

GRANTEE STORIES - EDUCATION REIMAGINED

**Learning Lab**



## Understanding the unique needs of students.

To call Norris Academy “peerless” is not hyperbole. Norris is the only school in its 900-acre school district, which is the smallest district in the state of Wisconsin, and it primarily serves the Norris Adolescent Center, a residential treatment facility for boys.

“For 99 percent of them, they haven’t been successful in what we call the game of school, or have decided not to play at all,” said Johnna Noll, Norris Academy’s executive director. The academy has changed the rules of that game in ways that favor the unique needs of about 50 students enrolled on a typical day.

When a student arrives at the academy, he and teachers take 45 days to develop his learner profile in four areas – academics, employability, wellness, and citizenship, which focuses principally on a student’s ability to advocate for himself, his family and his community. “It’s all about that sense of ownership – who you are and who you want to be,” Noll said. “We think about how we develop that agency from the very start given the transiency we have.”

### Education Reimagined - Learning Lab

**Duration: 3 years**

**Budget: USD 1,000,000**

**Year awarded: 2017**

- Build educator understanding of teaching and learning practices that meet the needs of diverse students through the curation and dissemination of evidence-based and culturally-responsive tools and resources that help students master rigorous content and define student success to include academic and social and emotional wellbeing.
- Support development of broader measures of student success and their widespread adoption in education policy and practice.



Each student and his teachers designate his greatest need in those four areas as his “urgency story” and direct learning at changing that story. The student and teacher organize his learning in two ways – placement in one of six learner communities grouped by similar interests such as Skilled Trades or Creative, and clusters of competencies to be demonstrated (the March Madness cluster, for example, uses college basketball to anchor learning around statistics, English and physical education). While the “game of school” is different for students, the academy still must meet Wisconsin’s education standards; teachers have had to map all the competencies students demonstrate back to the state’s expectations.

Educators at Norris Academy understandably have trouble identifying professional peers in schools that serve adolescents who often fall through the cracks in traditional schools or that similarly empower learners to determine their own educational direction. When Noll heard about Education Reimagined’s Learning Lab two years ago, she was eager to take part.

The Learning Lab is a national community of more than 300 people representing more than 70 school models who are committed to growing “learner-centered” educational settings, Education Reimagined President Kelly Young said.

“People thought of themselves as an alternative model or a one-off; their focus is on a model, not on a shared mindset,” Young said. Education Reimagined spear-headed work to identify five design elements of learner centeredness that it uses to shift that insular view among Learning Lab’s participants. Those five elements that identify a learner centered education setting are: competency based; personalized, relevant and contextualized; learner agency; socially embedded; and open-walled.

“Not everybody can carry on a conversation about this kind of learning,” Noll said. For her school, the value of Learning Lab is not to replicate one aspect of another model, but rather in broadening Norris’ educators’ views of what is possible and what is important to pursue.

The academy quickly volunteered for the Learning Lab’s latest effort – Immersive Learning Exchanges—that allow up to 20 Learning Lab participants to visit a school for structured observation and reflection. “We’re constantly iterating, growing, so to have people who are of a like mind come to see what we’re doing and offer reactions isn’t something we can get locally,” Noll said. “It was the most powerful experience for my staff that I could have imagined,” she said. The outcome was less a set of recommendations and more “a strong affirmation of what they are doing.” More than a third of the academy’s staff was still at school talking about their visitors’ comments at 8 pm on the day the Immersive Learning Exchange ended, Noll recalled.

Through the Learning Lab, Noll and her school “are part of the outcomes conversation nationally – what do we want from the graduate of a learner-centered setting,” she said. Norris also will be part of Education Reimagined’s Year of Education, a national effort “to raise the voices saying that these kinds of models are needed and are possible,” Young said.

Oak Foundation believes that schools in the United States and many other countries fall short of meeting the needs of too many students because they are designed to educate a mythical “average” student. These schools sort students along narrow paths that do not match the complex world in which they will live as adults. Learner-centered models can better meet the individual needs of each student.

The Learning Differences Programme supports Education Reimagined and other partners rethinking teaching and learning to ensure educational systems unlock each student’s creativity and power regardless of personal and social identifiers that privilege some students and marginalise others such as learning differences, race and income.

## **Would you like to know more about Education Reimagined?**

Education Reimagined is a growing community of hundreds of organizations dedicated to transforming education in America to become learner-centered.

Read more about Education Reimagined on their website [education-reimagined.org](https://education-reimagined.org).

## **Find out more about Oak Foundation.**

Read more about us on our website [oakfnd.org](https://oakfnd.org).