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**Better Together: How to
Leverage School
Networks for Smarter
Personalized and Project
Based Learning**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Learn how to create enriched learning experiences that prepare students for life beyond school.

Teachers are under so much pressure to prepare students for exams. In an attempt to get each child successfully across the line, educators are forced to sacrifice crucial learning qualities like engagement, differentiation, and all the interpersonal skills that turn students into successful citizens.

Deep down, teachers know the system isn't doing anyone any favors. They're stressed. Their

students aren't engaged. Their principal is panicking about being penalized for the school's low graduation rate. They feel like hamsters stuck in the wheel.

But there is a way to break the cycle. It can transform any school into an energized learning environment where staff are supported, students' individual needs are met, and kids are empowered to take ownership of their learning.

So what is this metamorphic resource?

It's learning networks. They are many and varied, catering to different needs. You just need to find out which one is right for you.

In these blinks, you'll discover

- the unexpected secret to successful online learning;
- why learning shouldn't always happen in a classroom; and
- how valuing generosity makes you a better teacher.

Connecting educators through school networks creates better learning outcomes for students.

Imagine you're a teacher struggling to improve student engagement. You're finding it difficult to strike a balance between getting students interested in lessons and preparing them for exams. And since everyone at your school is focused on test scores, no one has the headspace to workshop potential solutions. If only there were a community that could give you the support you needed...

School networks are one of the most valuable resources for educators. They provide member schools with access to learning models, resource libraries, professional development opportunities, and technological tools. Also importantly, they give teachers a shared vision for learning, as well as access to peers in other schools.

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There are around 7,000 charter schools in the US. A third of

these belong to school networks like the New Tech Network, Big Picture Learning, and the National Academy Foundation. According to research conducted by Stanford University, these schools outperform those that aren't part of a network. Let's examine why.

Firstly, since networks don't rely on an individual leader, they provide ongoing stability. Each network has its own vision for education – like using the Montessori method, for example. It won't matter who's at the helm; the vision will outlast the inevitable comings

and goings of leaders. Unlike schools at risk of having their agendas changed each time a new board is elected, member schools benefit from consistency. Less disruption means educators have the stability they need to fully implement changes to curricula and learning models.

Secondly, networks are idea-exchanging hubs. Teachers facing similar challenges – like how to support students with special needs – can benefit from each other's experiences. Or they can draw on a huge pool of classroom tools, adapting them for their own needs. This leads

to continual improvement: if a teacher improves a classroom tool, he can add his new version to the network's library, making it available to everyone.

Teaching is a demanding, often frustrating profession. But a supportive and energizing community helps make it sustainable. Imagine how much you'd benefit from expanding your community from a few dozen to a few hundred, or maybe even a thousand! It may well revolutionize the way you teach.

While online learning holds great potential, it isn't an effective way to teach school students.

Jump onto any social media platform, and you'll be bombarded with suggestions: Do you know this person? You should follow this group. Here are some pants to match the shirt you bought last week.

So many of our online experiences are personalized, thanks to background algorithms that track our behavior. Imagine what learning would be like if we could

customize teaching to the same degree. Algorithms could anticipate what students need and offer them tailored learning plans. If it's already happening when we shop online, why isn't it happening in education?

The key message here is: While online learning holds great potential, it isn't an effective way to teach school students.

There's a fundamental difference between business and education. Teachers and students will keep going to school, whether or not their classroom is state-of-the-art or crumbling. That means there's

not much incentive for technology developers to help them. Business, on the other hand, is exciting. There's the thrill of securing market share. When you take this into consideration, it's not surprising that technology for learning lags behind social media by a whopping five years.

The other challenge with online learning is that it follows a traditional education outlook, which values proficiency over growth. This puts students like Jose at a disadvantage. After moving and bullying disrupted Jose's education in middle school, he enrolled in an online

school. At this stage, he was behind in literacy and math by two and three years. Jose enjoyed the online math program because he could move at his own pace. But he was still a year behind when spring grading rolled around. And his literacy had deteriorated by another year. The school's online outreach just wasn't enough to engage him.

Jose's experience underlines a fundamental aspect of learning – it's most effective when it happens within a community. The relationship between educator and student is crucial

because it motivates learning. Because of this, children studying online actually need more support than those in a classroom.

However, education platforms are powerful learning tools when they're combined with in-person teaching. They support ongoing learning progression and give teachers insight into a child's development without the need for tests, since they collect data every lesson.

But learning platforms are expensive to develop and implement. This is where networks help. Some of them

offer platforms to their
members – another compelling
reason to join.

Student engagement improves when learning is personalized and project-based.

In 2012, San Jose's Katherine Smith Elementary was a low-performing school in a low-income neighborhood. Its teachers focused on test preparation and low-level tasks. As a result, its students weren't excited about learning, so the cycle of underachievement continued. Less than a decade later the students of San Jose's Katherine Smith Elementary are flourishing. Empowered and focused, they enthusiastically take ownership of their learning.

So, what led to this extraordinary transformation?

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and project-based.**

When Aaron Brengard became the principal at Katherine Smith Elementary, he knew that the school's teaching model needed an overhaul. A visit to Napa New Technology High School convinced him that joining the New Tech Network, or NTN, was the best way to make this happen.

NTN member schools all follow education models based on personalized and project-based learning. Personalized education uses each individual student's growth as the basis for designing their learning program. This means that in the classroom, students spend part of the day doing tasks differentiated specifically for them. This helps support or challenge each student at a pace tailored to their learning.

Project-based work helps students develop important soft skills – like communication, collaboration, and empathy. It also teaches children project

management and presentation skills. As well as being more engaging, this style of teaching prepares children for a contemporary workplace, where soft skills are essential.

An aspect of NTN schools that really sets them apart is how students are graded. Instead of focusing solely on test scores, students are assessed on critical thinking and personal agency – or *growth mindset* – which includes qualities like determination, persistence, and taking responsibility for learning. This places value on the learning process, not just exam results.

Shifting from a traditional education model to one like NTN's is a huge undertaking – one that asks teachers to change the way they lesson plan, teach, and assess. That's why school networks are so valuable: their model includes everything a school needs to overhaul their system, from a new curriculum to a resource library for teachers. A school can have confidence in the network's approach because they can see it implemented in other schools. Under the NTN model, 92 percent of students graduate school, and 70 percent of them go on to college. With figures that high, it's no wonder that

Brengard thought the NTN model was the right choice for his school.

To foster the next generation of innovators, teaching must focus on learning experiences, not results.

Jared wasn't doing well at his traditional high school in Boise, Idaho. But luckily, he had initiative. When he heard about an unusual school called One Stone, he transferred. Under its nontraditional learning model, which uses *design thinking* to solve real-world problems, Jared transformed from a struggling freshman into an empowered learner and budding coder.

The key message here is: To foster the next generation of innovators, teaching must focus on learning experiences, not results.

So, what is design thinking – and why is it such a powerful learning framework?

Design thinking is a tool anyone can use to find solutions to new problems. Popularized at Stanford University, it's a method that encourages a flexible mindset – a quality that's essential for leaders. Design thinking starts by using empathy to better understand a problem from a user's perspective. Next,

the problem solver conducts research to come up with various potential solutions. They develop and test prototypes before evaluating how well each one solved the problem.

After seeing design thinking in action at Stanford's d.school, One Stone founders Teresa and Joel Poppen recognized its value as an education model and decided to implement it at their own school. One Stone students are empowered to explore without fear of failure. In fact, the school teaches that it may take more than 50 attempts before students find the right solution.

Jared loved this aspect of the school's framework. If his project didn't work out, it didn't mean he got a bad grade. It just meant he had to look for another way to make it work. In the thoughtfully constructed makerspace at One Stone, Jared had the freedom to work on projects like programming in different languages and building his own computer networks. Equipped with determination and an entrepreneurial attitude, Jared is poised to take his place in the contemporary workforce.

Educators can also benefit from applying design thinking. At Design39 Campus – a school in

Poway Unified School District – staff start each day by discussing how to approach teaching. Following the framework of design thinking, teachers reflect deeply on what students have told them so they can understand challenges from a child’s point of view.

Collaborating in this way fosters a vibrant learning environment, where students and teachers share the same strategies to attain their goals.

Connecting education to the real world is a powerful way to engage students.

Across the Teton Science Schools network, a number of students aren't at their desks. But they're not playing hooky. They're participating in Field Education programs, which use place-based education to create authentic learning experiences.

In place-based education, students complete projects grounded in real-world examples. For instance, students in a Field Education program tested water quality in their

neighborhoods. This type of learning framework not only connects students to their local landscapes, it also helps them reflect on local culture and social practices. While using inquiry-based learning to develop their projects, students see themselves as part of their local community.

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Connecting students to their communities motivates them because their learning becomes relevant to life around them. For

instance, Larry Rosenstock – founder of High Tech High in San Diego – encourages his teachers to integrate art with biology, through projects that support the local blood bank or draw attention to local fauna and flora.

A cross-curricular approach like this is common in schools using nontraditional learning models. These models recognize that, in the real world, nothing stands in isolation. The engineer will communicate their research during meetings or in reports; the artist stretching canvas will use math to measure frames.

Fieldwork isn't the only way to create real-world learning experiences. Under the Summit School model – a global network supporting innovative secondary schools – students participate in quarterly expeditions taught by partner organizations or staff at the network's central office. These expeditions have the added bonus of giving teachers the chance to get out of the classroom and visit other schools, or to develop their own lesson plans.

Summer internships are another way to give students real-life learning opportunities. Students

between their junior and senior years at Samueli Academy in Orange County complete a 45-hour internship during their summer break. Carefully structured, these internships involve work-based learning with Academy business partners.

When students learn through real-world experiences, it brings meaning to a school day.

Learning is no longer a theoretical activity – it can have positive outcomes that change people's lives.

A student's learning experience significantly improves when teachers take responsibility for it collectively.

Think back to when you were in high school. No doubt you had a different teacher for every subject, and each of those subjects was taught in isolation. But this style of learning is contrary to human nature. Humans like to learn within networks.

The key message here is: A student's learning experience significantly improves when

teachers take responsibility for it collectively.

If you visit any school that's a member of the New Tech Network, you'll notice something interesting about the classrooms – they're twice the size of a standard room. This isn't so that students can spread out. It's because rooms are designed to hold two classes at a time.

Under the NTN model, two teachers from different disciplines teach courses together to better reflect how we experience information in the real world. For example, an

English and a Social Studies teacher might combine forces, integrate the English and History curriculums, and create a World Studies course.

But subject integration isn't the only reason why the NTN learning model is designed this way. Working in teacher teams has a range of other benefits. These include ongoing course improvement through teachers giving each other feedback; making teaching more sustainable by having in-room support; and providing better lesson differentiation to challenge high achievers and support students who struggle.

Team-teaching also changes student behavior – for the better. If one teacher needs to take a child aside, there’s still an adult in the room to supervise the rest of the class. Teachers have the chance to role model important behaviors too, like collaboration and teamwork.

When teachers view a child’s entire education as their responsibility, they also naturally collaborate outside the classroom. For instance, the social network Teacher2Teacher makes it easy for teachers in different schools to connect with each other. The network includes subcommittees, where

teachers can swap tips and resources based on subject areas or learning needs. This helps teachers improve their individual teaching practices, while also benefiting from collective knowledge.

The key to making a teacher network valuable is generosity. By sharing tools and experiences, teachers can work together to help students thrive.

A clear vision of what you want to achieve will help you identify which learning network will work for you.

Congratulations, school leader! You've decided to join a learning network to transform education at your school – but there are a number of networks to choose from. They all have pros and cons, and offer different resources and benefits. So, before you pick one, you need to have a clear idea of what kind of school you'd like to create and how strictly you're willing to adhere to what each network offers.

The key message here is: A clear vision of what you want to achieve will help you identify which learning network will work for you.

Let's have a look at some of the different network models on offer.

Managed networks consistently deliver quality outcomes to their member schools. In the US, there are over 50 networks servicing around 40 percent of all chartered schools. These schools share a learning model – including a curriculum and assessment rubrics – as well as professional development

opportunities for teachers. Many of them also offer, or are beginning to offer, online learning systems that help personalize classroom education. This is extremely valuable since an individual school typically wouldn't have the budget to develop their own platform.

While there are huge benefits in being handed a tried and tested learning model, managed networks aren't for everyone. Their focus is on implementing *their* model in schools, which can stifle innovation and make tailoring impossible.

Because of this, some schools prefer a more flexible network, like one that's based around learning principles or design.

Principle and design networks attract educators who share a common vision for learners. For example, National Academy Foundation members are all small schools with a career-themed learning model. This model prepares students for a career in information technology, finance, engineering, health sciences, or hospitality and tourism. They all use the NAFTrack Certification system, which ensures that students are career and college ready.

Joining a principle- or design-based network is a cost-effective way to learn best-practice methods from other schools. But because they're not as rigorous as a managed network, they're not as cohesive, so they don't have the same impact. Still, they're a good option for educators looking for more flexibility when it comes to using network models.

Networks have the power to completely overhaul how your students learn and how your teachers teach. It's worthwhile taking the time to explore what

each one will offer you before
you make your final decision.

To change a child's learning experience, you must change a school's culture.

Remember Katherine Smith Elementary School from an earlier blink – the school that was transformed when it joined the NTN? Well, it's true that the school's new learning model significantly increased student engagement. But that's just part of the story. Without a complete organizational shift, the new model would've had limited success.

Part of Principal Brengard's vision for Katherine Smith

Elementary was to give students life-changing social and academic confidence. This was particularly important since most of its students came from low-income families who didn't speak English at home.

According to Kathy Gomez – superintendent of Katherine Smith Elementary's school district – you can't change a school without a cultural shift.

The key message here is: To change a child's learning experience, you must change a school's culture.

Typically, this shift begins with a change in focus from test

scores to learning outcomes. Once teachers don't solely need to prepare students for tests, they can plan lessons that cater to each child's learning needs.

But this is scary terrain. It goes against most teachers' professional education. Because of this, they need a leader who creates trust and inspires her team to believe they truly have the ability to change education for the better. In Gomez's opinion, a leader must be vulnerable to achieve this. By having the courage to be vulnerable, leaders win their teams' confidence.

Similarly, leaders need to reassure parents when they announce that the school is shifting to a nontraditional learning model. Many parents won't understand how new teaching methods work, and they'll be anxious about how this might affect their child's future. Since overhauling a learning model is complex, leaders can use the time its roll-out provides to help parents become more comfortable with the change.

If you're planning to make significant changes in your school or district, setting up subcommittees to tackle one aspect of the project is a great

way to get your learning community involved. Whether you're implementing a new curriculum, improving your school's image, or even reviewing the quality of cafeteria food, make sure that each committee has a clear goal with specific milestones and deliverables. Your team will be proud when they see how their hard work has transformed the school into a positive learning environment where students thrive.

“A spirit of openness can help build trust with staff, so they believe they have the freedom to change.”

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

While it's understandable that many schools feel pressured to focus on test scores, teaching under a traditional education model doesn't necessarily prepare students for the modern economy. To succeed beyond school, students need to learn to think critically and innovatively, take initiative, and, above all, to love learning! Schools can foster these qualities by adopting a nontraditional learning model – one that's tried, tested, and

supported. Learning networks can facilitate this, helping educators around the globe inspire the new generation.

Actionable advice:

Start blogging your education ideas.

Blogging is a great way to share your teaching ideas with the broader education community. Don't be afraid of sharing ideas for subjects you don't teach. For instance, when you're out for a drive one day, you might have a great idea about a project on stopping distances – one that combines physics, math, and

sociology. Don't worry if you're a biology teacher! Share your post across your network. Even if it's just a springboard to a better idea, it's still a valuable resource for your peers.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with the title of this book as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *Building a Better Teacher*, by Elizabeth Green

We've just explored how nontraditional teaching models create empowered learners. But most teachers in the United States still work under a traditional model and often struggle to get results in the classroom. To find out why students in mainstream American schools consistently underperform, check out the blinks to *Building a Better Teacher* by Elizabeth Green.

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

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