

LISTEN LEARN LEAP

From Surviving to Thriving: how we helped a NY School foster stronger connections during a global pandemic

BRONXVILLE UNION FREE SCHOOL 2021

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"The work we did with EnRusk allowed us the time and space for our teachers to process and think about all they were able to persevere through in terms of their mental health, to list their accomplishments and how they made it from March 2020 till now. It was a very powerful experience for them and one they deserved to have" Dr. Mara Koetke, Head of Learning Bronxville School

CONTEXT

One of the highest-ranked high schools in the United States, Bronxville Union Free School District had partnered with us even before the global pandemic; however, in January 2021, we came together again to address the Covid-19 crisis and its impact on the classroom. Building on the previous work we'd done together, we continued exploring solutions to foster stronger connections—teacher to student, student to teacher, and student to student—at a time when the experience of isolation has heavily impacted everyone in the school community.

We're constantly impressed with how Bronxville avoided treating the global crisis as a disruption to "the way we do things" (like many other schools did), and instead sought our help to turn the situation into an opportunity to innovate. Together, we explored how we might answer questions like: What have we learned? How do we identify and celebrate the ways in which we achieved innovation? How do we share this out on a broader scale, to benchmark our innovations and continually move forward?

THE GOAL

Bronxville enlisted our team at EnRusk to help ensure that empathy was central to their journey of innovation in education and leadership. The previous 12 months had been a challenge for all, and there was the feeling of disconnection and isolation, leading to low morale. Our challenge was to turn that around, unite the teams, strengthen the connections, provide a platform for open dialogue, and listen and uncover the hidden gems of innovation that were happening but were getting lost. We'd then share findings with the whole school to help the



community continue on this path of change and growth, instead of settling for a 'return to normal' attitude.

Working closely with EnRusk, Bronxville aims to benchmark its innovations and become a school committed to empathy. Bronxville wants to become "The listening school".

HOW WE DID IT

Using a Design Thinking process, we had previously immersed the school into the status quo, revealing new challenges and discovering opportunities for designing innovative solutions. The COVID-19 crisis didn't shift that goal, but it did change the conversation to an extent. To understand how Bronxville students and teachers felt, we helped them create multiple design teams consisting of students, teachers, and leadership.

We then facilitated several workshops with each team where participants interviewed each other and openly shared some of their struggles, as well as their attempts at working in ways they had never previously considered. Participants also reflected and shared how the previous 12 months might have changed their perception of what 'good learning and teaching is.'

Throughout several short, dynamic online workshops, with groups of faculty and students, the Bronxville community finally talked about how they felt. They shared what scared and excited them about the future, what they'd like to amplify, change and/or ditch about their current school experience. Everyone walked away with a better understanding of themselves and each other.

"Some of the experiences that have been missing that this has brought to the front is the need for empathy, for us working together for all of our success and the need to care for one another. We are now asking ourselves where does that fit into the day to day schooling of students because it makes the learning more meaningful to have those strong relationships...it's so fundamental to what we do."
Ann Meyer Head of The High School

From there we guided them in distilling their findings into key themes. Then, together we ideated and co-designed solutions and a strategic approach to build on these ideas.

WHAT WE'RE MOST PROUD OF

We used these workshops to listen to the Bronxville community and get a better sense of where they are now and where they want to go. While everyone feels the need for more human connection, they recognize how far they've come in the face of daily uncertainty and a lack of structure.

It has given us the chance to really look at what we're doing with kids in a different way and we're asking ourselves how we're going to bring that forward as we emerge from Covid"

EnRusk's creative team worked closely with Bronxville, building content in the form of films, animations, and slide decks to help them better tell their collective story and shared learnings to themselves and the world. Bronxville is committed to continuing the partnership with us to further guide them on their journey to becoming a school dedicated to innovation, leading with compassion and empathy.