

# **Kansans Can: Redesigning Education in Kansas**

*Dr. Randy Watson*

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win. – John F. Kennedy

On September 12, 1962, President Kennedy went to Rice University to deliver a challenge to all Americans to travel to the moon and return safely to earth. That challenge galvanized a country and on July 21, 1969, Apollo 11 landed safely on the moon.

Rarely before in American history had a peacetime goal been so ambitious. All involved knew, too, it was one full of danger, organizational challenges and ripe with a strong chance of failure.

In the fall of 2014, the Kansas State Board of Education charged me with gathering information from Kansans as to what they wanted in their school system. This issue of *Educational Considerations* highlights many of the components of that research and action taken by school districts in Kansas since that time. Specifically, Dr. Brad Neuenswander details the research conducted that led to a bold, new vision for Kansas' education.

After months of studying the research conducted from listening tours and matching that data to current educational research, the State Board of Education launched a new vision for education in October of 2015. Just as audacious and bold as President Kennedy had proposed the moonshot in the early '60s, this new vision inspired educators, parents, business and community leaders toward education reform in Kansas.

## **Kansas Leads the World in the Success of Each Student**

This vision had clear metrics for success – Lead the World. Those metrics were all focused on a single point of obtainment – the Success of Each Student. The vision was clear, difficult to achieve, compelling and viewed attainable by 2026.

The State Board then created a method to explore, design and test practical models and ideas that adhered to the research conducted during 2015-17. In the fall of 2017, the State Board launched the first school to redesign around this research and principles. Named after the initial phase of the space program, Mercury had its wings and soon the original seven school districts were working to transform education.

Over the next three years, the Mercury cohort was followed by additional districts joining phases as Gemini, Gemini II, Apollo and starting this fall, Apollo II. The State Board desires to have all school districts involved in redesign by 2026. Today more than 67 school districts and 170 schools have voluntarily embarked in the redesign process since 2017.

“It is important to note that a key factor in the success of this project is we asked for volunteer schools and districts,” said Denise Kahler, KSDE Communications Director. “This was not a top-down mandate, but rather viewed as an opportunity for districts to shift their models.”

There have been tremendous success stories within the redesign school districts and some minor setbacks. Student success is up in a majority of the school districts who initiated school redesign, all seeing that initial success within just two years.

On March 17, 2020, Gov. Laura Kelly became of the first governor in the United States to order a state-wide shut down of schools because of the pandemic. This was an opportunity for our schools to take what they had learned through redesign and “pivot.”

Our work is far from complete. As the pandemic continues to impact learners this fall, our redesign efforts will help Kansas stay a leader for the current times while still preparing us to Lead the World for the future.

Throughout this edition of *Educational Considerations*, readers will examine the initial process and research to formulate the work. Districts and schools are highlighted to give readers a glimpse of the work that has been done – teacher by teacher, and designed for the benefit of each student.

Enjoy this detailed look at our collective work. We are very proud of the efforts of Kansas’ educators.

*Randy Watson (rwatson@ksde.org) is Kansas commissioner of education.*