

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING:  
What is Leadership's Role  
in Supporting Success  
for Every Student?

GENE WILHOIT  
LINDA PITTENGER  
JIM RICKBAUGH

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This paper pulls together key ideas surfaced through a series of conversations over several months with educators about what leadership means as schools undergo transformation, a review of leadership development models in other nations who are organizing around student-centered approaches, and a review of relevant research. It represents a synthesis of ideas and perspectives that we hope leads readers to new insights; some terms are in common use and will be familiar.

## ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center for Innovation in Education was launched in 2013 with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is housed at the University of Kentucky. Putting learners and learning at the center, CIE strives to serve as a national voice to build consensus around a new, more coherent vision of education and to help state and local systems develop and act on robust theories of change. A unique part of CIE's approach is working in cooperation with state education agencies and local districts on innovation priorities, with both policy and practice, so lessons learned can inform state policy and be more likely to enable real transformation. Main contacts are Gene Wilhoit ([gene.wilhoit@gmail.com](mailto:gene.wilhoit@gmail.com)), Chief Executive Officer, and Linda Pittenger ([linda.pittenger@uky.edu](mailto:linda.pittenger@uky.edu)), Chief Operating Officer.

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# INTRODUCTION

We are faced with the task of shifting a hugely complex education enterprise from an orientation toward schooling to an orientation toward learning – to a system that is capable of delivering on the promise of an empowering education for every young person. The new imperative to prepare all students for success in life-long learning, career, and civic life has launched an unprecedented era in public education. There is a growing consensus that preparing young people to succeed requires nurturing not only content knowledge but also transferable learning skills and dispositions. This combination will enable them to take responsibility for their own lives and operate within a greater social context with a strong sense of identity, agency, and competence.

This new goal challenges historic ideas about learning and teaching, and about what equity means. It calls us to question every aspect of legacy systems. With this paper, we want to spark thinking and collaborations that will lead to an actionable understanding of leadership in an era of learning in which the student, not the institution, is the primary reference point. Much like our earlier “51<sup>st</sup> state paper” that called for a new approach to accountability, this paper was developed to support those who are leading the creation of learning systems designed to guarantee personalized learning experiences and to generate deeper learning outcomes for all. We challenge the field to think more broadly about the characteristics of those leading complex change efforts – to consider the knowledge, skills, and particularly the dispositions leaders must have to be effective and to understand what it will take to support them. Effective leadership in a community that is transforming is very different from leadership in a school in incremental improvement because the culture and values of the community are undergoing profound change. Transformational leadership will invite educators, learners, and other members of the learning community out of the familiar and more comfortable environment to a very different, less comfortable, and sometimes unfamiliar set of conditions where they must act with purpose and courage – especially as they work for equity and inclusion.

We’ve chosen to describe this social unit as a “learning community” rather than “school” since many innovative structural configurations are emerging in the field. Even within traditional systems, “schools” are unbundling. The people who lead these communities are leading much more than a building and a set of static programs packed in traditional course sequences; they are leading much more open and loosely configured learning environments where learning and teaching are technology-enabled; where teaching expertise and other resources may be specialized and distributed among or shared with other organizations; where learning is credentialed in and out of school; where roles are shifting dynamically in response to the

development of student agency; where decision-making is more inclusive; and where the boundaries between K12, higher education, and business are blurring. They are leading a system focused on learning as the constant and instruction as a key but variable resource, rather than instruction as the focus and learning as a variable outcome.

They are leading an enterprise that is, increasingly, connected to many others in very complex and dynamic ways.

In this new environment, “fidelity to purpose” shifts from valuing precision and compliance in implementing carefully developed standards and procedures that dictate what is to be done, when, and for how long, to valuing learning above all. Fidelity to purpose becomes an ongoing act of intention and self-discipline for the many individual decision-makers participating in learning. As focus moves away from things like seat-time and grades, learning becomes the culture and currency of a community working for a changed student experience where learners are:

- Developing skills and dispositions that lead to learning for life and productive participation in our democracy; to success in jobs that have yet to be invented; to developing and using skills that have yet to be defined; and to navigating an increasingly interdependent world.
- Actively engaged and motivated to succeed at next levels, demonstrating their learning in ways and at times that are authentic, meaningful, and relevant.
- Developing and practicing agency by making decisions and receiving support in evaluating the impact of decisions in the context of their goals – purposefully connecting their education to their own futures and to a purpose bigger than themselves.

If these elements are present in the overall experience of learners, we can be reasonably assured that the practices and pedagogy employed by the community supporting them – not just individual teachers – are consistent with intended learning outcomes. Improved student outcomes are far more likely to result when educators are developing their practice collegially with a strong sense of purpose and helping one another challenge traditional teaching paradigms so their application of teaching capacities and skills is contextual, coherent, integrated, and driven by the needs of learners.

***“Learning becomes the culture and currency of a community working for a changed student experience”***

This understanding calls for a profound shift from vertical systems of professional development delivery to horizontal networks of engaged professional learning. Regardless of setting, these organized communities of learning form the basis for professional excellence. Educators are engaged individually and collectively in action research as they gather evidence of student learning, determine their pathways to improvement, connect, and support one another to advance learning for all students. They extend themselves into broader communities for support and to contribute to the capacity of the learning enterprise. Educators are enabled; they have influence and/or authority for decisions about the allocation of the human and financial resources to support their work. Systems of rewards, compensation, and status emerge from these dynamic learning communities. These networks could be within a school, or a district, but they can also form across traditional institutional boundaries.

What, then, does this say about the leadership that is setting the conditions for educators and the learning communities within which they work? As is true for teachers, a list of standards or competencies for leadership that spans all levels and applies to all contexts is inadequate. Such a framework may be essential, but competencies without context are not sufficient. As the representation of a community’s collective expectations, competencies should be thought of as no more and no less than a springboard – an opportunity that can be brought to life only when a series of cascading implications for things like leadership preparation, professional supports, inclusivity in the profession, and shared responsibility as the most productive form of professional accountability are taken up and operationalized throughout the system.

Finally, while this paper focuses primarily on leaders of learners and teams, we also aim to inform larger issues of policy and practice, such as:

- The redesign of systems that recruit, prepare, select, evaluate, support, reward and enable educators as leaders.
- The creation of tools that support self-reflection and self-direction for those already in practice, supporting both individual development and peer collaborations.
- A more coherent view of how leaders, practitioners, and communities can work in collaboration to develop high-quality systems that support deeper learning for all.

## Why Now?

We have learned much over the past thirty years of education reform about what does and does not work. As an example, the Nation at Risk report accurately defined the problem, but erroneously attributed it to lack of effort and accountability rather than systemic realignment. Decades later, we have a growing understanding of the causes of systemic underperformance and how to address root cause issues. However, while we were learning, many other forces have dramatically impacted our world and how we live, how we learn, and which competencies students really need to be ready for independence and success.

This is not a moment for visionary people to predict change on the far horizon; powerful changes are immediately upon us. This moment of increased understanding and urgency calls us to act now on the leadership question:

### Higher, Better-Aligned Expectations and Learner Experiences

- States and districts have adopted new definitions of college, career, and civic readiness that embrace higher and deeper levels of learning aligned with what will be needed for success in life. Many are taking steps to hold themselves accountable for redesigning and realigning systems of learning around this new goal. That commitment implies the need for new and differentiated capacities among adults so that they can engage young people in designing and undertaking meaningful experiences in the rich work of learning.

***“Competencies without context are not sufficient. As the representation of a community’s collective expectations, competencies should be thought of as no more and no less than a springboard.”***

## The Equity Challenge

- Race and class continue to be the most reliable predictors of educational achievement in this country at a time when our nation is becoming increasingly diverse. Learning communities must find ways to ensure that they are incorporating the perspectives and experiences of those they are trying to serve, especially those who are traditionally underserved. Young people are entering formal education with vastly different skills, experiences, and levels of access to external resources and supports. It is imperative that as learning communities and delivery systems are being redesigned, leadership is placing equity-based approaches and inclusive strategies at the forefront, meeting students and local communities where they are, making sure that they have access to the people and the resources that can help them, and always paying attention to both the right to excellence in education and access to opportunity.

## New Frontiers in Learning

- The rapid development of technology and advancements in the understanding of brain development and learning science have opened new opportunities to improve learning and expand our vision of what is possible. These phenomena are creating a platform from which leadership can engage policy, practice, and research from a much more proactive and impactful stance.

## Policy Opportunity

- Given the Every Student Succeeds Act, states have significant new opportunities to lead from their “North Star” vision for education and engage stakeholders to transform entire systems – navigating federal policy but not bending their visions to it. States must ensure that policies in place and under construction support the concept of transformative learning at the local level. Even after a supportive policy environment is established, the passion and capacities of those leading implementation will be a key determinant in whether promises to the public are fulfilled.

## Leadership – A Working Definition

For the purposes of this paper, leadership is the art of enabling a learning community to transform from its current to future state by dramatically and continuously improving its capacity to deliver on the goal of readiness for every child through influence on the organization itself, its stakeholders, and the systems within which it operates.

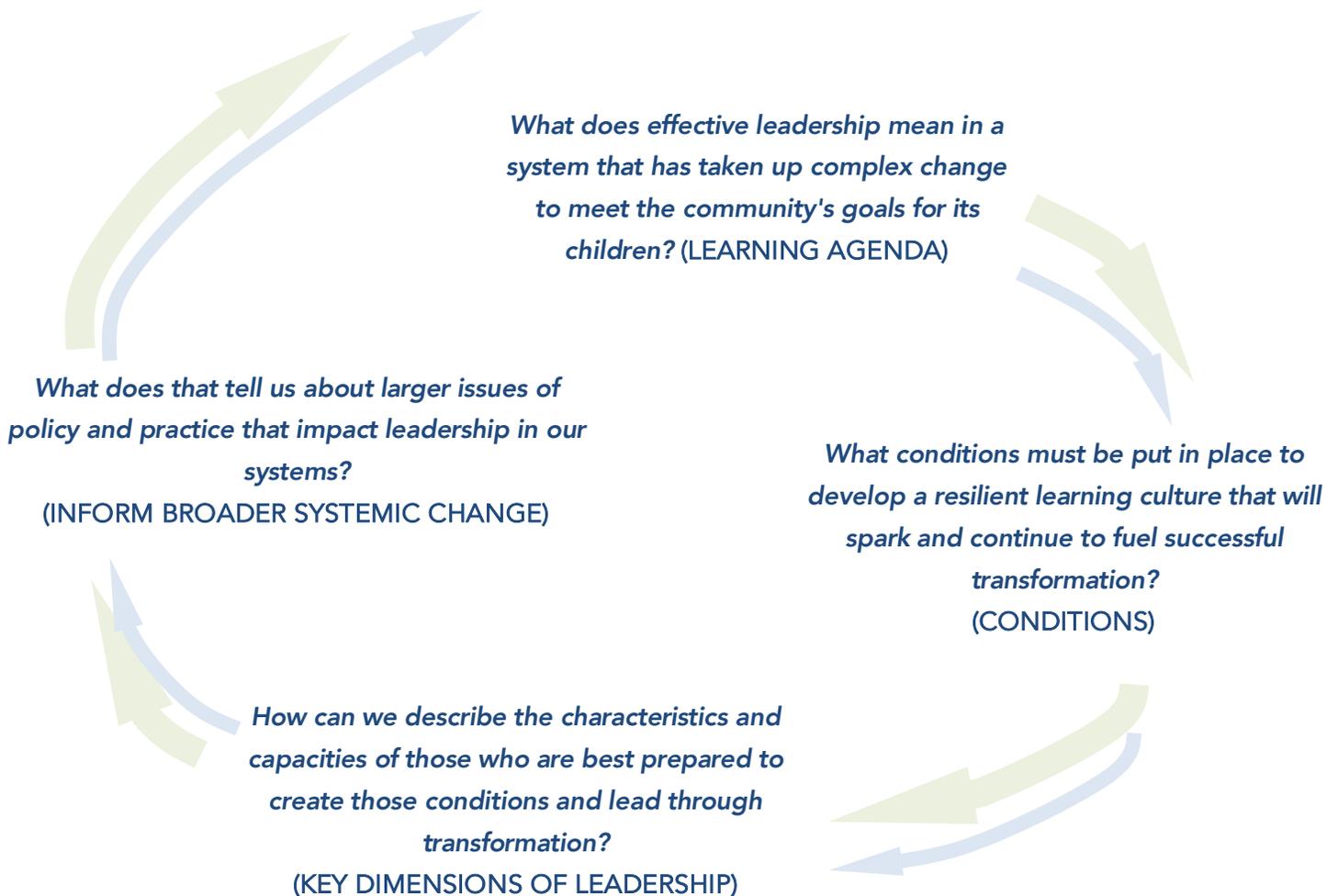
Our belief is that leadership is not the sole responsibility of a single individual. Leadership is the work of a team that possesses complementary knowledge, skills, dispositions, and contextual understandings.

There is no single, best profile for the individual who takes the positional role of leadership in a learning community. Rather, the community should identify and then continue to develop the collective leadership capacity that is most likely to meet the needs of its learners – to live out the collective will of the community for the future of its youth.

***“Leadership is the art of enabling a learning community to transform from its current to future state by dramatically and continuously improving its capacity to deliver on the goal of readiness for every child through influence on the organization itself, its stakeholders, and the systems within which it operates.”***

## How This Paper Is Organized

The main ideas in this paper are presented through related lenses, or series of questions on leadership for systemic change. We propose a learning agenda, a set of conditions most likely to allow new ideas and practices to take hold and thrive, and key dimensions of leadership needed to support the community and foster lasting change. Finally, we hope this leads to productive discussion of the more open questions about how the broader systems our learning communities operate to prepare, recruit, and support local leaders.



Think of this as a cycle or spiral of inquiry, not as a closed loop. Each iteration of planning, doing, and reflecting should elevate the conversation and deepen understanding. In this case, what is being learned at the local level about effective leadership should spiral up to inform broader policy change at the state level.

# THE LEARNING AGENDA

We are approaching this work as learners – building on what we know, what we wonder about based on emerging trends, what research is telling us, and what we make of evidence from our own experiences.

We must build on positive gains and past innovations in policy, practice, and structure that are taking hold as accepted norms, such as personalized learning and new models of shared accountability. But leading through transformation will also require that the learning community confront a complex web of “wicked problems” where there is no obvious solution or single correct answer and where what one has done in the past does not necessarily hold many answers for what one must do in the future. That combination of building on what is known and collectively exploring the deeper, more persistent problems to push through to new solutions can be called a learning agenda.

We believe there is a set of crosscutting themes and essential questions that sit at the heart of the leadership challenge. Confronting them with honesty in actionable ways can help us think about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions effective leaders will need to help systems shift from the current to future state.

1. **Equity:** How can leadership create and sustain inclusive learning environments, develop a compact among all stakeholders to ensure that each learner is progressing to readiness, and “own” the equity agenda in all its decisions?
2. **Core Mission:** How does leadership develop a shared understanding of readiness and then build toward shared commitment to delivering on those outcomes for every student, both internal and external to the learning community?
3. **Learning Disposition:** How does leadership foster an organization’s ability and inclination to learn and innovate, to be deeply self-reflective, to take risks, and to continually push toward the edge of their learning?
4. **Educator Effectiveness:** What is leadership’s role in helping educators develop, practice, and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that unlock their potential to enable powerful learning for students?
5. **Sense making:** How can leadership increase a learning community’s ability to understand mounting complexities, tolerate ambiguity, maintain focus in the midst of distractions, and collaborate to formulate and test solutions?

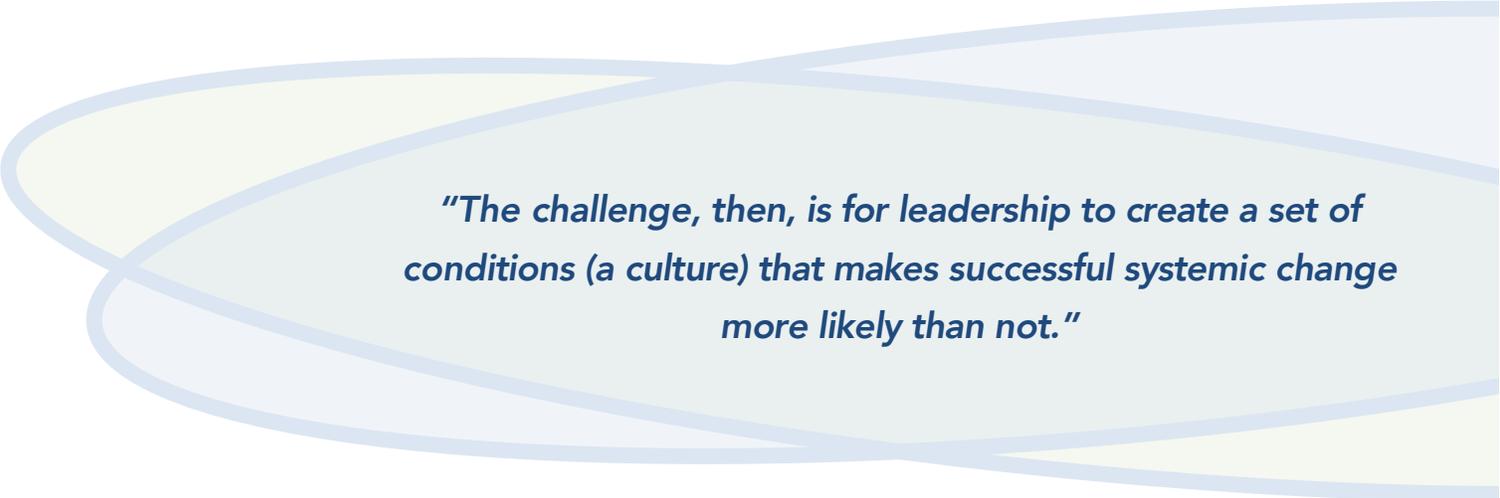
## LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Engagement in change must occur at the levels of belief and practice; roles and relationships; and structures and policies. The process of change itself must be accompanied by ongoing and open communications that engage key stakeholders. If these things do not occur, true and lasting change is unlikely.

If we are committed to readiness for every child, leadership must think and act systemically to generate systemic improvement. Our communities need education leaders who not only have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that we associate with success, but who are keenly aware of the contexts within which they are operating and know how to lead from one situation to the next in very purposeful ways.

The challenge, then, is for leadership to create a set of conditions (a culture) that makes successful systemic change more likely than not – in part because people see themselves more united, empowered, and equipped around the core mission than not – and then to sustain those conditions until they are held deeply and long enough to transform complex organizations. The conditions they set in place characterize the learning community.

Finally, if the core mission and organizing concept for a transforming learning community is learning, this is a profound shift. The first focus will not be instruction and “instructional leadership,” as has often been the case. This is an old paradigm. In a learning-centered context, instruction (like time, funds, and people) should be thought of as an asset – a resource that varies in response to need, is based on savvy interpretation of multiple and varied forms of evidence, and is offered in much more personalized ways. Leadership for learning will increasingly become the focus, rather than leadership of instruction.



***“The challenge, then, is for leadership to create a set of conditions (a culture) that makes successful systemic change more likely than not.”***

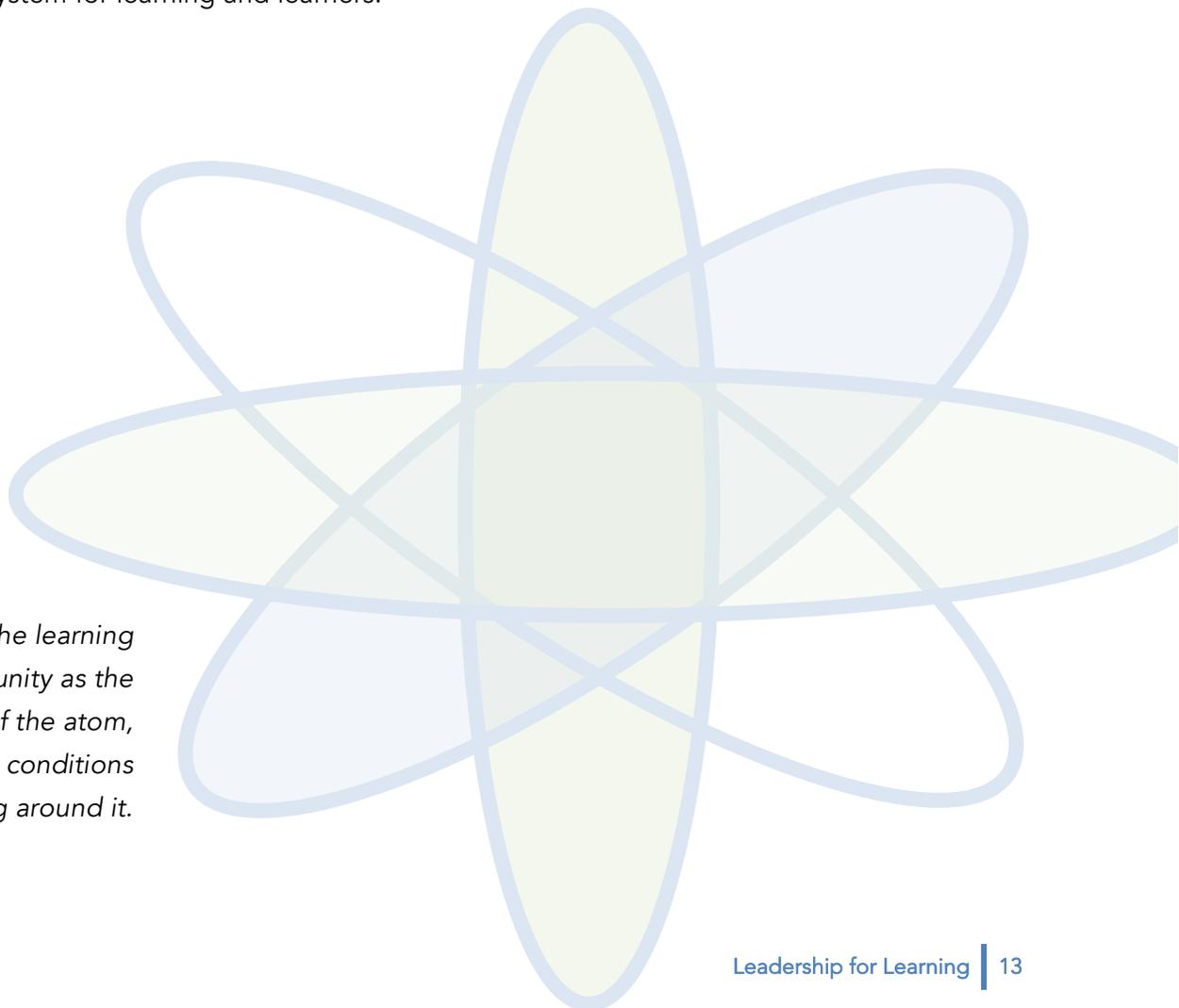
# CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMING LEARNING COMMUNITIES: FOCUS ON CULTURE

The conditions that surround people taking part in complex systems change matter. One of leadership's chief responsibilities is to foster the conditions most likely to engage a crucial combination of energy, stability, and focus that will spark and continue to fuel the process of transformation.

We identify some essential conditions below. While each holds implications for action, it will be the combination of conditions that establishes a resilient learning culture focused on iteration and continuous improvement.

In the same way that the atom is at the center of what we assume and experience in our world, the right conditions can provide the environment within which to create, develop, and support a new ecosystem for learning and learners.

*Think of the learning community as the center of the atom, with the conditions orbiting around it.*



**Condition #1: Vision for learning is shared, challenging and compelling.** Everyone understands what the learning community values and seeks to accomplish. That shared understanding builds shared commitment. Everyone knows why accomplishing the vision is important to the future and appreciates the complexity and hard work that will be involved in making it a reality. The vision is so strong and widely shared that those leading the learning community are comfortable with others having significant decision-making authority relevant to their roles. Members of the learning community are willing to tolerate reasonable levels of ambiguity and feel free to seek and create clarity.

**Condition #2: Learning is the core mission and organizing force of the work – not teaching.** The prevailing question is, “What is necessary to ensure higher levels of learning for every student?” This includes the professional learning and effectiveness of educators as well as learning how the systems themselves can be changed to remove barriers and increase learning opportunity. Questions about instruction, pacing, curriculum, standards, tools, and resources are asked in the context of nurturing learning. There is a shared understanding that the needs and readiness of each learner within the context of challenging, future-aligned learning competencies must drive decisions rather than standardized, inflexible, group-focused processes. The issue is not to abandon more traditional instruction in favor of new approaches; the issue is to apply all that we know about teaching and learning, and what is possible, to find the mix and balance of approaches that meet the personalized learning needs of individual students.

**Condition #3: A growth mindset means mistakes, missteps, and setbacks are mined as rich opportunities for learners and leaders to push to the edge of learning.** There is a shared understanding that while leaving anyone in sustained failure is not an option, incremental setbacks are crucial aspects of learning. Learning communities take ownership of framing and testing hypotheses, making sense of what occurs, and applying those lessons to future work. In that context, challenging and changing assumptions is valued and expected (rather than being perceived as failure to implement with fidelity). These communities seek to understand what is being taken for granted that may be inhibiting success or obscuring potential options and opportunities. When inhibiting assumptions are exposed, they are replaced by assumptions and intentions more consistent with and supportive of the shared vision. Self-selection by adults, out of and into a learning community undergoing substantive change, should be valued. This is one way the community can grow and refresh itself.

**Condition #4: Success is generated through transparency, shared responsibility, collaboration, and interdependence.** Shared commitment, mutual support, and high levels of trust lead to a sense of abundance as thinking, creativity, curiosity, insights, ideas, and efforts are shared widely and received with respect. The need to hoard, hide, and compete for resources diminishes as they are shared to create mutual benefit rather than consolidated to build status and power in one or a few members of the community. Similarly, every individual's personal growth increases in value to others because the learning trajectory of the entire community is advanced to some degree.

**Condition #5: Learning is treated as an inside-out, student-centered process.** Learning starts where the learner is in the context of developmental progression rather than status against a fixed standard of performance on a pre-planned lesson, where the curriculum-pacing guide says they should be, or where adults want learners to be. Learners are seen as human potential to be unlocked, not vessels to be filled. Learning is characterized by exposure, awareness, purpose, reflection, and iteration. Students are increasingly co-creators, co-designers, and co-assessors of their learning. These learning experiences are anchored in state standards as they are enhanced and expanded at the district and school levels. Within this framework of learning expectations, learners build experiences that advantage their knowledge, interests, strengths and ambitions. Students should be engaged in learning that enables them to take responsibility for their learning and make purposeful connections to the transformative power of education in their lives.

**Condition #6: Definition of success is anchored in agency and capacity for future learning.**

People are not given agency; they develop agency. The growth of agency means learners are internalizing identity as individuals who have choices to make that impact their lives.

Supporting both young people and adults in developing agency and the facility for future learning is crucial, capacity-building work. We must prepare today's learners to engage in jobs and careers that have not been invented, requiring skills that have yet to be defined, and working with people who may be very unlike themselves and located anywhere in the world.

We must also support teachers in developing deeper learning skills and their own agency to unlock their potential and increase effectiveness. Both students and teachers need exposure to experiences that are unstructured, unfamiliar, and offer the opportunity for choice. They must be skilled learners, not just good students. They need to come to see themselves as leaders of themselves as well as others.

**Condition #7: Competencies are guideposts that enable equity – not threats to success.**

Competencies are employed to meet learners wherever they are on a continuum and support them in setting goals, aligning learning paths, monitoring their progress, and demonstrating mastery through assessment pathways that are meaningful and relevant. They are not instruments to label, blame, or shame. Rather, they are signals of growth in knowledge and skills as well as beacons for success. Everyone – learners and educators – shares responsibility for achievement of goals and works together to see that learning experiences lead to achievement of high expectations. This implies unprecedented need to nurture the capacity of educators to make good judgments based on multiple and varied forms of evidence.

**Condition #8: Technology is a tool for unlocking learning potential.** There is shared understanding of the potential of technologies, digital content, and social media as tools to transform learning environments, to democratize the learner experience, and to find solutions to teaching and learning problems that have seemed unsolvable. Technology is not viewed as a replacement for human interaction, but as a way for both learners and the teachers who support them to understand more about the learner and learning more rapidly. There is an inclination to use technology for what technology can do best, for both individuals and organizations; to investigate and apply technologies in ways that expand learning opportunity; to make the process of learning more visible and transparent; to enable students and teachers to develop and exercise agency as they create and not simply consume; and to streamline processes so scarce resources and valued assets (people, time, content, funds, space) can be allocated to learning. Technology helps unlock the potential of learning communities, supporting collective learning and moving knowledge quickly.

**Condition #9: Learning supports social justice.** There is wide acceptance that everyone has the right to and must experience the learning opportunities, supports, and expectations that lead to success. Cultural responsiveness and inclusion are core values. The learning community is mindful of its internal need to develop an inclusive culture and diverse community, as well as its more public-facing responsibility to amplify the voices of those who are traditionally underserved. It is understood that education has the power to alter the trajectory of any life for the better and can be a lever those in rural and urban settings use to transcend poverty. As our society moves through a knowledge economy and into an innovation economy, the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn – and to create, iterate, and implement – will spell the difference between poverty and economic stability as well as between work satisfaction and mere survival.



## KEY DIMENSIONS

Below are key dimensions of leadership suggested by the thoughts that frame this paper, including some of the essential knowledge and skills, dispositions, and contextual understandings that could typify or underpin each. We use the term “suggested” because what follows is not intended to be prescriptive. ***The ideas below should be used in combination with the questions and ideas that precede it as a catalyst for local discussion and deliberative judgment.***

The particular knowledge and skills, dispositions, and understandings that any community will value most highly will depend upon its aspirations, context, and capacities. Consider what follows as illustrative of how one community might translate what they most value in leadership and how they might look for evidence of real change over time.

**SHARED VISION:** Leadership is able to lead the development of and share commitment to a clear and coherent vision for learning that is translated into action with an optimistic and inclusive perspective.

**VALUES:** Leadership exemplifies a belief in the moral imperative to advance learning, opportunity, equity, and social justice, and finds inspiration for systems-level strategies in the community’s aspirations for its children.

**CULTURE:** Leadership exemplifies and values a growth mindset and fosters a deep commitment to learning as the culture and currency of the organization.

**CAPACITY BUILDING:** Leadership is mission-focused on developing individual and collective capacity to respond to the needs of all students and on fostering innovation as the space where breakthrough learning is more likely to occur and thrive.

**ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST:** Leadership builds systems of shared responsibility for supporting all students to succeed; for working toward continuous improvement of both individuals and the system itself; and for purposefully building trust and confidence in the system through openness, responsiveness, integrity, fairness, and inclusion.

- I. **SHARED VISION:** Leadership is able to lead the development of and share commitment to a clear and coherent vision for learning that is translated into action with an optimistic and inclusive perspective.

#### Knowledge and Skills

- Engages the community in articulating their vision for what will prepare young people to take responsibility for their own lives, be responsible citizens, and thrive within a greater social context
- Leads the development and practice of shared values, fostering honest reflection that uncovers assumptions and leads to examination of long-standing practices and beliefs about who can learn and how learning happens
- Engages in productive dialogue to reduce tension and conflict
- Can point to examples where new approaches to learning, school models, and learner supports are closing gaps in achievement, access, and opportunity so those who cannot believe until they can see can find on-ramps to understanding
- Is able to communicate why developing skilled learners must supersede our traditional focus on student proficiency in academics alone
- Can articulate current challenges in an actionable and optimistic frame

#### Supporting Dispositions

- Is inspired by possibility and committed to inspiring others
- Trusts in the capacity and creativity of others to engage in problem solving
- Thinks systemically

#### Contextual Understanding

- Understands the current and growing capacity of the learning community to accept and support a vision for the future of learning that is significantly different from what has been assumed in the past
- Realizes that people often view change as loss
- Grasps the community's historic aspirations for its children, its relationship with formal education, and how it sees its future
- Understands the pace and nature of change under way in the broader community that is impacting the local economy, culture, and makeup of the citizenry

- II. **VALUES:** Leadership exemplifies a belief in the moral imperative to advance learning, opportunity, equity, and social justice, and finds inspiration for systems-level strategies in the community's aspirations for its children.

#### Knowledge and Skills

- Embraces personalized learning (higher expectations, individually customized pathways, and competency-based progressions) as a necessary condition for learners to thrive – especially those who are traditionally underserved and struggling
- Demonstrates and fosters cultural responsiveness, models willingness to acknowledge personal biases, and understands how to design for inclusiveness
- Ensures the design of learner experiences focuses on developing success skills that transfer from one context to another, within and beyond formal educational settings, regardless of the student's background or current circumstance
- Clearly understands and can successfully advocate for the role of competency-based learning as a strategy to improve quality and equity
- Engages learning partners (both formal and informal) and the broader community to expand learning access and opportunity and to ensure each student receives needed supports
- Has a solid grasp of the public systems, organizations, and community groups that are impacting students (negatively or positively) and looks for opportunities to create positive change

#### Supporting Dispositions

- Is an open and responsive listener
- Is ready to engage in courageous conversations and stand up for the work of the learning community in the face of opposition
- Searches for the gifts and talents each person possesses
- Seeks collaboration and partnership with diverse people and differing perspectives
- Does not accept a lowering of expectations for self, students, adults, or the system
- Is willing to tolerate ambiguity and help others work through conflict as the community becomes aware of, grapples with, and settles on new assumptions and associated thinking and practices

### Contextual Understanding

- Grasps differences in community and stakeholder engagement in and acceptance of long-held assumptions, traditions, and practices
- Is aware of the need to monitor the impact of changing assumptions on traditional influencers and cultural norms
- Understands how family history with education can play a key role in how learners view learning and school
- Understands that students bring different educational and social capital into school and that some are more advantaged than others, but that each brings strengths that have value and can be leveraged to support their learning

### III. **CULTURE: Leadership exemplifies and values a growth mindset and fosters a deep commitment to learning as the culture and currency of the organization.**

#### Knowledge and Skills

- Approaches problem solving from the standpoint of the needs and motivations of people, rather than from protocols and regulations
- Frames the learning community's work in the context of hypotheses that are tangible, strategic, and always in service to learning
- Supports members of the learning community in taking responsible risks and expanding the boundaries of their experience, knowledge, and skills
- Can productively call out and redirect practices and processes that are not aligned with learning
- Stays aware of new developments and emerging trends, with the ability to understand what the learning community is ready to embrace now and what they will be prepared for over the longer term
- Is skilled at providing formative feedback and readily seeks and accepts feedback from others
- Can navigate other systems, such as licensing and certification, that do not directly value growth mindset, inquiry, and individual agency

### Supporting Dispositions

- Is comfortable with time spent in ambiguity as the learning community works through complex problems
- Takes a “human-centered” approach to problem solving and design
- Is willing, as a leader, to take responsible risks
- Demonstrates and values empathy
- Identifies as a lead learner and “chief curiosity officer”
- Values strong, supportive, and sustained relationships
- Values intellectual curiosity and questioning in others
- Makes running at the hardest parts of the problem the path of least resistance
- Always pushes self and others to their edge of learning

### Contextual Understanding

- Understands that education systems can be prone to compliance and averse to risk
- Grasps differences in community and stakeholder engagement in and acceptance of long-held assumptions, traditions, and practices
- Is aware of the need to monitor the impact of changing assumptions on traditional influencers and cultural norms

## **IV. CAPACITY BUILDING: Leadership is mission-focused on developing individual and collective capacity to respond to the needs of all students and on fostering innovation as the space where breakthrough learning is more likely to occur and thrive.**

### Knowledge and Skills

- Manages risks by having a structured approach to identifying, testing, and refining new strategies to foster learning success as a priority for the learning community
- Pursues the latest research and emerging developments in teaching, learning science, school models, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and child development
- Structures and incentivizes professional learning so adults experience the deeper, personalized learning we want students to experience
- Prioritizes tools, training, and supports to help both educators and students collect, curate, and learn from evidence about the development, current state, and readiness for next levels of learning as a continuum
- Develops the learning community’s capacity to use technology, digital content, and social media, and increases their ability to exploit technologies to do what technologies can do best

- Is entrepreneurial in approach to resource allocation; has a deep understanding of what resources are available, how they are allocated, what is within leadership's purview to change, how to approach challenges beyond local control, and how to negotiate smart tradeoffs to create new opportunities
- Is able to take a holistic view of the learning community and the work in which it is engaged on a change continuum, and can differentiate conditions and supports to each: Are what were once innovations becoming the norm? Is the same recent innovation emerging in multiple places? Are there very nascent ideas of high promise?

#### Supporting Dispositions

- Is a systems thinker
- Is inclined to flexible management
- Demonstrates curiosity and a commitment to understanding that prevails over the urge to blame and fix
- Demonstrates patience for mistakes and missteps in the interest of learning and pressing the boundaries of understanding – sometimes even when their occurrence might be predicted
- Shows confidence that members of the learning community will make good decisions and take responsible risks consistent with a strong sense of shared purpose and vision

#### Contextual Understanding

- Understands that when people feel supported to learn and grow after mistakes, missteps, and setbacks, they are more likely to take responsible risks in the future
- Realizes that when leaders model transparency about their own experiments, successes, and failures, members of the learning community may feel more inclined to take responsible risks themselves
- Works to create an environment in which the nature and level of early risks are responsive to the risk tolerance and history of the learning community
- Appreciates that even if logic, research, data, and experience support new ways of developing learning, there can be reluctance and discomfort with significant change

- V. **ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST:** Leadership builds systems of shared responsibility for supporting all students to succeed; for working toward continuous improvement of both individuals and the system itself; and for purposefully building trust and confidence in the system through openness, responsiveness, integrity, fairness, and inclusion.

#### Knowledge and Skills

- Values transparency in reporting and is sensitive to the needs of different audiences when sharing data and information, including explaining how data and evidence are used and how decisions are made
- Possesses a leadership style that evidences commitment and the ability to develop shared ownership and mutual accountability across the learning community, rather than a focus on structures and governance
- Is skilled at building shared understanding of and commitment to the multiple measures and indicators for which the learning community will be held accountable, how progress will be determined, and what will be done in response to what is learned
- Acknowledges different stakeholders and constituencies whose trust and confidence must be gained and differentiates strategies and feedback loops to support each (students, adults in the learning community, families and immediate community, the broader public, policy makers)
- Has a solid working knowledge of governance and regulatory structures within which the community operates and understands how to engage policy makers
- Can translate more abstract ideas into tangible next steps in which people can locate their own role, so complex problems do not overwhelm the community's ability to engage in problem solving and act

#### Supporting Dispositions

- Views educational improvement as the primary purpose of accountability
- Consistently and inclusively engages students and the community as key stakeholders
- Approaches the need for corrective action in the context of capacity building and continuous improvement
- Is inclined, when facing what appear to be policy or regulatory barriers, to determine whether they are real or perceived and to advocate for change in an open and forthright way as chief advocate for the learning community

### Contextual Understanding

- Acknowledges and respects the role of the community in defining success for its young people and the complexities of balancing what is valued locally with the demands of a global economy
- Recognizes and respects the evolution of thinking and practice that have led states to broader definitions of success, but resists the urge to freeze around incremental improvement
- Does not underestimate the impact of previous “shame and blame” approaches to accountability on many educators and on public opinion
- Understands the reciprocal nature of accountability in a multi-level system (local, district, state, federal) and how that can differ from place to place

## WHERE TO BEGIN - LAYING A FOUNDATION

There is always risk that people will begin the process of implementing and acting on big changes, like the issue of leadership, without deep reflection and honesty about the complex, persistent problems for which solutions are being sought. Establishing a conceptual framework and learning agenda early on will help ensure that people remain mindful of what they are trying to accomplish and why - allowing them to “see the forest through the trees”. There are many ways to lay the groundwork for moving ahead. We suggest some below, based on feedback from those leading complex systems change, but you must find the launching points for this work that are relevant within your own community:

- 1) Do you have a framework of clear expectations for young people around which you will engage the community – a broadened definition of student success accompanied by a vision for empowering students and teachers that will unlock the potential for learning? Do you have a plan that utilizes such a framework as a staging point that supports buy-in before you begin acting on leadership change?
- 2) Have you examined what is keeping you from making desired changes in the function of leadership right now? What is it about the current system that is holding you back? Be brutally honest, open, and proactive in thinking about how you will prevent those same challenges from being barriers in this work. Try to anticipate the unintended consequences.
- 3) Do you have a strategy to engage teachers in ways that are productive, respectful of their professionalism, and responsive to their needs for support through complex change? In particular, how will you create the conditions and incentives that support a shift to teaching as a collaborative effort, a community-wide endeavor?
- 4) Do you have a plan to engage and build the trust of students and their families so that they understand the changes underway as designed to support learners and learning, and not to meet the needs of adults and institutions?
- 5) Do you have a way to manage the split-screen of current system and transforming practice, and support people as they have a foot-hold in each? Where is the balance between moving ahead with deliberation and purpose and not getting too far in front of the learning community’s ability to absorb change? Can you “chunk” and sequence implementation to make it more manageable?
- 6) Have you identified the partners that are eager to help you redesign and transition preparation programs, professional learning and supports? Do you have partners who will engage in prototyping or proof of concept work? Can you find them in the current professional preparation and support systems, or do you need to look for alternatives?

## TO THE READER

It is clearly the dawning of a new day for education in America. Our collective challenge as educators is to create the dynamic learning environments in every community that result in high levels of educational achievement, enabling all citizens to thrive in this diverse, dynamic, and interconnected nation and world. This new vision will not just appear; it will require mastery of multiple and complex transitions.

New leadership is central to reaching lofty expectations for learners. We have written this paper to remind all of us of the emerging realities, describe what we see as the call for a more contextually based approach to building effective leadership, propose a learning agenda that nests in what we now know, propose a set of conditions that we believe can transform our learning communities, and bring forward for deep exploration a set of key dimensions of the new leadership.

This paper is intended to stimulate conversations among educators, to serve as a tool for individual education communities as they organize themselves to create a better future for learners and learning communities, to be questioned and improved through the process of practice, and to serve as a stimulus for serious conversations about how to improve policy to support local initiative. This paper is not a closed construct to be applied literally by readers. The days of prescriptive and universal solutions have passed. It is ill advised for those struggling to improve educational opportunities to simply institute generalized formulas from afar. It is also ill-advised to expect that even the most skilled leaders can actualize all of these ideas in short order. Decide where to focus first and commit to learn and develop over time. Meaningful and lasting advancement will come through local trial, informed by past innovation and deep exploration, and enriched by a rich exchange of ideas. We know that your reflections on the ideas we propose will improve the initial work, and we are confident that you will make these ideas come to life as you engage in the hard work ahead.

As you do so, we have work ahead of us to support you. We envision an effort to provide guidance about the implications of this paper on professional learning. We see the need to develop tools for local communities to translate these words into local action. We feel we need to develop evidence of effective leadership and to craft indicators of progress to be used for formative feedback and reflection. More importantly, you will uncover other areas of need and develop solutions to persistent hurdles. We look forward to the collective work we will undertake and stand ready to partner in some of the most exciting and rewarding discovery in which one could wish to engage.

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