



Plan to Innovate With

ALL KIDS IN MIND

By Andy Jacks

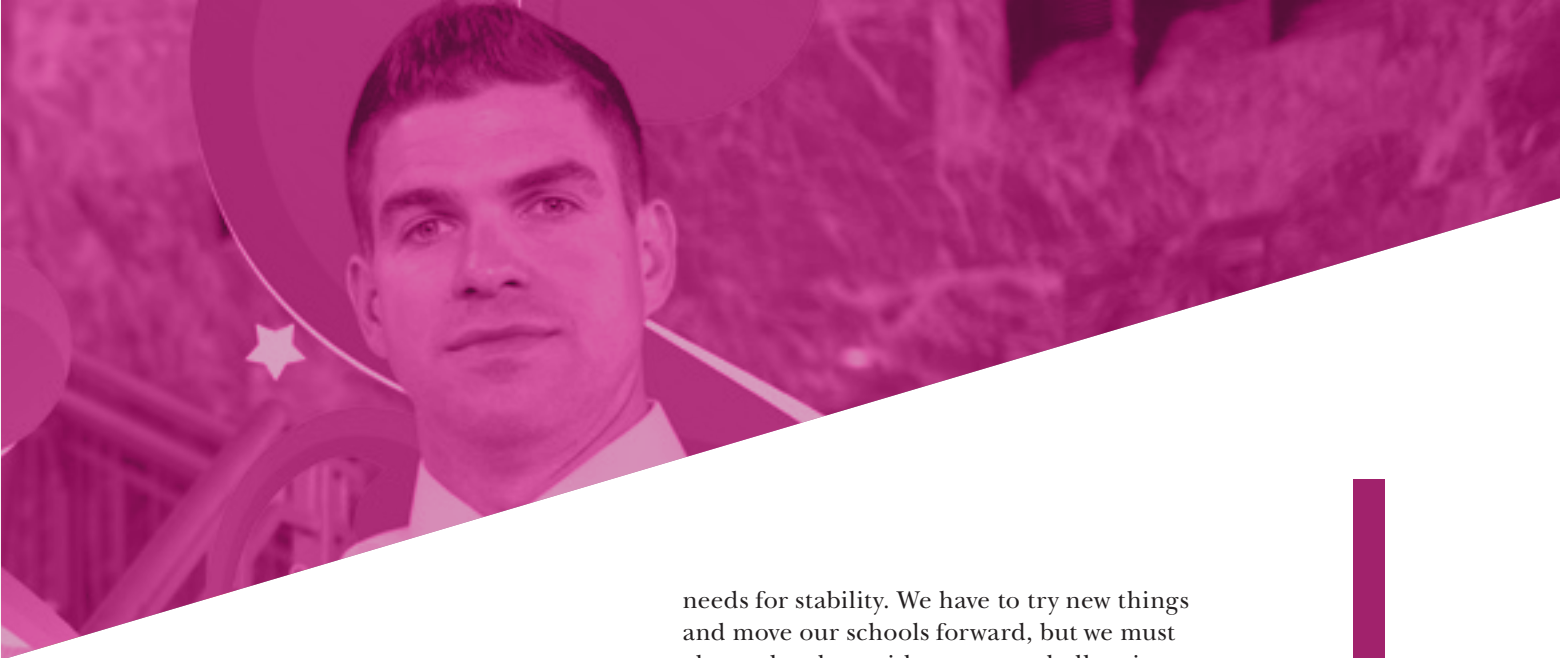
Flexible seating was going to be *it*—the game-changer, the innovation that would revolutionize the look and feel of our classrooms like nothing we’d ever seen before. Every class had to have it, and we were so excited to make this change and surprise our students when they came back from a long weekend break.

We rearranged the rooms and ordered new furniture. We bought colorful exercise balls to use as seats. We lowered desks so kids could use pillows as seats on the floor. The classrooms looked bright and colorful, and we knew it was going to be amazing—once students were comfortable, they would be more engaged, better behaved, and more focused.

As I walked the halls on the first day, I could hear the students giddily trying to make sense of their new seating arrangements. I had a smile on my face and an extra hop in my step. I was having a blast seeing the students’ reactions as I went to the next ... SLAP BOING!

Exercise balls make a unique sound when they bounce—a sound that’s dreadful to hear coming out of a classroom. I rushed into the room and saw exactly what I feared:

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A group of students was tossing the exercise balls around the room. I looked over to the teacher, whose face quickly went from beet-red with anger at the students to pale mortification at seeing me enter.

The natural reaction—and, unfortunately, the common practice—would be to discipline the students and address classroom management with the teacher. But we didn't play the blame game; instead, we looked inward to see what we needed to do differently as leaders.

We had made the classic leadership mistake: putting more emphasis on the flashy new program than on the kids who would be using it. We should have known that this class would have a hard time adjusting to the seating change; we had been working on specific behavior issues with its students all year. In forcing a change upon them, we had created a new discipline problem.

Change vs. Stability


Situations like this should force us to rethink the change process and weigh the need for the change versus the students' and teachers'

needs for stability. We have to try new things and move our schools forward, but we must also make plans with our most challenging students in mind. We can't pretend they don't exist when we implement new strategies. We teach the kids we have.

We can't set up lessons with only the best students in mind, then get frustrated when one or two of them distract the entire class. Use your knowledge of the students and classrooms to predict likely behaviors and adjust your plans accordingly. If you are looking to make a big change, ask yourself:

- How will the best-behaved students respond?
- How will the most challenging students respond?
- What happens when students don't act the way we want them to?

Not everyone will be ready for innovations at the same time, but programs don't have to be all-or-nothing. The more we push students who aren't ready, the more we must support them and be prepared for something failing to work as intended. Preparation must incorporate a forecast of students' reactions to assess whether it's a good idea to take on the new challenge in the first place, and if so, how we might modify it for the variety of students we serve.

We can't let an innovation be more important than the students who will be using it. Go big! Try new things. Remember, new programs are never more important than the kids. 

Andy Jacks is principal of Ashland Elementary School in Manassas, Virginia.