



Systems Thinking: Integrating Healthcare at School

What is it?

The PI practice of systems thinking (PI Practice I1) encourages collaboration within and across organizational boundaries. In this video, Avondale Elementary School District (AESD) and Bayless Integrated Healthcare provide an innovative example of systems thinking which reduces student absenteeism through organizational collaboration. Finding that their families lacked the flexibility to take their children to the doctor during normal business hours, AESD collaborated with a health care provider to bring those services to where the families could access them: in the school itself. By embedding licensed “wellness coaches” in the school, where the provider could directly observe children throughout the school day, the school district found that the socio-emotional and physical health of students improved, ultimately reducing student absenteeism.

How does it support Principled Innovation?

Moving from prototypes—e.g., a single classroom solution—to a large-scale innovation involves the PI Practice I1—developing the habits of an informed systems thinker:

Use evidence-based resources and data to inform flexible thinking and appreciation of emerging insights and multiple perspectives, allowing one to recognize how the individual parts are influenced by their environment and interact to form a complex whole.

Systems thinking involves working across organizational boundaries to understand how our society’s social structures and physical spaces can both create and solve problems. In systems thinking, we engage our PI character assets of empathy and perspective-taking and PI Practices C1 (“Understand culture and context”) and C2 (“Engage multiple and diverse perspectives”) to try to better understand the root causes for the problems we observe, and then enact the PI character asset of collaboration to bring together the different support systems needed to help ensure our students’ success. Systems thinking ties together these PI character assets and practices to help enable innovators’ practical, problem-solving wisdom, allowing them to foster greater human flourishing in our society—or as in this case, in schools and families.

This video provides an easy-to-understand example of how systems-thinking works that can be used in teacher or leader preparation contexts. In the video, the district leaders began by understanding a systemic problem: that parents' full-time jobs—particularly low-wage hourly jobs—often make it difficult to find the time during the work day to take their children to visit doctors or therapists. Then, they broke down the organizational and physical boundary between healthcare and schools to bring the services to where these young patients spend their days: at school. In using systems thinking to both understand the problem and find a solution, the district leaders demonstrate the value of enacting these critical PI assets and practices.

Use this video with pre-service teachers and leader-prep students to illustrate the way that PI's emphasis on systems thinking can scale collaboration from the individual level to the organizational levels and how working inclusively to bring in new partners and ideas can lead to creative and equitable solutions to historic problems. As pre-service teachers work in their school-based internships, developing a systems-level awareness about the support structures in the school's local community can help teaching teams better understand where to go to help their families find answers to their problems.

What do I need?

- Time: 20 minutes
- Classroom or virtual setting

How do I use it?

Step 1: Prepare

Watch the video and read the “What is it” and “How does it support Principled Innovation” sections above. Read through the discussion questions provided below and consider how you yourself would respond.

Step 2: Situate

Following the “How does it support Principled Innovation” section above, begin by providing the following description of PI Practice I1, “Develop habits of an informed systems-thinker”:

Use evidence-based resources and data to inform flexible thinking and appreciation of emerging insights and multiple perspectives, allowing one to recognize how the individual parts are influenced by their environment and interact to form a complex whole.

Ask students what parts comprise an educational “system,” pushing them to think about the parts both inside the school and outside the school to identify social structures that can both create problems and solve problems. Then, explain that the video they are going to watch provides an example of this practice in action.

Step 3: Present

Present the video for the participants or have them watch it on their own.

Step 4: Discuss

Discuss the video in a group discussion (in-person or online). Here are some questions to consider using:

1. How does this story provide an example of Principled Innovation?
2. What systemic problem is being addressed in this video, and what might be some of the larger implications of that problem?
3. In what way did systems thinking help this district to cross both organizational and physical boundaries to use systems as a solution to a problem that other systems created?
4. What are examples of moral, civic, intellectual and performance assets in the way AESD approached meeting the needs of families and students?
5. What role does school leadership play in this Principled Innovation? How would enacting the PI character assets in this context ultimately lead to better health for children?
6. Imagine this solution ultimately arose from the suggestion of a third-grade classroom teacher. How might the fictional story of that teacher have looked in leveraging systems thinking to identify the problem, find a solution, and ultimately bring the idea to the school and district leadership?
7. In what ways might this model for integrated healthcare contribute to the flourishing of students and the community?