The Redesign of Hillsdale High School: Teacher Leadership as a System Property

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Introduction

Facing disengaged students and lagging achievement in the early 2000s, Hillsdale High School (Hillsdale) in San Mateo, California, undertook a teacher-led conversion from a traditional, factory-model secondary school to one redesigned around small learning communities (SLCs). The school created teaching teams, advisories, and heterogeneous classes while placing a premium on interdisciplinary, project-based learning. To do so, the school had to make trade-offs in an effort to make academic learning more meaningful and ensure every student is well known. In doing so, Hillsdale exemplifies many of the 10 Features of Successful High Schools where adults know students well, take collective responsibility for their success, and continually improve the academic and social side of learning.

Hillsdale, which serves approximately 1,500 students in an urban/suburban community near San Francisco International Airport, continues to report gains in student achievement and graduation rates even as its student body becomes increasingly diverse. But perhaps just as importantly, Hillsdale is also a school where teachers and students find joy in teaching and learning. In a recent survey, 82% of the students reported high levels of belonging—much higher than the district's other comprehensive high schools.

Over time, teacher leadership at Hillsdale has evolved into a *system property* through the interaction of four forces: (1) a collaborative culture where teachers focus on evidence of deeper student learning and relationships among the adults and young people; (2) structures that make authentic and deep teacher collaboration possible; (3) educators' shared responsibility for students' success; and (4) shared decision-making that empowers teachers to lead alongside administrators.

At Hillsdale, teacher leadership has been both a cause and a consequence of the redesign. Teacher leaders drove the initial work, while the school's cornerstones (principles and structures) cultivated every teacher as a leader in some way.

The narrative arc of this case study—built from recent interviews and previous research [1]—has been developed to inform the efforts of RedesignEd and the other networks of the California Secondary School Redesign Pilot. It is accompanied by a short yet powerful video highlighting the power of teacher leadership that spurs positive developmental relationships among young people and the adults who teach them.

Together, they paint a vivid picture of what teacher leadership can look like when master schedules are reinvented to drive deeper learning and when authentic assessment in high schools is designed for every adolescent to be well known by educators. This case study is intended to inform practitioners as they take systemic action in their own contexts to redesign secondary schools that prepare every young person for a rapidly changing world.

Importantly, the story of Hillsdale's redesign is one of early innovations and collective decisions that built the school's small learning community architecture over time. Small experiments became anchors for institution-building and transformation of structure and culture. Student assessment has been a key driver of the school's structure and culture of the redesign: collaboration, teacher leadership, shared-decision making. During the testing boom of the 2000s, Hillsdale developed a graduate profile with its own conception of achievement. See Appendix A for the redesign timeline.

> **There was the capacity for and permission to experiment, and then turn that innovation into structural changes that weren't so sweeping that people were instantly going to put their guard up against them.**
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> ***– Greg Jouriles, former Hillsdale social studies teacher and union leader***

Across the nation, the topic of reimagining the role of teachers has once again emerged. The case of teacher leadership at Hillsdale is different—it is the case of how to transform the factory model of teaching and learning so every teacher can lead in some way. It is also the case of how teachers and administrators, committed to small learning communities, resist the gravitational pull of the traditional, comprehensive high school anchored in standardized, efficiency-driven approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment. From the early 2000s through the pandemic of 2020, the school has had a relentless focus on establishing a graduate profile and creating a scope and sequence leading to students demonstrating what they know and can do.

In Jon Snyder's 2017 study of how five schools, including Hillsdale High School, organized teacher time, he observed that the participating schools "created (and continually re-created) the school schedule so that it would work better for the students...and, importantly, so that it would also work better to enable teachers to help each other do what was best for the students." [2] This narrative builds on Snyder's findings, organizing lessons around five themes: (1) the structure, culture, and power of teacher collaboration; (2) governance that reinforces authentic teacher and student leadership; (3) the building blocks of collaborative professionalism; (4) the role of the district and the teachers association; and (5) the future and Redesign 2.0.

1. The Structure, Culture, and Power of Teacher Collaboration

The job of teaching at Hillsdale is anchored by highly protected professional collaboration time during which teachers, administrators, and staff sit down in teams and deliberate. Sometimes subject-matter teams plan, execute, or evaluate learning cycles. Often, interdisciplinary teams that loop with the same students for two years as part of a "house" engage in what is known as Kid Talk—a structured, recurring time when the adults who teach the same students sit together and compare what they are seeing, hearing, and learning about each of them. The school's professional learning community structures are anchored in the cultural norm of teachers' connected autonomy where teaching teams exercise professional judgment inside a deliberately designed web of shared purpose, shared students, shared time, and shared responsibility.[3] Teachers retain a professional voice, but their practice is constantly shaped by colleagues, students, and shared inquiry.

Hillsdale is divided into lower and upper division houses in which core teachers in different subjects share the same 110–120 students for two years. Houses are divided into four advisories and students attend advisory classes along with their core classes and electives. In the lower division the core classes are math, science, English, and social science. In the upper division the core classes are English and social science. Because teachers share responsibility within a house, leadership almost inherently becomes a team sport: teachers can't easily retreat into isolated autonomy because the student experience is inherently collective and a driver of decisions and resource allocation. A teacher's classroom, for example, may move in support of the house and need for educators to work in close daily proximity to one's teammates.

Kid Talk operates as a weekly leadership routine within the SLC—structured, recurring, and practical. The house team (which includes an administrator serving as a house team advisor, a counselor, and a resource specialist) shares observations, surfaces patterns, builds a fuller picture of students' lives, and coordinates pedagogical actions across classrooms. Collective expertise, coordinated support, empathy, and problem-solving that advance students' academic, social, and emotional well-being also reinforce connected autonomy and teacher leadership.

Kid Talk is one of the primary school structures where common beliefs, norms, and values are practiced, learned, and passed down to new teachers when they are hired. House teams have the opportunity to regularly deliberate over what they are seeing in students they share. Matt

Springman, who has been teaching social studies at Hillsdale for 11 years, says teachers look at "trends, common things popping up from academics to mental health, to things that are happening at home that are affecting what's happening here." In these structures teachers try to figure out how to help particular students flourish. Springman notes:

> At Kid Talk we get at least four different perspectives on the kid. Each of us gets to see that kid in different spaces and in a different time. You get to see all these threads and facets of a kid that you normally wouldn't. I think it makes you more patient...less reactive...able to deal with frustration a little more.

Danielle Flores, who has been teaching at Hillsdale for 18 years, adds:

> Kid Talk really keeps me open. I am a room in a house, and this house is also a village... Kid Talk keeps me open to what I'm sending out in the world into this village and also what I'm receiving. And Kid Talk keeps me honest about that.

For educators who want to learn about our redesign model, I personally think that seeing Kid Talk in action would be the single most compelling professional learning experience for them. It forces a conversation around *why* (because we set personalization as a cornerstone), what (what has to be changed to allow it), and *how* (how we moved the culture to get to this point), and it illustrates what is most important for Hillsdale to share: backward design from a set of commonly agreed upon values, our cornerstones, to creating a culture of change to rearranging resources (time, FTE, etc.) to teacher ownership of the model.

– Jeff Gilbert, Current Hillsdale High School Principal

Ashley Milton, Hillsdale's assistant principal, points to the centrality of the master schedule as a key structure that deepens and sustains the school's culture and the value of deeply knowing each student. It is an intricate and deeply contextualized process, involving both technical moves and human judgment. She says:

> You have to know your teachers...the data must be precise...Your first priority is to block prep periods for each house and the second priority is to block prep periods for each content team.

The school's Kid Talk structures along with the culture of connected autonomy among teachers make more powerful and accountable forms of collaboration inevitable—and leadership unavoidable. Within the master schedule each house core team has a daily common prep period that allows it to meet during the school day to plan the advisory curricula and to engage in Kid Talk.

The Master Schedule and Trade-Offs: The Relational Backbone of Secondary School Redesign

Ashley Milton, assistant principal, treats the master schedule as the backbone of Hillsdale's redesign: it is where the school's values about houses, advisory, and teacher collaboration become real or fall apart. She pointed out, as did Craig Childress, president of the local teachers association, that the school had to make hard choices and make real trade-offs including offering fewer electives and a narrower menu of Advanced Placement courses as well as eliminating siloed pre-algebra, reading, and AVID support classes to lower student loads as well as protect this web of teacher collaboration, advisory, and Kid Talk structures. These structures are now the heart of the school's approach to ensuring that every student is well known and has a sense of belonging. Protected teacher collaboration and smaller student loads were purchased through explicit resource trade-offs, not just cultural goodwill.

Each grade-level subject-area content team also has a common prep period. Additionally, most schoolwide professional development time is dedicated to house or subject matter team meetings. While many teachers can and do voluntarily meet outside of the school day, interviews revealed that most collaboration, averaging about four to six hours a week, takes place within the schedule.

Teacher leadership develops within these daily collaborative structures and relationships. There is no formal hierarchy. Teachers take turns facilitating. They learn to run effective meetings, manage projects, solve problems, develop professional empathy, and become better community members. As Flores says:

> Every teacher is a leader in their classroom. The major difference here is that we have to be very intentional about keeping our doors open so that our leadership is not siloed ...leadership here is not about being in front, but about all of us being side by side.

Flores describes leadership as happening "everywhere"—in formal spaces (committees, planning) and informal ones (hallways, copy room)—because the culture expects shared problem-solving and the norm is one of visible classroom practice and collective expertise.

Both teachers and administrators describe school leadership in terms of connected autonomy—relying on each other's experience and instructional expertise in leading the work. Gilbert has trouble understanding principals who find their work lonely because at Hillsdale "the weight is carried so evenly." Gilbert leads with his teaching colleagues:

> I think we do a really good job of developing teacher leadership...You're a new teacher, it's so important you're with a core group of teachers who meet consistently because you are learning leadership skills there. Then you may take a leap and work on a committee or become a house leader or department head, but you've been cultivated to be a leader from the moment you've stepped in.

Two newer teachers, Gus Dexheimer (English Language Arts and Ethnic Studies) and Jackie Sanchez (social studies) echoed Gilbert's view of teacher leadership. They also talked about

how current teacher leaders are central to continuing the redesign journey by intentionally recruiting, selecting, and inducting the next generation. Both Dexheimer and Sanchez came to Hillsdale through professional networks and word of mouth. Sanchez had friends who were student teachers at Hillsdale and repeatedly told her how deeply teachers knew students: "they always shared something so positive about how their...mentor teacher just really knows the kids." She remembered them saying, "it's so cool...the teachers just know them," even though the house system and looping were initially hard to understand from the outside.

Both teachers described how the team structure inducted them into teaching with more support than the vast majority of new recruits in other traditional schools experience. They also praised the school's two instructional coaches who have reduced teaching loads to provide time to support their teaching colleagues. Later Gilbert told us that Hillsdale is skeptical of some coaching models, such as teachers on special assignment (TOSAs) who no longer teach students and drop into classrooms from outside the daily work of teaching.

Dexheimer also points out the complexity of entering Hillsdale's teaching team structures. "At first," she says, "it is hard to wrap your head around all of the interlocking teams." She talked about four teams of which she is a part: her humanities colleague with whom she co-teaches; the larger humanities team; her social studies team; and her interdisciplinary advisory team. She said, "Everyone who I've met here is...super invested in professional learning and improving their practice."

As a result, new teachers see how more seasoned, expert colleagues teach and think about their teaching. Dexheimer and Sanchez admire the veterans in their midst, and hope and expect to be able to teach as effectively as they do.

Jesse Boise came to Hillsdale as a new teacher in 2007, later left the school and then recently returned as an assistant principal to work with and learn from Gilbert, whom he deeply admires. He spoke about how teacher learning and leadership are indelibly linked and anchored in the school's core structures rather than formal titles. As a homegrown Hillsdale teacher and now an assistant principal, Boise pointed out that when administrators lead with teachers, they gain influence as facilitators, stewards of process, and protectors of collaborative time. He also noted how the same school's structures shaped him as a teacher leader and an administrator.

Both Gilbert and Boise see the principal as a guardian of the school's rituals, language, artifacts, and cornerstones—so much more than leaders of curriculum and assessment.

In addition, Boise noted that a major role the principal plays alongside teaching colleagues is recruiting and hiring. He said that Hillsdale recruits for strong pedagogy, but also for humility, vulnerability, and willingness to place the team and system above individual preference.

2. Governance That Reinforces Authentic Teacher and Student Leadership

Teachers develop as leaders as they engage in Hillsdale's shared decision-making model. Springman asserts:

> It feels like here if you want your voice to be heard, it will be heard. There's a process for decision-making and it can be slow and frustrating, but the alternative is you're being told what to do. Because shared decision-making is embedded in the school through really clear structures, any new initiative will last beyond any particular administrator or someone who's going to come in with big ideas and save the school. But then as soon as that administrator leaves, things start over. Hillsdale has built a governance structure that not only encourages teacher leadership but also cultivates and sustains it.

The school, in its redesign journey, developed its own Constitution as a number of teacher leaders realized the need for a new decision-making model to accommodate the SLC structure. Greg Jouriles recognized that the teachers association had an effective model, anchored in democratic principles, so he led an effort to adapt it in developing the school's own Constitution.

The formal document, which is routinely reviewed, outlines the school's mission and cornerstones: equity, personalization, rigor, and shared decision-making. It codifies an agreed-upon decision-making framework and amendment process. Leadership is built by repeated participation in deliberation over important matters. The Constitution, born from the association's approach to shared leadership, codified *whole-school academic rituals* that spurred the premium placed on autonomous and connected teachers who made teaching more of a public, not private act.

Hillsdale has a small number of formal teacher leader roles—notably house leaders and department chairs, which come with modest stipends. However, the *Smaller Learning Community Council*, made up of house leaders, elected at-large delegates, administrators, students, and parents, has become a major locus of power and over time houses became

more important than departments in managing schoolwide decisions.

The school draws on rotating committees (clustered conversations) to study issues, generate proposals, and bring them to the SLC for votes after deliberations in house meetings. Occasionally, for constitutional amendments or major programs, such as a schoolwide assessment program, the whole faculty will vote.

The school has also codified another structure—a *Council of Elders*, which meets yearly to help advise the administration on limited but critical decisions around staffing and teacher placements. The Elders must have at least six years of teaching experience at the school, and as Milton told us, "they help handle sensitive power questions"—who moves to upper division, who shifts houses, and how to respond when teaching partnerships aren't working.

Rather than the principal persuading staff to implement "the plan," the structure positions the principal's work as facilitation, stewardship, and execution.

Gilbert, who has been the principal of the school since 2006, noted that a future administrator who replaces him will not be able to undo the structures—and the professional culture—that have been built. He noted, "A new principal cannot undo this...they wouldn't get in the door."

Gilbert points out that most principals are expected to be ***the leader*** whose job is to spearhead new initiatives or to be the short-term turnaround specialist. He says this is the wrong way to think about school leadership. He asserted, "the most important lens for a site administrator is viewing the institution as an entity that has a culture and a language of its own apart from the people who happen to be here." Gilbert, as the principal of the school, says: "It is energizing to be part of a community constantly evolving towards a vision."

Cultures don't just happen but are deliberately crafted by thinking about artifacts, rituals, language, and practice. And this requires shifting the role of the principal and their role in leading the school.

– Jeff Gilbert, Current Hillsdale High School Principal

Teacher collaboration and agency seem to produce a more personalized and engaging experience for students, who themselves feel greater agency. Emma Sevilla, a graduating senior in the Class of 2026, spoke appreciatively about the web of adults who know her, "It's rare to have one teacher who knows you. Here I feel like…I have a whole bunch of them."

Sevilla repeatedly linked her confidence and willingness to speak up, ask for help, and push herself to take academic and social risks to Hillsdale's structure. Having the same core teachers for two years creates an intimate and safe learning environment where students feel comfortable and respected—key conditions for self-directed learning.

For example, Sevilla pointed to her history class as a place where the teacher creates space to really think, connect content to real-world issues, and recognize patterns in history—hallmarks of deeper learning that require student agency (mastery of substantive knowledge and its application, sensemaking of current events). She told us how so many more students lead discussions, test ideas, and revise thinking rather than staying quiet. Teachers know each other well, inside of small learning communities, which leads to them knowing their students as a collective.

Recently, the school began supporting a Senior Symposium, built from performance assessment prototypes of the 2010s, in which seniors organize and teach underclassmen about topics they have studied deeply. The 12th-grade humanities teachers share planning time, work as a team, divide the logistics, prepare students to teach rather than merely present, and then refine the project from year to year. In this sense, the symposium is a vivid example of connected autonomy: seniors exercise voice and leadership, but their agency is made possible by a carefully orchestrated architecture of teacher collaboration, advisory, common planning time, and schoolwide trust.

Gilbert described the symposium as part of the school's norms, beliefs, and values related to teachers and students as co-pilots in teaching and learning. He pointed to a pattern of "constant evolution of improved practice around things that work," along with a willingness to abandon what no longer works. The symposium, Gilbert hopes, will become a repeatable school ritual as teachers and students inherit a design, improve it, and pass it forward.

Our documentation of Hillsdale's journey reminded us of a core lesson from research on cultivating student agency through teacher leadership. Charles Leadbeater, a global authority on innovation in the public and private sectors, summarizes the concept as the *iron law of co-agency*.

> It is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students. Students only become agents when capable teachers do as well.
>
> If teachers are coming to school feeling like they are working on a qualification production line, following a script, teaching by rote, how likely is it that children will learn to become self-determining agents? If the adult role models in the school are not themselves capable, trusted agents, how can students develop that identity? Student agency requires students and teachers to do great work together.[4]

As we dig more deeply into how the school's collaborative culture was built, note that a 2024 survey across the U.S. showed that only 31% of teachers reported having sufficient time to collaborate with colleagues—and very little of it is spent on team teaching and peer observation.[5]

3. The Building Blocks of Collaborative Professionalism

Hillsdale is not just where leadership tasks are distributed to classroom practitioners [6] or where teachers and administrators share influence. [7] It goes deeper—more akin to the concept of collaborative professionalism, developed by Andy Hargreaves and Michael O'Connor.[8] Collaborative professionalism is about depth, not superficial collaboration; inquiry, not compliance; collective responsibility, not individual heroism; trust and solidarity, not forced teamwork; moral purpose, not mere efficiency; and connected autonomy, not individual professional judgment or scripted implementation. Teachers retain professional voice, but their judgment is exercised inside a web of shared students, shared time, shared evidence, and shared responsibility.

Redesign was fueled by the interaction between teacher collaboration and innovation, coupled with administrative flexibility and facilitation. This cannot emerge overnight—especially not in schools and districts where teachers have been historically siloed as solo practitioners in their isolated classrooms. Hillsdale's collaborative culture and structures have evolved organically over time. Knowing more about the school's redesign history surfaces lessons for those currently leading redesign efforts.

The roots of Hillsdale's redesign date back more than 30 years. Seeds were planted by small groups of teachers with the intent of deepening learning by getting students to show what they know while creating new structures for the adults to know young people more deeply (see Appendix A). The journey began in the 1980s with a series of teacher-led curricular *experimentations*, beginning with 9th grade interdisciplinary humanities work. English and social studies teachers jointly created project-based units—The Golding Trial, Renaissance work, World War I simulations—organized around powerful questions, performance, evidence-based argument, and public demonstration. It was about making school more interesting

and challenging. Then teachers decided that a better curriculum required better structures. For example, Craig Childress, now a physics teacher and association president, along with Deb Stucke, established integrated pathways that blended core academics with career and technical education. Another was the development of Home Base, an early version of today's advisory coursework with a focus on academic personalization. Several teachers developed and advocated for the structure, but it failed to launch—not because the idea was ill-conceived. Home Base "failed" because the school had not yet built enough relational and political support for the change. As Jouriles noted: "You can have a good idea, but if you don't do the legwork and you don't make sure that people are behind it, it's going to fail." The idea, through advisories, succeeded later. (See Textbox)

In the early 1990s, a veteran teacher of auto mechanics nearing the end of his career, Chuck Borecco, dedicated himself to the establishment of a kind of homeroom/advisory at Hillsdale. It would go beyond the traditional conception of homeroom as a place to hear the school announcements, get caught up on homework, or socialize. Instead, it envisioned a place where adults established relationships with students that would lead to their academic success. The proposal eventually became known as Home Base and in its conception contained many of the elements of personalization that would later be foundations of advisory in Hillsdale's smaller learning communities. Don Leydig, Hillsdale's principal at the time, firmly backed the initiative.

It was a bold move for Chuck Borecco to step out of his traditional role and try to lead a change. As an industrial arts teacher, he had spent many of Hillsdale's "golden years" watching his auto program grow. Few people then questioned the status quo as they managed what seemed to be successful, stable programs. But like many other things at Hillsdale industrial arts enrollment declined in the mid 1970s and 1980s (Moreland 1986). As their programs shrank, Borecco and some of his industrial arts colleagues were forced to teach core academic subjects. While teaching math in the early 1990s, Borecco shared classrooms with Deb Stucke and Marty Kongsle and saw what they were trying to accomplish and what they were gaining from collaboration.

He knew that the kind of students he still taught in industrial arts were struggling in core academics and needed some support. He also knew that he still had years left in his career and he needed to keep himself alive educationally. His peers, the friends he ate lunch with every day for years, did not, however, share his insights and motives.

The faculty held many meetings about Home Base. A group met off campus on a school day to firm up specific plans. Like almost any other issue, the faculty was predictably mixed about Home Base. Including Chuck, there were zealots

who thought it would solve many of the school's problems. There were those who liked the idea without much passion, those who were intrigued, and those who were afraid of the extra duties and extra responsibilities in areas they felt neither trained for nor confident about.

Source: Jouriles, G. (2013.). A Same Better Place. Unpublished manuscript

Dan Lortie's 1975 classic, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, helps explain the failed launch of Home Base. Borecco was trying to introduce a relational, collective model of teaching into a faculty culture still organized around the individual classroom-based practitioner. Lortie's account emphasized how teaching had been shaped by individualism, presentism, and conservatism—norms that made teachers more likely to preserve familiar routines than embrace collective redesign. Later, Andy Hargreaves pointed out how teachers' workplace orientations often make their practices a force for continuity rather than change.[9] In that sense, Home Base did not fail because the idea was weak. It failed because it asked teachers to do something the inherited grammar of high school teaching had not prepared them to do: assume shared responsibility for students' academic and personal development beyond their own subjects, classrooms, and daily rosters.

As Jouriles noted, although he envisioned and supported larger changes, "After the defeat of the Home Base in the spring of 1993, (former) principal Leydig backed off schoolwide reforms and by his own admission became obsessed with what he saw as the small pockets of excellence he could find, like the freshman humanities, mock trial team, and Elizabethan festival."[10] Each demanded authentic collaboration around consequential instructional matters. The college prep humanities program, which began in 1993, fueled the book club in 1996, which then spurred the Senior Exhibition in 1997. At its core was Leydig's commitment to professionalism—teachers' use of knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy in the best interest of their students. As Marty Kongsle noted, "Don would approve of a circus in the parking lot if you could justify it."[11] Over time, teachers began to develop a greater sense of their own connected autonomy and how it made the difficult work of teaching more possible and more powerful for students.

Gilbert, who taught at Hillsdale in the 1990s, told us, "At the time the students (in the small humanities community) had this shared identity on campus, which was problematic in that three-quarters of the school wasn't getting that experience." The freshman humanities program created challenging community-based academic rituals that others wanted to emulate. Other students and teachers saw the power of new school design on both academic learning and engagement in it—in ways that redefined the job of the teacher.

In the late 1990s, Gilbert, then a social studies teacher, along with Sam Matthews and Greg Lance developed a Senior Exhibition and later persuaded the staff to vote for a block schedule and tutorial period to support this project-based learning. Later Kongsle,

Stucke, and Betsy Muir expanded the freshman humanities approach with REALM, a freshman interdisciplinary English, social science, and math program in 2000. In November 2002, a two-day Coyote Point retreat emerged as a seminal event with 40 stakeholders, including teachers across subject areas, administrators, classified staff, students, the superintendent, the association leadership, with Stanford faculty and staff who helped facilitate and move a "messy democratic discussion" into an actionable proposal.[12] Throughout the process, teachers learned about design from key "foundational texts" such as Ted Sizer's Horace's books, Debbie Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas*, and Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Right to Learn*. Administrators, in collaboration with teachers, also played a major role in establishing Hillsdale's culture and structures. Don Leydig, Hillsdale's principal during its early stage of redesign, embraced a bolder brand of teacher leadership with a focus on innovation and collaboration.

Don had many gifts and one of his major early contributions was to be open to the ideas of teachers who approached him. He initiated Hillsdale's professional development school relationship with Stanford, liaised effectively with the district office, and at one critical moment in 2002, stepped up and dramatically took charge in the middle of a pivotal meeting, and throughout clearly and forcefully communicated the key components of redesign with the staff and community.

– Greg Jouriles, former Hillsdale social studies teacher and union leader

Hillsdale's proximity to Stanford University also had a salubrious effect on the school's evolution. In 2001, Hillsdale was invited to become a Professional Development School (PDS) with Stanford's School of Education. The PDS relationship "brought with it an invaluable outside perspective and an infusion of information about possible solutions" as well as instruction for teacher candidates and veterans to learn how to teach in a redesigning school together.[13] Stanford supported teachers and administrators together in learning about other small, redesigned schools while also using data to dig deeper into student performance and barriers to closing achievement gaps.

Despite the important role Stanford played, Hillsdale teachers believe that the work of redesign does not require the support of an elite private university, but rather an external partner that can support very busy educators in grappling with the complexities of organizational change. But perhaps most importantly, Hillsdale's strongest redesign partner was the San Mateo Union High School District Teachers Association (smuhsdTA) itself.

The school's structures and culture prevent any one person—including the principal—from undoing the model. But the same is true for teachers: they do not have unlimited individual autonomy to teach whatever they want, because they are accountable to team

commitments. Jesse Boise noted, "Coming to Hillsdale, you may not have the autonomy to do the exact unit or assessment you want, because of your team." His insights reminded us of the importance of pushing individual ideas through teams to make the outcomes more powerful and pervasive and creating a sense of "connected autonomy" that supports individuals in deprivatizing their teaching practices. [14]

4. The Role of the District and the Teachers Association

Hillsdale's redesign took root because it was neither imposed from above nor negotiated around teachers, but built through teacher leadership, democratic site governance, and a careful partnership with the association. Greg Jouriles, then president of the district teachers association and a Hillsdale social studies teacher, played a pivotal role as both an early advocate for collaboration and integrated curriculum and a guardian of contractual integrity. But most importantly, teachers and administrators both recognized the importance of broad stakeholder involvement in forging ahead with bold moves to transform the secondary school experience.

The school's small learning communities steering committee, composed of district and school administrators, teacher and association leaders (one and the same at Hillsdale), and Stanford redesign experts, jointly led the work. The committee ensured that each step of the phase-in process was transparent, faculty-supported, and formally authorized through annual straw polls, legislative council approvals, and contract waiver votes. The depth of faculty support was striking: in spring 2002, 92% of the faculty approved using professional development time to learn about small learning communities, and 89% approved implementing the first year of the SLC proposal for ninth graders.[15]

Previously, the teachers' association (smuhsdTA) and district took on several initiatives that established trust and a common purpose in improving the student experience by rethinking teaching policies and practices. Redesign took place alongside substantive shifts, led by joint committees on teaching evaluation and professional development. For the association, advocating for peer review and stronger teacher evaluation helped mold the association as a developer of "strong teachers" with the professional capacity to lead redesign.

Jouriles led waiver votes in the first two years of implementation to address often knotty contract issues including staffing ratios and loads, hours of employment, and transfer and assignment provisions. The initial waivers made way for: (a) having teachers in the same subject area with different class loads;

(b) allowing for possible expansion of the work day; (c) shifting department chair duties and the reallocation of stipends; and (d) recognizing advisory class and collaboration periods as valued functions in teachers' contractual load.[16]

Part of the work of the joint professional development committee in the early 2000s was to support a book club that featured Linda Darling-Hammond's *Teaching as the Learning Profession*, which detailed the what, the why, and the how of embedded professional collaboration time. Those tenets were soon to become central to the Hillsdale redesign model and the association structures emerged as prime incubators for teachers to learn, practice, and radiate leadership skills.

As the school's redesign efforts developed over time, district administration and the smuhsdTA were able to advance their respective and collective goals: to advance student learning and teacher agency through innovations in instructional practice and workplace conditions. The district administration was looking to implement a core academic program. The smaller learning community redesign matched the district's goal of getting better student outcomes, especially when Hillsdale science teacher Steve Maskel lobbied hard to include science in the core. Additionally, the district was looking for ways for Hillsdale to be more appealing to parents in the district's open enrollment program. Personalization, in the form of advisory and Kid Talk, mattered for many parents—perhaps more than the full array of electives found in other comprehensive high schools.

Both the school and its teachers association came to realize the need to do schooling differently—pushing for new uses of time and resources (e.g., FTE and course offerings) to enable the effective implementation of interdisciplinary teams, advisory, and small learning communities. It also served a political purpose. To deepen credibility in bargaining for better working conditions, salary, and benefits, the teachers association saw redesign as a way to improve the learning experiences for students and teachers alike.

And while the district's collective bargaining agreement (CBA) looks like many others, it is slimmer than most (about 100 pages) and advances many key principles of collaborative professionalism, including the provision for both an individual preparation and professional responsibility period each day as well as peer review in the teaching evaluation process. In fact, teacher evaluation is defined as a "collaborative, reflective process" whose primary purpose is to help all unit members improve. The CBA also recognizes curriculum and assessment design as work that deserves time or pay. It also creates a role for curriculum councils and the Association in determining how that work is supported.

At Hillsdale, association (or union) and teacher leadership are not readily distinguishable. Childress says that a school's instructional leaders often lead for the association. He describes every person on his executive board as "a well-respected, if not exemplary teacher in the district." When smuhsdTA goes to the bargaining table it does so with some of the district's most accomplished teachers. Childress points to the importance of association (or

union) presidents, like himself, to remain in the classroom in hybrid teaching and leading roles. Childress, who has taught machine tool technology as well as physics, actually wrote the engineering technology curriculum for the district. When he makes the case for better salaries and working conditions, he does so through the lens of his teaching expertise and the respect that administrators and teachers have for him.

At the same time, the role of the district has been to let each high school find its own unique identity. Randall Booker, superintendent, describes San Mateo as "ten schools, six cities, one district," where each campus has "its own history, culture, and model." For example, he points to Capuchino's IB identity and Hillsdale's small learning communities as examples, while noting that other schools have different traditions and community expectations. The district office is not laissez-faire about what happens at each school, but seems to have established a high degree of "bounded site autonomy." Booker sees this diversity as both a strength and a coherence challenge. He noted, "There are separate cultures and communities and values, but there needs to be one district with a very specific through line."

The conversation led to a number of questions about the future. The challenge for the next phase of redesign is not to standardize these models, but to build cross-school learning systems so educators can see, adapt, and improve practices across campuses without losing the local identity that makes each design viable.

5. The Future and Redesign 2.0

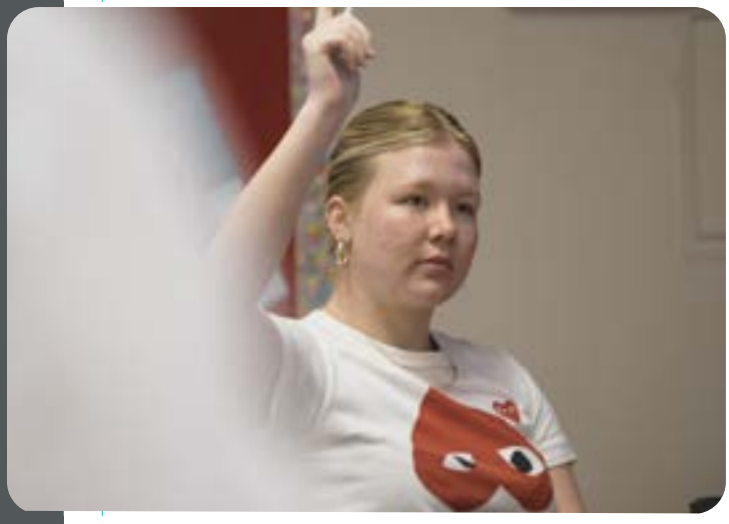
Hillsdale's story is not one of completed reform. It is the story of a school that built a powerful architecture for belonging, teacher collaboration, shared decision-making, and student agency—and now faces the next stage of redesign. The school is successful by many traditional measures, but its leaders believe they may have hit a ceiling and lack clear internal drivers for improvement and the next phase of redesign. For example, school leaders need to develop much better measures, beyond traditional standardized test scores, to guide the school's next iteration of redesign. Gilbert noted:

> We don't know...if our kids are good writers or good readers...We say in our graduate profile you're going to demonstrate these things, but we're not quite sure we have the right tools and data to assess those things and what does it mean to be really competent in writing and reading.

In addition, while Hillsdale has shown that the traditional comprehensive high school can be reorganized so students are known well and teachers lead together, the interviews offered hints of what might come next. For example, several educators suggested that the school's strongest structures for belonging in the 9th and 10th grades are not yet equally developed across all parts of the curriculum or all four years of the student experience. While students' sense of belonging remains deep and powerful, educators worry that students are not as academically engaged as they once were. We did not have time to explore these matters fully, but the interviews surfaced a clear question for Redesign 2.0: How can Hillsdale extend the coherence of its lower-division model into the more varied and individualized experiences of juniors and seniors?

The next frontier may begin with the upper division. Hillsdale's lower-division houses, looping, advisory, and Kid Talk create a kind of coherence, shared responsibility, and belonging that is not quite the same in 11th and 12th grades. Teachers and administrators pointed out that the upper division is harder to organize because students pursue more varied schedules, electives, AP courses, dual enrollment, internships, and postsecondary interests. The challenge is not to force juniors and seniors back into a one-size-fits-all structure. Rather, Redesign 2.0 should ask how Hillsdale can make the upper division as coherent around purpose as the lower division is around belonging.

This matters because Hillsdale's focus on belonging is not peripheral to learning; it is central to adolescent development. The school is a living example of how learning in adolescence is fundamentally relational: belonging, safety, and sustained developmental relationships are not "soft" supports, but preconditions for deep reflection, identity formation, civic reasoning, and academic persistence. Redesigned high schools can intentionally cultivate these conditions through small learning communities, advisory, inquiry-based learning, performance assessment, and student agency.[17] And while the Hillsdale Kid Talk serves as an anchor for the school's approach to teaching, learning, and assessment, teachers and administrators have yet to use emerging tech tools to build credible, longitudinal data systems that support educators' workflows, synthesize large amounts of qualitative evidence, and sharpen the school's house/advisory/Kid Talk model and measurement of progress toward the school's graduate profile (now further anchored by California's newly established Portrait of a Learner).



This relational architecture may be even more important for the future of public education, which is likely to be disrupted by AI (like any other institution). In fact, the AI-tutor revolution is already running into one of education's oldest problems: students do not learn simply

because instruction is available. They learn when they are motivated, known, challenged, and socially drawn into the work.[18] Recent studies show that students using unguarded AI as a "crutch" to get answers, without pedagogical guardrails, can weaken durable learning.[19] Even one of the nation's leading AI-for-education developers, Sal Khan, recognizes that the "biggest lever (for change) is really investing in human systems."[20]

Hillsdale teachers, according to Jenny Macho, are mostly skeptical, and for good reason (see textbox).

Across several recent studies (2021–2025), AI in middle and high school education is generally seen as promising but conditional: reviews and classroom studies report benefits for personalized learning, intelligent tutoring, feedback, engagement, computational thinking, and AI literacy, including ethics and career awareness, especially in project-based or cross-disciplinary formats.[21] At the same time, the research evidence uplifts a consistent warning: Effective use of AI depends on teacher training, curriculum fit, ethical governance, and equitable access, as well as concerns about the tools can weaken critical thinking, reduce human interaction, and create academic integrity problems.[22] These recent studies underscore the 2026 Brookings report that distinguishes between AI-enriched learning—well-designed tools used within pedagogically sound approaches—and AI-diminished learning, where overreliance puts students' cognitive development, social-emotional well-being, trusting relationships, safety, and privacy at risk.[23]

That said, most teachers and administrators, rightfully proud of their human-centric approach to the high school learning experience, seem quite skeptical of AI. Macho noted that most Hillsdale teachers have "not thought much" about how AI could deepen the impact of their small learning communities; she believes many colleagues are still focused on how to "counteract it." That caution is understandable. Hillsdale's redesign has always depended on human relationships, professional judgment, and face-to-face deliberation. However, could prosocial forms of AI reinforce and deepen the school's ethos?

Perhaps the most promising use of AI at Hillsdale may not be just more personalized learning, but a tool for creating a coherent curricular architecture in service of belonging and purpose. Prosocial AI tools could help adults see patterns that are otherwise difficult to detect: which students are drifting socially, which are overextended, which lack an adult advocate, which interests are emerging across courses, and which students might benefit from a particular mentor, peer group, project, internship, or capstone opportunity. As students move through high school, AI-supported advising tools could help them connect their course choices, projects, work-based learning, college interests, and civic commitments into a more coherent story of who they are becoming and where they are headed.

The "human-in-the-loop" use of AI could benefit from Hillsdale's teacher leadership and democratic structures to ensure that the use of this powerful technology supports the academic as well as the social side of learning, rather than diminishing it. The school's structure and culture naturally push back against top-down pressures while reinforcing the social side of learning.

Redesign 2.0 could also reconnect two strands of Hillsdale's history. Historically, Hillsdale's redesign has leaned more toward academic personalization and project-based learning than toward applied, elective, and career-based interdisciplinarity. Craig Childress's reflections are important here. Hillsdale had earlier strands of innovation in integrated pathways, tech prep, applied science, and career-connected learning, while the 9th-grade humanities bloc and senior exhibitions helped establish the school's powerful academic and relational design. At a time when the state of California is seeking a more coherent system of teaching and learning—bringing together community schooling, dual enrollment, and career pathways—through secondary school redesign, Hillsdale can help lead the way. A future opportunity for Hillsdale and its school district may be to rethink how these strands come together: the small learning community architecture of belonging and collaboration with renewed career pathways, dual enrollment, internships, and community-based learning.

The Senior Symposium offers one prototype for this next stage, as no single capstone can carry the full weight of a graduate profile. For many years Hillsdale has been building a more coherent 9–12 system of performance evidence, culminating in upper-division demonstrations connected to college, career, civic life, and community. In this next phase, the question is not whether Hillsdale should add another program. The question is how the school can help every student develop and demonstrate a coherent sense of purpose across increasingly individualized pathways that equitably prepares everyone for college, career, and civic life—while holding true to its academic foundations grounded in relationships, relevance, and rigor.

As this case goes to press, Linda Darling-Hammond, president of the California State Board of Education, announced (July 17, 2026) to the 14 networks of the state's Secondary School Redesign Pilot of a $50 million infusion to bring often siloed community school, dual enrollment, and career pathway initiatives together through high school redesign. She also noted several potential policy shifts on the horizon: (1) both the State Board of Education and UC Board of Regents are launching study groups to explore modernization of A–G; and (2) the development of a "career passport" to represent student competencies in a way that's

useful to employers and higher education.

Hillsdale, with its other pilot partners, is well positioned to inform how its approach to teacher learning and leadership can bring the pieces of the state's secondary school redesign puzzle together. However, this case reminds us that school redesign is not primarily a technical exercise in schedules, pathways, programs, or even innovative, human-centric data dashboards, even though each matters. At its core, redesign is a human enterprise—where educating young people for college, career, and civic life depends on adults who know them well, design meaningful learning with them, and take collective responsibility for their success. Hillsdale shows that the key investment is not in a small cadre of designated teacher leaders, but in the leadership of all teachers—cultivated through time, trust, shared inquiry, and structures that make collaboration unavoidable. Danielle Flores called this bold brand of teacher leadership "side-by-side professionalism"—teachers leading not from isolated classrooms or formal titles, but through daily collaboration, open doors, shared responsibility, and collective care for students. Teacher leadership, understood as a system property rather than a title, is not an accessory to redesign; it is a cornerstone of it. Teacher leadership—the heart of Hillsdale's unique interplay of structure, culture, and *side-by-side* power relationships—drives the school's vibrant, engaging, and intellectually ambitious learning environment that young people need and deserve.

About RedesignEd

Hillsdale High is a key school partner in RedesignEd, one of 14 networks of the California Secondary School Redesign Pilot. RedesignEd, anchored by Inflexion and eKadence Learning Foundation, is committed to advancing a redesigned and equitable system of public education, with human-driven, AI-enabled tools to prepare young people for a rapidly changing world.

About the Authors

Barnett Berry is a senior research fellow at the Learning Policy Institute. He also serves as a senior advisor to RedesignEd. His latest book, *The Future of Public Education: One District's Journey to Transform School and System* points to how school districts and their communities can reinvent teaching and learning so every young person can thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Greg Jouriles taught social science at Hillsdale High School for thirty-seven years and was district association president during Hillsdale's redesign. He worked extensively on interdisciplinary project- and demonstration-based curriculum and assessment and has published articles on practice and policy, advocating for collaborative, grassroots reform.

Appendix A: Timeline for the Origins of Hillsdale High School's Redesign

Early innovations and collective decisions that built the school's small learning community architecture

Year	Individual / Small-Group Innovation	Collective / Systemwide Action
1989	Bedford and Jouriles launch **freshman honors humanities**.	-
1993	Del Gaudio, Kongsle, and Lowe start **freshman college-prep humanities**.	Faculty votes down **Home Base**, an early advisory proposal.
1996	Del Gaudio starts a faculty book club.	-
1997	Gilbert, Lance, Matthews, Frantz, and Deighan launch the **Senior Exhibition**.	Most teachers serve on exhibition panels.
1998	Kongsle and Deighan advocate for sustained silent reading; block-schedule committee forms.	School adopts a modified **block schedule**, sustained silent reading, and tutorial.
1999	Mohr begins district strategic planning.	-
2000	Stucke, Muir, and Kongsle launch **REALM**; Lance and Gilbert start **Social Action**; Gilbert leads WASC.	Joint district-association committee revises teacher evaluation.
2001	Leydig and Sarnowski establish **Stanford PDS** partnership.	District and association leaders study *Teaching as the Learning Profession*.
2002	Lance writes **SLC planning grant** with Hirschfield, Schlaak, and Leydig.	School receives SLC planning grant; faculty studies, designs, and approves conversion in a straw vote. Joint PD committee sets professional learning principles.
2003	Sixteen core teachers prepare for and launch **9th-grade conversion**; new governance structures emerge.	Staff approves conversion through official association vote and initial **Constitution**.
2004	Sixteen more teachers join to extend the 9-10 core.	-
2005	-	Entire school enters smaller learning communities and advisories, with teaching teams.

Source: Adapted from Jouriles, G. (2013). A Same Better Place. Unpublished manuscript.

Endnotes

1 Initial interviews (February 2026) were conducted with Jeff Gilbert (principal), Greg Jouriles (retired social studies teacher and former union leader who helped lead the transformation) and current teachers Matt Springman (social studies) and Danielle Flores (math) as well as Emma Sevilla (student). Additional interviews were conducted in early May with Ashley Milton (assistant principal), Jesse Boise (assistant principal), Jenny Macho (English language arts teacher); newer teachers Gus Dexheimer (English language arts and Ethnic Studies) and Jackie Sanchez (social studies); and Randall Booker (superintendent). This paper also draws heavily on the Stanford School Redesign Network's report, Hillsdale High School: Windows on Conversion (2005); Learning Policy Institute's Redesigning High School (2024) and Performance Assessment Profile (2019).

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