

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

BUILD SKILLS TO BRING A SHARED VISION TO LIFE

By **Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown**

“If you’re trying to be successful, particularly as an urban district with the diverse needs of many students, you have to center on a moral purpose. That moral purpose has to be an imperative for every person in the district.”

— *Wendy Robinson, superintendent,
Fort Wayne Community Schools*

Successful district and school leaders are systems thinkers. They understand that passion for work comes from purpose. They recognize the challenges of change and the difficulty of steering many people with multiple perspectives toward the same end. They meet challenges with the conviction and fortitude needed to forge a new approach without diminishing past practices.

In systems where all educators commit to continuous learning, leaders have the critical skills needed to develop a shared vision throughout the organization. A shared vision is a dynamic force in people’s hearts and minds, and employees who share a vision connect to one another through their common aspiration. Peter Senge describes common aspiration as “the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we want to create. When there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar ‘vision statement’), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to” (1990, p. 9).

Beyond forging the straightforward vision statement, change leaders develop metaphors that explain the vision



and regularly share stories with staff about educators making dynamic shifts in their practices. They inspire others and build shared vision by modeling passion for the work, high energy, and high expectations for all. They recognize that their words and actions set the tone for the entire organization.

In learning systems, the superintendent and leadership team members are mission-driven, other-centered, caring leaders who have a passion for their moral purpose of educating all children to high standards and are committed to see it through.

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Adapted from *Becoming a Learning System*, Learning Forward, 2014.

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DESCRIBE THE VISION

Those who lead organizations driven by moral purpose take steps to develop a compelling shared vision because they know it provides a focus and energy for learning and achieving challenging goals. Learning system leaders understand that a shared vision helps a community accomplish what individuals working independently cannot.

Developing a compelling vision requires significant skill. Leaders base their work on a grounded theory of change and a logic model that clarify how members of the organization will learn. These tools allow district leaders to debate effective strategies, incorporate research findings and others' experiences, and seek feedback from school leadership teams before establishing a learning agenda, designing professional learning, and initiating implementation.

Margaret Wheatley, author and management consultant, says that in order for leaders to put a vision into action they must continuously work to build clarity around the organization's message: "Creating the field through the dissemination of those ideas is essential. The field must reach all corners of the organization, involve everyone and be available everywhere. Vision statements move off the walls into the corridors, seeking out every employee, every recess of the organization. In the past we may have thought of ourselves

as skilled crafters of organizations, assembling the pieces of an organization, exerting our energy on the painstaking creation of links between all those parts. Now, we need to imagine ourselves as broadcasters, tall radio beacons of information, pulsing out messages everywhere. We need all of us out there, stating, clarifying, discussing, modeling, filling all of the space with the messages we care about" (Wheatley, 1992, pp. 65–56).

In other words, leaders articulate the vision's message and then make sure that they continually speak it so that in time, the vision permeates the organization. As staff deepen their commitment to the vision, they develop a sense of collective responsibility for achieving it. This is one indicator that a system is truly a learning system. One way successful leaders support the shared vision is to use documents and visuals that reinforce the message. The reflection questions on page 4 help leaders get started in considering their next steps in this work, while the tool on pages 5 and 6 steps teams through a process for articulating a vision.

CONSIDER THE MAGNITUDE OF CHANGE

Effective leaders consider the magnitude and implications of changes they expect from those in the organization. They begin by establishing a theory of change that outlines the essential actions required for an innovation to be implemented well. A basic theory of change explains how early and intermediate accomplishments set the stage for long-term results and what further actions will be needed to move the organization toward full implementation with fidelity.

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Improving student learning and professional practice requires ongoing systemic and organizational change.

Get specific to take steps toward a vision

Judy Tyson, principal of Iduma Elementary School in Killeen, Texas, led staff through a process of defining not only their purpose, but also the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors educators were expected to evidence in the classroom each day. They created this statement:

Iduma Elementary is a fun-loving, collaborative, focused, enthusiastic, risk-taking, intelligent community of learners with a reputation for excellence:

- Students engage in learning what is meaningful to them and make significant progress in achieving state and national standards. They value learning; they respect themselves and others; they share in the responsibility of a democratic school in which all achieve at high levels.
- Staff members engage in continuous learning. We use research and data to guide our decisions. We support each other and mentor each other so that all are highly competent. We share the responsibility for all students in the school and acknowledge our power and control to change those aspects of the school that have the greatest impact on student learning. We meaningfully engage students, parents, and community members in understanding the learning process, the expectations for student success, and ways they can powerfully partner with us.
- Parents and community members engage as equal partners in ensuring the success of all students. They make positive contributions at school, in their businesses and places of community service, and at home to ensure students are healthy and engaged in learning.

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Successful district teams trying to implement any innovation think carefully about what it will take to move the entire organization through first- and second-order change and where any breakdowns might occur in order to add another stepping stone. In first-order change, people's behavior does not vary much, if at all, from past practice. Teams simply become aware of new expectations and engage in professional learning to develop their understanding of how to meet them (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). In second-order change, staff make a significant break with current practices.

As people move through first-order change to engage in new practices and experience second-order change, they often become frustrated. They may misunderstand the initiative or find it difficult to implement the change. When leaders understand how those in their organization learn best and how adult learners move from first-order to second-order change, the innovation is far more likely to succeed.

Successful leaders clarify the vision and goals by carefully crafting a logic model. Logic models help leaders set a series of expected outcomes over time that allow them to manage the change process. They declare short-, medium-, and long-term goals based on the theory of change, as well as clear outputs and the resources needed for the initiative to succeed. The example on p. 7 demonstrates an approach to implementing a new way of teaching reading.

COMMIT TO SUCCESS

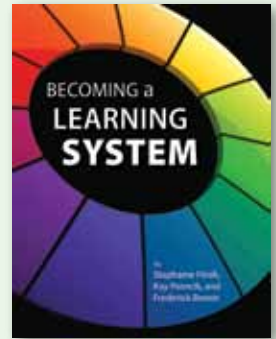
Building shared vision and designing and initiating innovations is only part of the work involved in increasing all students' academic success. Leaders also make a deep, personal commitment to steering the organization through the change process. They build strong relationships with their boards and district and school leaders in order to lead all in the system to share a powerful, compelling vision and to work together to achieve it.

Research finds that a superintendent's tenure positively affects student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, many district and school leaders don't intend to stay in their positions for long, or do not expect to be allowed to stay. Despite the rewards of seeing the effects of new practices on student learning, by the time the organization has moved to second-order change, many superintendents have moved to new districts. According to a report from the Council of the Great City Schools, the average tenure of urban superintendents increased from 2.3 years in 1999 to 3.6 years in 2010, a 56% increase that educators are celebrating. Yet fundamental change in a district requires a seven- to 10-year commitment (CGCS, 2010). District leaders who focus on the right goals, manage change effectively, and remain in

WHAT IS A LEARNING SYSTEM?

In learning systems, all educators commit to continuous learning and to applying that learning to their own and others' performance. Educators at the district and school levels share responsibility for their own learning and for ensuring great teaching for every student every day.

Learn more in Learning Forward's latest book, ***Becoming a Learning System***. This comprehensive volume outlines the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors district leaders need to lead, facilitate, and coach school leaders and leadership teams to transform learning practices in schools. The tool kit includes exclusive access to dozens of online tools, protocols, and additional readings. Purchase the book online at <http://store.learningforward.org>.



their roles long enough to see results have higher-performing students (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The best way to lead people into the future is to connect deeply in the present with their passions and their moral purpose for teaching and leading. Only shared visions take root, and leaders create shared visions only when they listen closely to others; appreciate others' hopes and attend to others' needs; communicate their own beliefs and vision clearly; and use systems, processes, and protocols to navigate the change process. The best leaders bring people into the future because they engage in the oldest form of research: They observe their team members and connect these members' desires and aspirations to the vision. Then that vision truly becomes shared.

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