

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

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Executive Summary

Hillsdale High School (Hillsdale) in San Mateo, California demonstrates what can happen when teacher leadership is built into a school's daily structures and culture rather than limited to a small number of formal roles. Over more than three decades, Hillsdale evolved from a traditional comprehensive high school into one organized around small learning communities, shared responsibility for students, and meaningful collaboration among teachers and administrators.



The redesign did not begin with a single plan or sweeping reform. It grew from teacher-led experiments in interdisciplinary learning, advisory, exhibitions, and other approaches designed to make learning more meaningful and ensure students were well known. Many of the [10 Features of Successful High Schools](#) have gradually shaped and sustained the school's professional culture anchored in teachers' connected autonomy where they shared responsibility for the success of students as well as for themselves. The central lesson: Teacher leadership becomes part of how a school operates when it creates the time, structures, relationships, and decision-making processes that allow, encourage, and expect every teacher to lead in some way.

What Hillsdale Did. Hillsdale organized students and teachers into small learning communities, or houses. Core teachers within each house share approximately 110–120 students for two years. Students participate in advisory—a formal class that teachers and administrators teach, while educators work together to understand and simultaneously support their academic, social, and emotional development.

The master schedule lays the foundation, but not without educators making hard choices about what is most important for students to know and do. House teams have a daily common preparation period, and subject-area teams also have shared planning time with opportunities to develop community-connected, project-based learning for their students. School structures and its bell schedule give teachers approximately four to six hours each week to collaborate during the school day. The school may offer fewer electives, but students and teachers know each other better, driving a schoolwide ethos of belonging rarely found in traditional, large high schools.

One critical routine is Kid Talk, a recurring, weekly collaboration among teachers, counselors, resource specialists, and administrators to share observations about students, identify patterns, and coordinate support. Because each adult sees a student in a different context, the team develops a fuller understanding of the student's strengths and needs. Responsibility shifts from "my students" to "our students." From the early 2000s through the pandemic of 2020, the school 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.

Hillsdale also established shared governance structures that give teachers a meaningful role in schoolwide decisions. Teachers participate in teams, committees, and a representative council that considers proposals affecting the school. Some teachers hold formal leadership roles, but leadership is not limited to those positions. Teachers routinely facilitate deliberations, incubate innovations, solve problems, develop curriculum and assessments, examine evidence, and help shape school priorities.

What Made It Work. Several conditions helped teacher leadership become embedded throughout Hillsdale:

- **Protected collaboration time:** Authentic and deep collaboration is built into the master schedule rather than added before or after the school day.
- **Shared responsibility:** Teaching teams are organized around common students and expected to coordinate their instructional and social-emotional support.
- **Leadership through practice:** Teachers develop leadership skills, not via a program, but by facilitating meetings, calibrating pedagogical strategies, leading projects, examining evidence, making decisions, and going public with the evidence of their professional practice.
- **Administrators who lead with teachers:** Administrators protect collaborative time, support experimentation, facilitate shared processes, and steward the school's values.
- **Connected autonomy:** Teachers retain professional judgment while remaining accountable to team commitments, shared goals, and joint responsibility for each other's effectiveness as educators.
- **Clear and shared decision-making structures:** The school's Constitution and its Cornerstones anchor shared-decisioning and connected autonomy among teachers, administrators, and staff
- **Willingness to make curriculum trade-offs:** Hillsdale educators made difficult choices about staffing, course offerings, student loads, and resources to preserve collaboration, advisory, and small learning communities.
- **Support from beyond the school:** District leaders, the teachers association, and external partners jointly helped create the contractual, organizational, and professional conditions needed for redesign.

Applying the Lessons in Other Schools. Hillsdale's specific model may not fit every school, but its experience offers a practical starting point for school-based teams. The following considerations can help teams apply Hillsdale's lessons within their own school contexts:

1. Begin with the student experience. Identify the problem the school is trying to solve. For example, students may not feel known, teachers may work in isolation, or learning may feel disconnected across courses.

2. Start with a manageable experiment. Pilot a promising idea with a willing group of educators, learn from the experience, and use the results to build broader support.

3. Organize educators around shared students. Create teams of adults who teach or support the same students and give them collective responsibility for student learning and well-being.

4. Protect time for meaningful collaboration. Build common planning time into the schedule and establish clear routines for discussing students, examining evidence, coordinating action, and following up.



5. Create authentic opportunities for teacher leadership. Give teachers meaningful influence over curriculum, assessment, professional learning, resource use, and other consequential decisions. When teachers lead their own learning they are more likely to help their students lead theirs as well.

6. Identify the necessary trade-offs. Determine what the school may need to reduce, reorganize, or stop doing to make its priorities possible.

7. Build support and improve over time. Engage students, families, district leaders, and the teachers association. Treat redesign as an ongoing process rather than a program to implement.

8. Teachers associations (or unions) must be co-designers, not stakeholders consulted after the fact. The Hillsdale experience challenges the assumption that instructional innovation belongs to management while unions protect teachers from its consequences. Associations can create and drive the democratic processes, contractual flexibility, and professional working conditions necessary for teachers to take risks and redesign their work for both young people and themselves.

The Core Takeaway. Teacher leadership at Hillsdale isn't a title, committee, or program. It is the foundation of how the school organizes time, people, responsibility, and decision-making. When teachers share students, collaborate regularly, influence meaningful decisions, and lead alongside administrators, leadership becomes part of the school's operating system.

The result is not only greater teacher agency. It is a more connected high school where adults know students well, take collective responsibility for their success, and continually lead and improve the academic and social side of learning.

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.

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