

# HOW TO MAKE EVERY SCHOOL A SMART SCHOOL

Game-changing ways to fold  
technology into the education system





In our latest Business Impact Workshop, we sat down with David Akridge, the Chief Information Officer of Mobile County Public School District in Alabama.

Akridge is always looking for innovative solutions to those deeply frustrating issues that have plagued schools for decades. How do we keep students and faculty physically safe? How do we motivate teachers to embrace change in their long-held practices? How do we ignite passion in apathetic students?

Akridge and his team have mastered the art of conceptualizing great ideas and building them into reality. We sat down with him and were in for a truly remarkable conversation.



## Giving Serious Thought to Lighting is a Bright Idea

Picture one of your high school classrooms. Or better yet, the cafeteria. Remember those long beams of blue-gray light -- the ones that made everyone look a little bit sick? Turns out, the research says it all: Fluorescent lighting makes for an awful working environment, inducing major eye strain for students, reducing productivity and overall reducing the pleasantries of a building where students and staff spend the majority of their lives.

Akridge got to work on a solution: Digital lighting. "It allows the optimal type of lighting to be in the room -- it fluctuates throughout the day as the light changes outside," he said.

It's had, he said, a "tremendous effect" -- and not just for students. It's also a cost-effective solution for after-hours: "As a security guard walks through the building at 9:00 at night, the lights come on as he's walking and turn off as he passes. I don't have to leave the lights on 24/7."

From there, Akridge kept thinking. How else could the school utilize lighting to resolve issues? The idea came to him after he borrowed a set of beacon lights, which allow the user to mix color combinations, for his daughter's wedding. What if the school employed colored lighting to signify emergency situations, like a visual alarm? The idea made total sense, but the product -- something branded as an emergency lighting system for schools -- wasn't on the market. No one else had thought of it.

He thought, "Someone can make this lighting system." So he started making calls. "We called a company and told them, and they said nobody's ever needed it, but we can do it."

Think about it. It's so simple, and it's brilliant: Everyone's thinking about digital displays, intercom systems, automated text alerts. But lighting is universal. You walk down the hall, the lights suddenly turn red, and just about every last student instantly knows what it means.

## **Fear of change can be powerful, but leaders must encourage progress.**

We were surprised to hear Akridge's explanation of why so many schools look and operate exactly as they did 30 years ago. But it makes sense: Teachers learned how to teach a certain way, and they're often resistant to change, especially when they feel their methods have always worked just fine.

During a video conference with Cisco and dozens of other school

districts, the schools were asked what hindrances get in their way as they try to modernize their buildings. The answer was overwhelming, nearly unanimous. “Tradition and lack of wanting to change,” Akridge said. “People just don’t want to change.”

In other words, people who were in high school decades ago don’t understand why things should run any differently today than they did back then.

It’s a theme that’s certainly not limited to the education sector. Akridge told us that during a conference with Microsoft, more than three-quarters of companies from all types of industries reported that their own employees were resistant to technological change in the workplace.

“It’s not the technology that’s the problem,” he said. “It’s not the things we’re coming up with. It’s trying to overcome the fear factory, the complacency and comfort.”

We took a tour through Mobile’s school buildings and while there was new technology folded into the infrastructure, it certainly wasn’t overwhelming or distracting. Teachers adjust and thrive, even if there’s a period of transition as they get used to new tools, like digital smartboards instead of chalkboards.



Perhaps part of the fear is that employees worry they'll ultimately be replaced by technology. It's a fear with which many people, especially those of older generations, struggle. But the fact is, even as we bring technology into schools, teachers remain crucial. Indispensable. Students still need skilled, dedicated teachers, and the new tools simply help those teachers do their jobs as effectively as possible.

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“Change is hard, but we live in a society of change, And the kids are demanding it.”

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## Using technology to stimulate engagement and passion in apathetic students

Whew. This is one of those problems that schools have always had. Some people just aren't naturally great students -- they don't like to sit in class, they have trouble focusing, they quickly become bored or frustrated or straight-up angry. According to Akridge, the issue has only gotten worse over time as kids become less and less convinced that getting an education is fundamental.

“Kids today ... would just as soon fail school if they don't see a necessity for it,” he said. “So many of our kids are checked out because they're just not engaged.”

Technology is finally helping staff develop solutions to the perennial issue of the apathetic student. The general idea? Even if there's just one class a student adores -- for example, video

production -- that student will show up for school each day, even if it's just in anticipation of using state-of-the-art equipment to pursue their passions.

There's that famous quote "If you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life." We often don't start encouraging that mindset until college or even years into a career. High school isn't a throwaway four years; it really does set the stage for the rest of a person's life.



## **A lesson in leadership -- thanks, Dad.**

We've noticed, while working with Akridge over the past ten years, that he never takes credit for the awesome ideas that have transformed his school district. When we asked him about his remarkable leadership style, he got a little emotional as he reflected on his father.

“He said ... whoever you’re working under, you’re hired to work under that boss and make their vision come true. Whatever their vision is. Divisional head, superintendent -- making that person successful,” he recalled. “You don’t worry about getting in the spotlight. Make things happen for the person above you and things happen for you.”

He added, “Started out as a computer tech and now I’m the CIO, so it worked.”

The mindset, he said, is one you’ll often see on the football field. When a game goes well, the coach gives all the credit to his team. And when the team loses, the coach takes responsibility.

It’s a leadership style that’s selfless in every direction, because Akridge, those working above him, and those working beneath him are all working toward a common goal. They all want to see the Mobile County school system grow and flourish. They want to see optimal success in faculty and students.

In short, they love what they do, and “getting credit” isn’t the payoff. The reward is seeing the county move forward. And that’s a lesson we all can take to heart.

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