



# BLUEPRINT *for a* LEARNING SYSTEM

**CREATE ONE LARGER, MORE FLEXIBLE TEAM THAT ENCOURAGES COLLABORATION  
IN ALL DIRECTIONS**

**By Paul B. Ash and John D'Auria**

**P**icture this: Teachers sharing insights and challenges. Principals leading with trust. Central office leaders inspiring and supporting principals. Educators regularly crafting innovative solutions to problems of practice. Students working collaboratively to solve problems that have relevance and meaning. A synergistic school system that results in all students learning at high levels.

Sadly, the vast majority of schools in the United States have not been able to reach these ideals. Most school dis-

tricts provide the best education their school systems are designed to produce. Every day, teachers and administrators come to work and do the best job they know how. In the book *School Systems That Learn* (Ash & D'Auria, 2013), we argue that most school systems, as they are currently designed, have reached or nearly reached the limits of their capacity and that systemic change is necessary to reach higher levels of learning for all students. To make this change possible, we have created a blueprint for building a systemwide learning organization that focuses on professional learning as the stimulus to improve student achievement.

Before diving into this problem, the following anal-



ogy may help explain what we mean by a system that has reached its maximum capacity.

Why can't a 6-year-old child run a four-minute mile? The human body is a system. Fundamentally, that biological system cannot convert food energy into usable energy fast enough and is not able to produce enough mechanical energy to run at great speeds, even if that energy were available. Even if this child ate just the right foods and exercised every day, he or she could never run a four-minute mile. The child's maximum speed is limited by his or her biology and physical structure.

The good news is that, unlike the body of the 6-year-old child, the maximum capacity of a school system is not limited by the laws of biology and physics. Rather, a school system's maximum capacity is a product of the structure and rules that were designed by humans. For example, in the 1900s, legislatures, school boards, and educational leaders set up the structure of schools based on a factory model of education. Students were sorted by age of manufacture and taught in batches of 40 to 50 students per class. At the time, no one expected schools to educate all students at high levels.

Now, society demands much higher levels of learning for all students, but many of the old structures have not changed. Teachers still work primarily by themselves

in self-contained classrooms and rarely collaborate with other professionals. According to a *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, teachers spend an average of 2.7 hours per week in structured collaboration with other teachers and leaders (MetLife, 2010, p. 15). Given today's higher learning expectations for all students, it is unreasonable to expect that well-educated teachers can provide high levels of learning using a 100-year-old model, no matter how hard they work.

To expand the capacity of a school system to educate more students at high levels, schools must grow from a traditional model based on teachers working in isolation to a new model based on educator teams. In these teams, educators collaborate to develop lessons, write formative assessments, differentiate instruction, and create intervention strategies. By changing the structure from isolated teachers to teachers working in teams, school leaders can increase the capacity of their schools to educate more students more effectively without adding personnel.

However, the team structure also has a maximum capacity. Even more can be accomplished if school systems shift from small, isolated teams to an entire K-12 learning school system that functions as one larger, more flexible team that encourages all teachers and administrators to collaborate in all directions.

### CREATING A LEARNING SYSTEM

As practitioners with 60 years of combined school administration experience, we have found no evidence that any teacher gets up in the morning and says, "I can't wait for more rules, regulations, and standardization — they inspire me to work hard and find new ways to teach all students at high levels!"

In 2009, Ronald Wolk, former editor of *Education Week*, criticized the level of standardization in American schools. He wrote, "Standardization and uniformity may work with cars and computers, but it doesn't work with

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humans. Today’s student body is the most diverse in history. An education system that treats all students alike denies that reality” (Wolk, 2009, p. 30).

Student educational needs are complex and changing, which means that educators must constantly challenge themselves to learn new ways to reach students.

We have created a model to improve learning for all students by expanding the collective potency of educator talents throughout an entire K-12 school system, including central office administrators working with all school-based educators. The model is based on four high-leverage drivers that will dramatically change the culture throughout a school system and lead to better solutions for all students on a daily basis. These four drivers are:

- Trust;
- Collaboration in all directions, elevating the importance of teamwork;
- Capacity building for all educators; and
- Leaders at all levels.

Here is an overview of the four drivers and how they work together to increase the quality of teaching and learning.

### TRUST

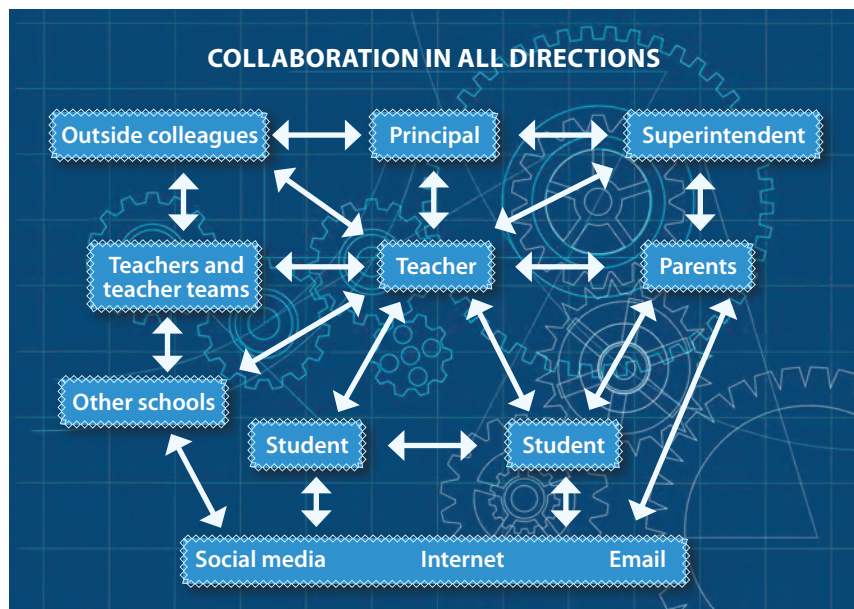
When a climate of trust exists, you can feel it. You know that your colleagues and supervisors care about your success and will do whatever they can to help you succeed. According to researchers Michelle Reina and Dennis Reina, founders of the Reina Trust Building Institute, “Without trust, employees have little interest in being creative, taking risks, and collaborating. The generative power begins to wane, and performance is diminished” (Reina & Reina, 2007, p. 36).

Educational researchers Bryk and Schneider found a strong correlation in schools between high levels of trust and student performance. They examined 100 schools between 1991 and 1996 and found that the schools in the top quartile for standardized test scores had higher trusting relationships, as measured by faculty surveys, than schools in the bottom quartile (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). While correlation does not mean causation, our experience bears out this commonsense conclusion. When faculty members trust one another, they are

much more likely to work together to improve both teaching and learning.

Leaders in a learning system can build trust by:

1. Genuinely caring about teachers’ professional growth and



2. success in the classroom;
2. Modeling vulnerability and demonstrating openness to continuous learning;
3. Working with teachers through conflict to achieve common goals; and
4. Demonstrating a willingness to make unpopular political decisions that address student needs.

While school systems without trust can produce successes and have programs that are exemplary, trust is one of the four drivers that sustains continual growth. It provides a safety net that supports ongoing experimentation and research. Trust also increases the system’s capacity to address unanticipated problems and obstacles that arise from the inevitable misunderstanding and conflicts that are part of complex communities. Trust is necessary for the system to achieve beyond its current capacity. Most importantly, trust provides the psychological safety that educators need to take risks and create ventures that lead to breakthrough ideas. Our current national emphasis on accountability, while necessary, is not sufficient to generate continuous innovation and high achievement for all students.

### COLLABORATION IN ALL DIRECTIONS, ELEVATING THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAMWORK

Many books focus on the impact of individual collaborative teams within schools, sometimes known as professional learning communities, but we argue that isolated learning communities are only the first step to form a school or system learning organization. In a larger learning organization, teachers and administrators must collaborate in all directions to raise the capacity of all educators to effectively educate students. (See diagram above.) Collaboration in all directions means that, within each school and

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throughout the district, every educator collaborates with others consistently to develop more effective educational approaches.

Studies show that U.S. teachers strongly support greater collaboration in schools. In 2009, MetLife conducted a study of 1,003 public school teachers and 500 principals in grades K-12. Survey results showed 67% of teachers and 78% of principals think that greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders would have a major impact on improving student achievement (MetLife, 2010, p. 9). In a 2010 survey of 40,000 teachers conducted by Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 86% of teachers identified a collegial work environment as “absolutely essential” or “very important” for their persistence in the profession (Scholastic & Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, p. 70).

Given that changing any large institution is difficult, why should school leaders direct the change to increase collaboration in schools? Research shows that educators throughout the U.S. feel that more collaboration will increase collegial trust, job satisfaction, teacher success in the classroom, and student responsibility (MetLife, 2010; Fullan, 1993; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Amy Edmondson from Harvard Business School says that collegial teamwork is the linchpin of innovation (Edmondson, 2012). Yet for all its potential benefits, collaboration is challenging and requires considerable skill building, which is why our third driver is linked to continuous capacity building.

### CAPACITY BUILDING FOR ALL EDUCATORS

If the goal is high achievement for all students, then we need to change how we increase educator capacity.

Traditional approaches include:

1. Firing or not rehiring ineffective teachers, and hiring better teachers;
2. Supervision and evaluation to improve classroom instruction; and
3. Professional development, which is often a one-day workshop, or relying on teachers to complete graduate courses.

While these approaches have some merit, there is weak evidence that they produce sufficient school and system capacity to close achievement gaps and provide high-quality learning for all students.

In a learning organization, the entire school system must be designed to promote continuous adult learning that is likely to increase student learning. To expand capacity beyond the traditional approach, we recommend that school leaders create a robust system of professional learning that builds on and shares internal knowledge and skills and reaches out to the external world when needed.

We suggest that all school leaders start by creating a K-12 professional learning committee comprised of teachers and administrators throughout the system. In our model, the committee would oversee development of in-district courses and multiday workshops that are aligned with school and district

learning goals. The development process would include identifying what skills and knowledge teachers need to learn at a deeper level to more effectively raise student achievement.

While the K-12 professional learning committee plays an important organizational role in the district, the day-to-day work of educators in schools must also produce continuous adult learning, formally and informally. For example, we recommend educators form study groups to share best practices, and principals and department heads use faculty meetings to build community and to improve adult and student learning. School leaders should create after-school professional learning that is aligned with school and district needs.

According to researcher John Hattie, “The biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching” (Hattie, 2009, p. 22).

We recommend these capacity-building strategies:

1. Promote conversations between and among colleagues (planned or unplanned) that allow teachers to share knowledge and to innovate;
2. Ensure that approved courses and workshops are aligned with school and district goals;
3. Use the hiring process to increase department and school capacity; and
4. Promote a culture that embraces professional feedback as a lifelong process to improve practice.

Providing high-quality professional learning is hard work and must become a core value of the district over time. There are no quick fixes to change and improve professional practice. An effective system of professional learning must be coherent, consistent, systemic, and sustained.

### LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

A major problem with top-down leadership is compliance. According to Peter Senge, “When genuine commitment is needed, hierarchical authority becomes problematic. ... No one can force another person to learn if the learning involves deep changes in beliefs and attitudes and fundamental new ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 1996, p. 43).

In a learning system, everyone can contribute to and advocate for change. Everyone can provide leadership within his or her work group to implement the new plan. In a K-12 learning system, all faculty members and support staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles either formally, in a part-time position beyond their regular duties, or informally, without a title, on an as-needed basis with peer colleagues.

To break through the current limitations of schools, administrators need to shift their leadership from “I” to “we” and

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promote a constant flow of new ideas and inventive thinking from everyone. Effective school leaders in a learning organization must encourage and validate creative problem solving and support educators who try new ideas and take risks. It is unrealistic to expect that many teachers will analyze current school or classroom practices and recommend new approaches without support from school leaders.

Schools must also become laboratories for new knowledge. Teachers need to use their classrooms as laboratories to examine student learning and develop more effective interventions. According to Hattie, “School leaders and teachers need to create schools, staff rooms, and classroom environments in which error is welcomed as a learning opportunity, in which discarding incorrect knowledge and understanding is welcomed, and in

which teachers can feel safe to learn, relearn, and explore knowledge and understanding” (Hattie, 2009, p. 9).

In a learning system, everyone can find his or her passion to improve student learning. Some educators will chose formal leadership positions, while others may choose to lead their teacher team or lead a district committee. Expanding leadership development is one way districts can expand their capacity to bring teams of educators together to solve complex educational problems.

While there are many factors that contribute to effective schools, creating a school system that learns is the most effective way to improve student learn-

ing. Changes in laws, teacher evaluation processes, and school structures are insufficient to increase learning to high levels for all students. Ultimately, what matters most is creating a learning system that results in everyone learning at high levels every day.

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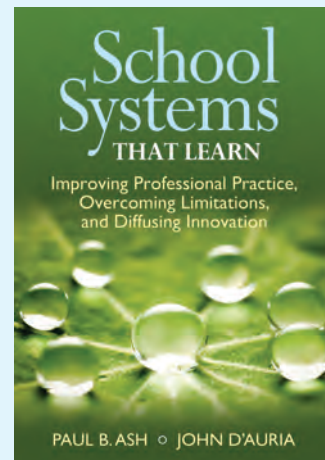
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## School Systems

**That Learn:**  
Improving  
Professional Practice,  
Overcoming  
Limitations, and  
Diffusing Innovation

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& John D’Auria

This practitioner’s guide to creating a systemwide learning organization focuses on professional learning as the stimulus to improving student achievement. *Corwin Press & Learning Forward, 2013*



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