



A legacy of leadership
is more than a park bench
with a bronze plaque.

LASTING LEGACIES

KENTUCKY SUPERINTENDENTS CREATE SUCCESS STRATEGIES
THAT REACH INTO THE FUTURE

BY MICHAEL CHIRICHELLO

It was near the end of the interview, and the candidate for district superintendent faced one last question: “What is the legacy you are leaving behind in your current district?”

“It’s a bench,” he said, explaining that the district had placed a bench outside the district office with an inscribed bronze plaque thanking him for his service.

He was not hired.

A legacy of leadership is more than a bench, as demonstrated by six Kentucky school superintendents who share a common commitment to providing a resource for continuous professional learning for district superintendents. The six leaders met at the end of their doctorate of education program at Northern Kentucky University in May 2015 to contribute strategies for what they hoped would be an integral part of their leadership legacy in their districts.

The six superintendents believe these strategies will find lodging in the hearts and minds of school leaders who, like them, feel compelled to make a significant difference, to matter, and to know their lives count for something more than a bench.

They developed a website (www.aspirationalschool.com) that provides overarching strategies and numerous resources to help new and experienced superintendents lead from the head and the heart — to matter and make a difference in the lives of their students. Each focus — strategic planning, effective communication processes, continuous professional learning, innovative instruction, succession planning, and student success during post-secondary education — becomes a professional learning resource for district superintendents.

Here are their stories.

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STRATEGIC PLANNING

12 STEPS TO SUCCESS

JAMES NEIHOF,
SUPERINTENDENT,
SHELBY COUNTY, KENTUCKY

James Neihof, superintendent in Shelby County, Kentucky, believes that strategic planning for the 21st century stems from a conviction that strategy must become more



James Neihof

than what a leader does. Rather, it is something one becomes: a strategic leader. This requires a conscious effort and deliberate practice to plan, develop, and execute an authentic strategic plan.

The district's 12-step process, the result of a districtwide action research project focused primarily on the strategic journey toward habitual effectiveness, begins with dreaming impossible dreams. From imagination and aspiration to celebrating the accomplishment of successes in a strategic plan, the impact on student growth and achievement in this district is beginning to increase. By fall 2016, two years into the plan, both college- and career-readiness percentages and high school scores were at record high levels for the district. Elementary and middle school state achievement scores remained comparable to 2014 levels, and achievement gaps had not yet been eliminated. While encouraged, everyone knew that work remained to be done to fully achieve the plan's goals.

An outgrowth of the district's strategic planning is what the district calls plan-

on-a-page, a self-monitoring process for principals to indicate one's measurable leadership impact on the strategic plan's implementation.

At the end of the year, each principal in the district shares his or her data based on the plan and reflects on the process during individual interviews with the superintendent. During these conversations at the end of each school year, principals' comments suggested that each had developed a high level of self-efficacy as they described what they chose to self-monitor to achieve the district's strategic plan. Here's one example of that self-efficacy in action.

In the early days of using the plan-on-a-page process, an elementary principal identified stagnant reading scores in a cohort of 4th graders, tracked the flatlining data back two years, and created a plan to double the students' growth. Using the plan-on-a-page structure, she designed and provided intervention for the group for one school year. She succeeded and, the following year, trained others on the staff to use her system, expanding her impact schoolwide.

Now, in the final year of the strategic plan, the district has achieved the plan's goals: writing and deploying a robust digital curriculum for teacher, parent, and student use; administrators routinely assessing the impact of their leadership actions and sharing data to prove the outcomes; teachers leading professional learning for each other; and community leaders engaging with the school district to create a new strategic plan for 2022 to achieve the outcomes of the graduate profile they helped create.

To learn more, visit
www.strategicschoolleader.com/action-research.

MEET THE SUPERINTENDENTS

◆ **James Neihof** is superintendent of Shelby County, Kentucky.

◆ **Anthony Orr** is interim superintendent of Powell County, Kentucky, and former superintendent of Nelson County, Kentucky.

◆ **J. Robin Cochran** is superintendent of Washington County, Kentucky.

◆ **Buddy Berry** is superintendent of Eminence Independent Schools, Kentucky.

◆ **Ron Livingood** is interim superintendent of Carroll County, Kentucky, and former superintendent of Grant County, Kentucky.

◆ **Robert Stafford** is superintendent of Owen County, Kentucky.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

A COMMON LANGUAGE

ANTHONY ORR,
FORMER SUPERINTENDENT,
NELSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Legacy leaders focus on a common language that refers directly to a district’s core values, highlighting connections between seemingly disparate initiatives. District leaders in Nelson County, Kentucky, realized that, despite thorough newspaper coverage, emailed superintendent messages, and web-based coverage of student achievements, communication efforts were falling short. The local community, parents, and even school staff lacked awareness and understanding of improvement efforts and resulting growth.



Anthony Orr

The communications system needed a significant overhaul to effectively integrate information about homework, school improvement plans, meeting agendas, and websites into daily life to help the community value the district’s work, manage change, and build a positive perception about the district for staff, parents, and other interested stakeholders.

Realizing that the district needed a plan for more effective communication with its staff, parents, and the community, then-superintendent Anthony Orr and his leadership team developed a strategic approach that focused on:

- Communicating regularly and frequently, helping staff with details needed for short-term task completion while connecting those tasks to a larger view of the organization’s primary function;
- Regularly and frequently revisiting the details and value of transformational work, leading stakeholders

from unawareness to adoption and internalization of change; and

- Implementing and monitoring communication plans that turn parents and staff into ambassadors who amplify the good news and gain the backing of the entire community.

To support these three key principles, the district implemented five strategies:

1. Take every opportunity to connect communications about the district’s work to its core values using a common language.
2. Tailor communication devices for specific audiences and purposes by repeating value-based vocabulary to connect task completion to purpose.
3. Communicate strategically to lighten the load for the staff.
4. Build commitment for the work by using multiple communication contacts to move stakeholders from initial contact to internalization of new and ongoing initiatives.
5. Use web-based shared documents to distribute the responsibility of developing district communication tools and messages.

The district developed and field-tested these three key principles and five strategies through an action research project, and this resulted in an improved communication process in Nelson County.

Consistently using a common language streamlined communication channels and individual messages. The leadership team developed stronger communication habits that led to more information being communicated less frequently. The primary messaging format further reduced time spent on new communications and reduced search time for staff members attempting to recall information transmitted previously.

To learn more, visit www.integratecomlegacy.com.

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◆ *J. Robin Cochran:*

The desire to develop a continuous growth mindset that transforms one’s practices provides a legacy for the future.

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

A FOCUS ON THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE CAREER EDUCATOR

J. ROBIN COCHRAN,
SUPERINTENDENT,
WASHINGTON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Effective leaders must create opportunities for ongoing professional learning that provide possibilities for individual and collaborative professional study,



J. Robin Cochran

analysis, application, and reflection that will continually improve professional practice and student learning outcomes. The desire to develop a continuous growth mindset that transforms one's practices

provides a legacy for the future.

J. Robin Cochran, superintendent in Washington County, Kentucky, developed powerful strategies from her research that supported her belief that continuous professional learning can positively impact the lifelong journey of the career teacher-educator. To create a culture that supports continuous professional learning, Cochran

believes that a district's leadership team must:

- Encourage reflective thought and action (planning, implementation, and refinement);
- Exemplify the relevance of new learning for all shareholders;
- Be focused and intentional;
- Facilitate shared learning and a growth mindset;
- Make connections to prior learning and experiences;
- Provide sufficient opportunities for deep learning that is supported and modeled;
- Provide opportunities for practice and feedback; and
- Involve inquiry into the teaching-learning process, relationships, and the individualization of our craft.

Her district now supports teachers who use strategies that include a two-day continuous self-guided learning plan, lesson study, peer observations, coaching, book studies, virtual learning communities, and professional learning communities. Cochran created a website that lists these designs for professional learning along with resources, tools, and videos that model the practices.

To learn more, visit
www.professionallearninglegacy.com.

A GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

These six superintendents believe that the pursuit of creating a legacy empowers leaders to understand leadership from a generational perspective — continually asking self-reflective questions:

- ◆ What lasting difference will my life's work make?
- ◆ Can my leadership decisions impact future generations?
- ◆ Am I here to do something that will last beyond my lifetime and that really matters?
- ◆ Can this learning legacy serve other district superintendents?

These six Kentucky superintendents — all under pressure to get results, all responding daily to state and federal expectations — knew that their hearts instinctively told them there is more to leadership than numbers.

◆ *Buddy Berry:*

Using the (Disney) Celebration School as a lesson on what to do and not do, the district's design team is focused on redesigning the American school.

◆ *Ron Livingood:*

This work provides a meaningful, problem-based, authentic curriculum for aspiring principals to know, understand, and apply as they move into formal leadership positions at the school level.

◆ *Robert Stafford:*

Long before high school, especially during middle school, students form ideas about attending college.

INNOVATIVE INSTRUCTION

REIMAGINING THE DISNEY DREAM

BUDDY BERRY,
SUPERINTENDENT,
EMINENCE INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS, KENTUCKY

Innovative instruction stems from passion, purpose, and a willingness to color outside the lines. Students must be risk-takers who will invent, create, and design as they make their pathways

to the future. They must apply and use their knowledge every day.

Buddy Berry, superintendent of the Eminence Independent Schools in Kentucky, developed real-world examples of innovative practices along with strategies and resources for leaders who want to leave a legacy as frontrunners of innovation.

In reimagining instruction, the lead designers in this district reached back to the early 1990s to research the Disney Development Company's establishment of the Celebration Community. They examined the development of Disney's

first prototype community as originally designed by Walt Disney with his creation of EPCOT (The Experimental



Buddy Berry

Prototype Community of Tomorrow). The design of this ideal town took over eight years to create and several years to construct.

Disney planned the town around the K-12 Celebration School, which was to be the prototype of future schools.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

AN INTENTIONAL PLAN

RON LIVINGOOD,
FORMER SUPERINTENDENT,
GRANT COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Creating and sustaining a pipeline for both new and aspiring school leaders demands that superintendents provide meaningful



Ron Livingood

professional learning opportunities for not only their principals and teachers, but also those aspiring to lead at the school level.

Ron Livingood, former superintendent of Grant County in Kentucky, noticed that existing professional development for young, aspiring leaders placed an emphasis on the theoretical components

of leadership but lacked the practical application of these components. It appeared that young leaders were becoming more data-driven than student-centered.

Livingood set out to develop a program designed to combine the theoretical constructs of quality educational leadership with a human approach to implementation that works. The desired outcome for all participants is to put all the pieces of educational leadership together to design a meaningful leadership vision, mission, and goals that will impact all students.

With this legacy in mind, he designed an intentional plan to provide aspiring school leaders opportunities to know how to develop and sustain a student-centered culture. Livingood's work provides a meaningful, problem-based, authentic curriculum for aspiring principals to know, understand, and apply as they move into formal

leadership positions at the school level.

This comment from one participant about the aspiring principals program reinforces the value of providing opportunities for teacher leaders to prepare for leadership roles: "Every time I speak and think about it, whether into a video camera, to administrators, with my colleagues, or in my own reflections, I realize more and more how much it inspired me. I think it's so great that you invested in your staff members and believed in us to acquire the skills, knowledge, information, and passion that you wanted to share as a legacy of leadership."

As a result of this program, two participants are now elementary curriculum coaches and one is the assistant special education director.

To learn more, visit <http://ronlivingood.wix.com/inspiring-culture>.

Disney conceived Celebration School to be an international model site for educators and teacher preparation. Eventually, Celebration School reverted to a more traditional model. Planners acknowledged that the experiment they undertook so enthusiastically and optimistically was too ambitious. No single school district had ever tried to use all the proposed principles simultaneously. It did not work.

Using the Celebration School as a lesson on what to do and not do, the district's design team is focused on redesigning the American school. Four

beliefs permeate this ongoing challenge: world-class knowledge and skills; student agency; anytime, anywhere, performance-based, personalized learning; and a comprehensive system of support.

Since applying these four beliefs to Eminence, teachers and students have taken on everything from coding and computer-aided design to international action research projects. Eminence became the first school district in Kentucky to achieve 100% college and/or career readiness by Kentucky state standards for two consecutive years,

meaning that all graduating students met the benchmarks for being college- or career-ready or both.

As a result, the schools are researching the impact of their personalized high school pathways, a process directly related to the district's innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

To learn more, visit www.buddyberry.com.

SUCCESSFUL POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

PROMOTING RELATIONSHIPS, RESILIENCY, AND PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

ROBERT STAFFORD,
SUPERINTENDENT,
OWEN COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Robert Stafford, superintendent of Owen County in Kentucky, believes that his responsibility is to create schools where every student can



Robert Stafford

succeed. School leaders in Owen County believed that former students who engage in retrospection of their high school education while attending a college or university can offer insights that may be absent by the traditional method of surveying current students and parents.

To gather data, Stafford used videotaped interviews to explore perceptions about why these students

were successful in high school and eventually in post-secondary education. The video interviews provided qualitative data and uncovered three major themes that accounted for the former students' successes in post-secondary education: relationships, resiliency, and parental engagement.

As a result of this research, Stafford discovered that, long before high school, especially during middle school, students form ideas about attending college. Teacher-student relationships help establish those expectations and influence students' decisions about the career options they will pursue.

Resiliency is essential for students to persist through adversity and stay focused on achieving success. Intentional planning is essential to help students obtain the skills, habits, and attitudes needed for successful transition to post-secondary education. It is a trait that can be fostered throughout high school. The district uses student data to identify high-risk students who are then offered services to meet their individual needs.

Additionally, students and their families need support to better

understand their post-secondary options. Teachers and administrators conduct student-parent conferences that focus on academic and social needs. The conferences have improved communication between home and school and reinforce positive student-centered relationships with the staff.

The district created teams that focus on the essential elements for individual student success. These teams engage in activities that build culture, and their guidance provides insight into what they consider important attributes that impact their learning.

During the interviews, a former Owen County student reflected, "The school system was really supportive. I think, if you ask pretty much any teacher, they are there for the kids. I can say that now that I am a teacher. They are not necessarily there for the education system or their paycheck. They are willing to help kids."

To learn more, visit <http://robertstafford3.wix.com/legacy-leader-d-in-p>.