plan to take our learnings from the 90 day challenge and its outcomes to continue to improve how we approach subsequent challenges and opportunities in the upcoming years.

ROCKiT learned a lot about the complexities of working on large, interorganizational challenges. We also discovered that it is extremely stressful and therefore immensely difficult for a new design team to learn about the components of the design process while simultaneously trying to solve their own, real challenge. Because of this, we are drafting a kick-off component to challenges in order to teach team members the ROCKiT innovation process in a comprehensive and less risky manner.

The Challenge

In MMSD, Black youth are experiencing academic success at rates significantly lower than their white counterparts. As a matter of fact, Wisconsin has the largest documented gaps. According to the MMSD Strategic Framework Metrics Summary for 2018-19, White middle school students are proficient in their MAP testing scores at rates at least 50% more than those of their African American counterparts. Overall change for White students in Math and Literacy MAP proficiency since 2012 are both +8 percentage points while African American improvement are +5 and +7 percentage points for Math and literacy respectively. Although MAP scoring is only half the story, it is a huge statewide indicator and Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) has dedicated itself to overcoming these numbers while making a strong effort to promote and center “Black Excellence” in its most recent Strategic Framework.

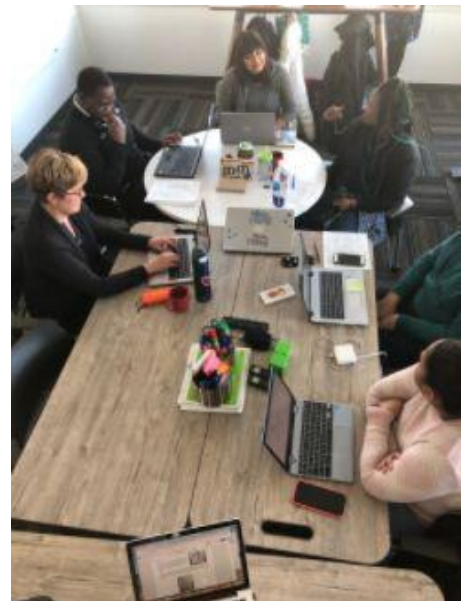
With math and reading test scores not growing as greatly as hoped, it was clear that out Black youth in middle school needed something different than we were providing in order to be both academically and socially successful. That’s where looking at amazing programs like the Middle School Schools of Hope Tutoring program came into play. It is already hitting a ton of our student population; how could we reimagine its structures and systems to better benefit targeted groups of students.

ROCKiT Preparation: Getting to 90 days

ROCKiT is MMSD's innovation team. In a partnership with American Family's Institute for Corporate and Social Impact, we are working to intentionally cultivate, develop and grow MMSD's capacity to innovate around complex, equity-based problems in order to find new opportunities so our students, staff and community to thrive. The ROCKiT innovative process is a combination of Human Centered, Liberatory and Service Design, Lean and Agile Scrum. A lot goes into setting the stage for a successful challenge, including researching the ecosystem of the challenge, determining potential areas of focus, important stakeholders and which perspectives to tap into or maintain on the design team.

For the Schools of Hope Middle Schools project, we needed to recruit perspective from not just MMSD but from the two other major stakeholders and leaders of Schools of Hope in the middle schools, Urban League of Greater Madison and The United Way of Dane County. Convincing people to dedicate three full days of their week for three months to this, while maintaining at least some of their regular responsibilities was a heavy lift, but with much convincing we were able to so and ended up with a team of eight people! There were two men and six women on the design team. Four of the eight people identified as People of Color. The initial Design Team included:

- two ROCKiT innovation “externs” and teachers from MMSD (one with high school experience and the other elementary)
- a current Middle School Schools of Hope coordinator,
- a Madison School and Community Recreation coordinator who had previously worked with the Schools of Hope tutoring program,



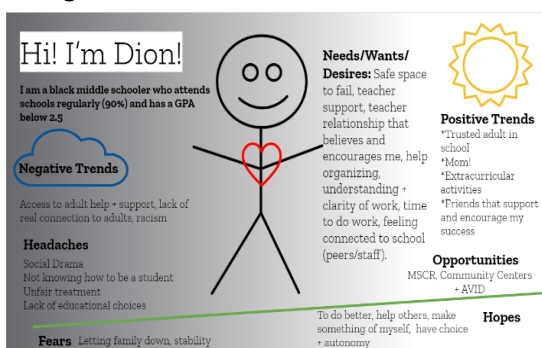
- the Urban League Director of middle school programming,
- a project manager from American Family Insurance who is familiar with the Design Thinking approach and provided an outside perspective to the work
- and even a local high school student.

At regular intervals, in this case every 30 days, a council of leaders and decision makers from the various stakeholders represented got together to meet with the Design Team for updates, feedback, and decision making.

The first 30 Days: Grounding the team and learning about 'Dion'

The SOH design team began to dig deep into the needs, wants and greatest pain points of our Black middle school youth by interviewing over 40 students despite a polar vortex and school closings! The team set out and interviewed middle school youth from all experiences and backgrounds, wrangling anyone we could access. Teams visited multiple community centers and even met with students via video chat. Students were asked to describe their *"perfect middle schools," "define success," "someone they see as successful,"* and *"the last time they felt themselves to be successful."* They were also asked about *"future goals," "how they deal with adversity,"* and *"what things help them to be at their best."*

Using the interviews, the Design Team determined that the client, lovingly named "Dion (Deon, Dionne, etc)" is a Black, middle school student with good attendance (over 90%) who's academics aren't where they could be (currently below a 2.5 grade point average. And from our data we learned that Dion wants:



- To Be Recognized.
 - To be seen and heard by teachers and other school staff
- To Have Leadership Opportunities
 - Motivated by helping others
- To Refine Their Study Skills
 - Binder organization, homework help, more time, quiet space, 1:1 time to feel academically successful

During the first council meeting, the design team presented updates on data collected, inspirations researched and what was learned. Council was shown trends discovered in the empathy interviews and introduced to Dion and a revised problem statement, *"How might we leverage Schools of Hope - Middle School's resources to increase Black middle school students' academic achievement?"* The initial council meeting wasn't about decision making but about properly grounding the work by identifying potential limitations for the project, pointing out blind spots that the design may need to check into, and bringing up any contexts and changes that impact the success of the challenge.

Days 30-60: Solutions and more solutions

During the second phase of the Middle School's Schools of Hope challenge, with the help of ROCKiT, the Design Team used the empathy themes from the first 30 days to brainstorm solutions from class pets to TV commercials celebrating their academic successes, a 24-hour 211 homework hotline, study skills games to special robes, robots, monthly motivational speakers, punching bags to get frustrations out, and a variety of rewards and consequences.

Until this point, SOH had been a tutoring program, where qualifying students worked with local (primarily UW student) volunteers from 15-30 minutes at least 3 times a year (ideally at least 15 times) in their respective classrooms. Although students found mentorship with their tutors and enjoyed their time together, the model wasn't moving the academic needle for enough students in its current state. That is where the resource center and accompanying focal course came into play. The new framework would give students a chance to meet more regularly for assistance, because it would be offered more widely and because (for at least some of them) there is dedicated time in their schedule for this social and academic work. But the Design Team needed to see if our vision of a resource center and course would be something that students would actually desire and really participate in. They decided to simulate a space, contact a couple teachers to let them know it was available and host a focus group to simply ask students. What we did learn in these focus groups is that students enjoyed the idea but didn't want it to ONLY be available at lunch or after school. Lunch is socializing time and after school conflicts with clubs and sports. They desired a space with tables, comfy seating, fidgets for focus, snacks and no phones!

Students were very excited about the potential of the program, and although desirability is a huge factor in human-centered design it is not the only factor in determining how solid a solution is. There were a ton of things the Design Team needed to test for and they needed to compose a well-rounded list to prioritize and tackle. ROCKiT helped the Design Team brainstorm potential assumptions to test such as teacher and volunteer buy-in, best location for such a center (in or near a library, stand-alone space, etc), how students will access and enter the space, what will be their pull to go, to stay, will they trust classmates as tutors, what times of the day/ semester/ year would be most beneficial, what kinds of trainings and preps are necessary and so on.

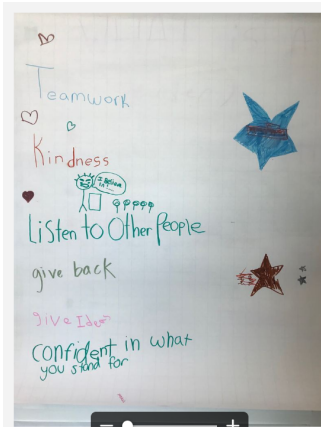
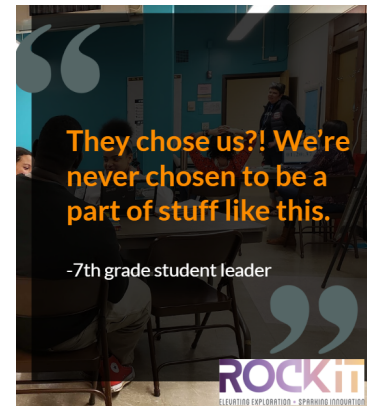
Council members had similar questions at the 60 day mark. They wanted to know when the center space would be offered. What the staffing model would look like? What specific services would be offered and by whom (for the resource center and for the leadership course)? What are the anticipated communication tools to students, staff, families and program stakeholders? Would this model hold up long-term or would it quickly lose its shine and appeal?

The second council meeting did include a decision point. Members were charged with deciding if the Design Team should continue to explore their resource center and leadership course idea or if they should further research other potential solutions and models. The Council chose the former and when asked how they saw themselves supporting the work offered up a variety of contacts, ideas, resources and inspirations to check out for curriculum and other effective resource center models.



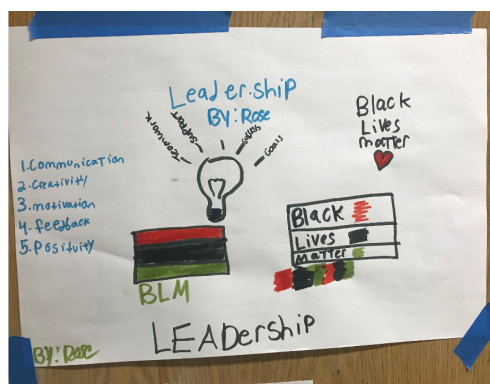
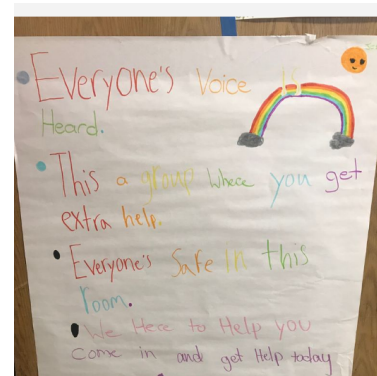
Days 60-90: Taking Potential Solutions to Schools

In the early versions of prototyping the Design Team looked strictly at the academic component of the need, thinking about how they could bring student grades up. They thought through homework helplines, online chats, and things of that nature but were still thinking in a deficit mindset. After really digging into the themes of what motivated the students and what they wanted support in the Design Team pivoted into more affirming and encouraging ideas. This is where they really doubled down on the leadership course, interviewing people from various (during and after school) programs, curriculum makers and other inspiration to figure out how they could acknowledge the various manifestations of leadership and hone the confidence and positive capabilities of our target students as middle school assets.



ROCKit's work is to push boundaries, go bold and question assumptions. It was definitely a challenge in mindset to ask staff to recommend the quiet, the not always positively impactful leaders, and the overlooked for their prototype, but these were the Dions the team expected to target and student reactions proved they might be on the right path. Chosen students gasped with great surprise at being chosen and acknowledged by staff members as leaders. One student commented that they're "never chosen to be part of stuff like this."

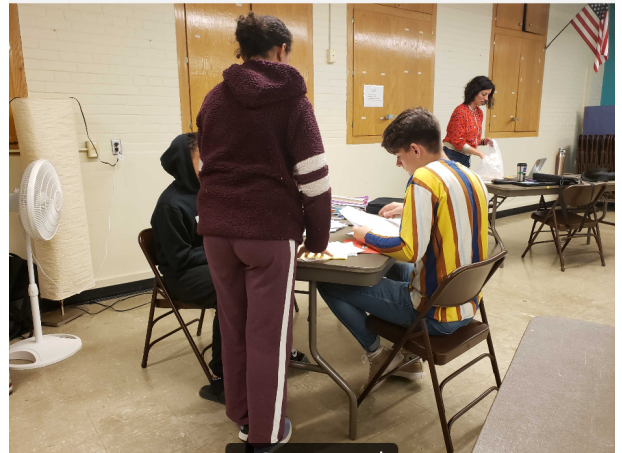
The team spent six days trying out a prototype of the leadership cohort and center. For this simulation, designers stood in as the Schools of Hope coordinator and tutors while the real coordinator and tutors continued their regular support of students in the classrooms. Twelve students were given a mini training on leadership and expectations in the space. They brainstormed what leadership was and then compared it to the DPI/MMAS standards for leadership:



- open to feedback
 - works well with others
 - shows creativity
 - takes the lead
 - helps guide teams
 - shares and assigns work
 - the golden rule/
- does what is right
- a problem solver
 - a decision maker
 - communicates well
 - teambuilding
 - Takes responsibility

Students were then tasked with coming up with as many ways as possible that each standard showed up in their lives. For example, helping a classmate pick up spilled handouts shows leadership by working well with others, doing what is right (the golden rule), and

taking responsibility (for the classroom community). Lastly, students stormed up that the center space should look like, sound like, and feel like they were signing peers into the space and assisting them with binder organization and coursework. Each student got at least two sessions in the center as a leader throughout the prototype and when given the opportunity to help others, they did! One day a student literally HOPPED at the chance to run over and greet a classmate who was coming in for assistance. Even students who were not in our targeted Dion group enjoyed the space. Designers overheard a male, African American student sad and concerned that he was new to the school and only found out about the center on our last day, "I'm mad that this is just my first time coming to this space just today."



At the end of the challenge, the design team recommended that stakeholders allow a group to prototype a full scale Student Resource Room that is led by students, staff, and Schools of Hope volunteers and a leadership course, for credit, in the fall of 2019 to continue to learn and assess the new program solution. In order to do so, resources would need to be granted to fund a new team of teachers, curriculum and instruction and Schools of Hope staff to flush out and lesson plan for the more robust prototype. The Council had the option to decide to persevere (invest in continuing the resource center and course), pivot (suggest to go in another direction), or stop (and discontinue the project altogether). The Council was impressed by all that had been done during the 90 day challenge, so much so that they asked for an additional 90 days to make sure that participants successfully wrapped up the work and were prepared to pass on materials to a group that would conduct a long-term prototype in a school.

The Extension: Preparing for a Full Length Prototype

The SOH Resource Center and Leadership course offers a safe space for students to be themselves and to see their personality traits and skill sets seen in a positive light. Too often we give opportunities for leadership and influence to students who fit into a very specific and inequitable model, highly dependent on grades. We have very narrow ideas of how creative and passionate present and aren't adept at finding the positive components of certain behaviors for our Black and Brown students, valuing them and building them. The purpose of this space is to turn those assumptions on their heads, acknowledging the excellence in our students and the wide array of ways leadership traits are exhibited. Ideally, this would be a place where students are able to gain mentorship and academic help as they bridge from the more supportive elementary schools to the more rigorous high schools while wading through physical, emotional, hormonal and social transformations. Additionally, designers wanted to provide a course that allows students to bridge credits for starting ahead in high school.

The purpose of the course is not only to position "Dions" in positive and successful relations to their peers (a huge factor in this age group) but it is also to staff (from whom they also desire approval and sometimes redemption). A huge factor in the success of this work is if staff members can shift in their thoughts and actions to mirror the changes being pushed in this program.

A great deal of this stage of the work was to condense findings for the summer design team, highlight needs within preparing and executing the resource center and leadership course that had been learned in student and staff interviews, focus groups and testing, and to begin to narrow metrics for success.

The Impact

As a result of this work, all stakeholders are rethinking the middle school programming, even if our leadership model doesn't pan out. As far as learnings, it seemed that everyone took bits of learning back to their jobs. Whether it was components of the design process to utilize, a renewed sense of purpose and excitement for the program, or the space and opportunity to innovate and challenge long standing assumptions, this process may have impact on MMSD, the United Way of Dane County, the Urban League of Greater Madison, the Schools of Hope program and the youth and staff involved in the prototyping for years to come.

As for ROCKiT, we learned a lot about the complexities of working on large, interorganizational challenges. We also discovered that learning about the components of the design process while simultaneously trying to solve one's own, real challenge can be extremely stressful and therefore immensely difficult. This has given us some insight into which components we need to strengthen as a group and work more intensely on. For example, teaching the innovation process to design members ahead of and out of the context of the project are important (which is something that we are being intentional about with our workshop series) because we noticed that learning aspects of the process, especially when it came down to solutioning and testing, were too stressful when it was crunch time. This experience solidified that innovation is a process and the services we provide as and to a school district are significantly different than the products produced in most Design Thinking contexts. We must create solutions that work not only for the clients, the students, "Dion" but also for the providers (the teachers, administrators, tutors and other stakeholders).