

# Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

## Inside

- Tool: Our vision work so far, p. 4
- Tool: Clearly articulate a vision, pp. 5-6
- Tool: Sample theory of change, p. 7

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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.

*Continued on p. 2*

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

*Continued from p. 1*

### 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.

*Continued on p. 3*

#### 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.

*Continued from p. 2*

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

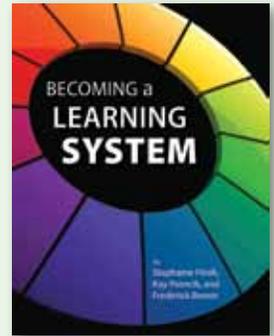
Building shared vision and designing and initiating innovations is only part of the work involved in increasing all students' academic success. Leaders also make a deep, personal commitment to steering the organization through the change process. They build strong relationships with their boards and 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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## **Our vision work so far:** Reflection questions

Before continuing the work to create a vision using the tools on the following pages, discuss the following questions to understand your vision work so far as a district or school.

**What strategies have we used to intentionally build a shared vision in our district or school?**

**What actions have we taken as leaders to model the vision?**

**What strategies might we use with those we serve to move our organization closer to owning the vision?**

**What is our theory of change?**

**What stepping stones have we considered that will help to achieve our vision?**

**How have we, as leaders, demonstrated a true commitment to change?**

**Source:** *Becoming a Learning System*, by Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward, 2014.

## Clearly articulate a vision

PURPOSE		
Develop a clearly articulated vision that all in the organization come to share.		
TIME		
Three to four 1-hour sessions over several months		
MATERIALS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chart paper</li> <li>• Markers</li> <li>• Sticky notes</li> </ul>		
STEPS		TIME
Session I		
1.	Working with a team at the district level or the entire faculty, explain that the purpose is to generate a vision of what you want a program, a curriculum, or the school to look like.	5 minutes
2.	<p>Create a list of beliefs or assumptions about the innovation based on the group’s research that established the innovation as essential to student success:</p> <p>“Let’s review our research that led us to place this innovation in our district/school plan. Through our observations of teachers and our analysis of quality instruction, we determined that we wanted to use inquiry as an approach to learning. What assumptions do we hold that grounded this decision?”</p>	10 minutes
3.	<p>As a group, write a description of the innovation that members will use to clarify what is meant by the innovation:</p> <p>“We are about to launch a new innovation in our district/school, as we established in our school plan. We want to ensure that all teachers are using purposeful inquiry approaches to learning. Let’s be sure, before we begin to talk to anyone about this innovation, that we are sure what it looks like to us. We can start by defining ‘inquiry.’ I want you each to use a sticky note and write one descriptive sentence that clearly defines inquiry to you. We will use these notes to develop the best description possible.”</p>	10 minutes

*Continued on p. 6*

**Source:** *Becoming a Learning System*, by Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward, 2014.

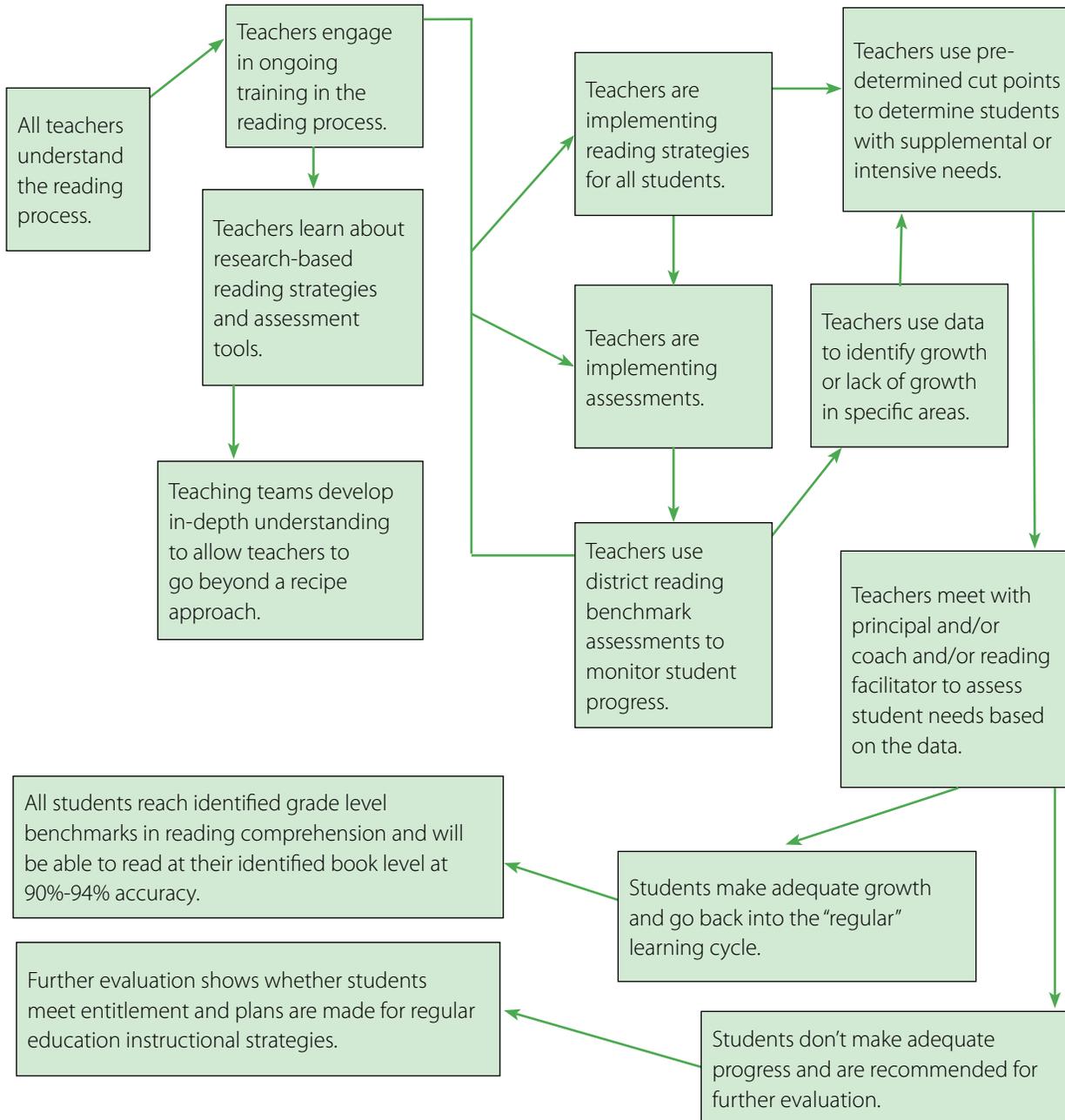
## Clearly articulate a vision *continued from p. 5*

STEPS		TIME
<b>Session II</b>		
<b>4.</b>	<p>Initiate conversations about how people in the program picture a successful program:</p> <p>“If we were highly skilled in using inquiry, what would it look like in each and every classroom? What would lessons look like? What would conversations look like? What would students be doing? What would staff be doing? What would leaders be doing?”</p> <p>“We can use the same system and have each of us generate sticky notes, or we could divide up in groups and have some work on what the curriculum would look like, what instruction would look like, and what assessment would look like. Others could describe what students would be doing, what staff would be doing, and what leadership would be doing. What do you think is best?”</p>	15 minutes
<b>5.</b>	<p>Begin to generate sticky notes around these comments. Talk about them. Explore other ideas. Read and study:</p> <p>“The first thing we are going to do is get all our best ideas out today. Then we will take a few weeks to explore and study what others think. We may choose to visit classroom teachers across the district who are skilled at using inquiry approaches.”</p>	15 minutes
<b>Session III</b>		
<b>6.</b>	<p>This session may need to be repeated several times to address all of the areas essential for developing a shared vision. Work on the system until people begin to see common ground:</p> <p>“Now let’s analyze the work that we are doing. Each team will share its research and explain team members’ thinking about our ‘What would it look like’ descriptors. We will allow ample time for discussion and generate a lot of ideas before we come to agreement.”</p>	1 hour
<b>Session IV</b>		
<b>7.</b>	<p>Help the team consider each descriptor until everyone on the team not only has a clear vision of the innovation but agrees that it is their vision:</p> <p>“Now that we have explored many ways of describing inquiry and determined many ways we would see this instructional process in our schools, let’s come to agreement about the essential descriptors.”</p>	45 minutes
<b>8.</b>	Celebrate and initiate a theory of change to achieve the vision.	

**Source:** *Becoming a Learning System*, by Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward, 2014.

## Sample theory of change: Implement a new reading program

To integrate a current reading program with an instructional decision-making model, district leaders might develop this or a similar theory of change to outline the specific actions that will move the larger vision into action.



As district and school leaders consider what essential steps must be taken for teachers to authentically learn and use new strategies, they also consider what barriers teachers will face and how they will overcome them.

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