

# Essential Learning: Leadership for Learning

## Why This Topic

CIE has always been keenly interested in the essential role of leadership in transforming education systems to work for equity and excellence. We think about leadership differently. We are less focused on district or building administration and instead approach leadership from the perspective of what it takes to shepherd a community through a complex change effort. And we believe that change is necessary for education systems to meet today's call to ensure that every student – including those historically underserved – learns at deeper levels and meets higher expectations for college, career, and civic readiness. We believe an education that strengthens one's identity, agency and competency has the power to alter the trajectory of any life for the better and that, therefore, every child has equal right to this form of excellence and equity in their learning experience. We believe that a system cannot produce something it does not practice; and that legacy systems were not designed for this calling. We are pursuing a reconceptualization of how education can serve society as an enabler of equity and opportunity.

Therefore, we believe that current conceptions of education leadership are limited and outmoded and ineffectively prepare leaders to take on this kind of systems change. Too often, leaders are not experienced systems thinkers accustomed to leading shared endeavors and, therefore, they are not as adept as they might be in leading to and through big shifts in beliefs and practice across a diverse group of stakeholders and a wide range of contexts. In particular, they may not have had the opportunity to lead shared endeavors that involve deep partnership with local communities.

With the paper, [Leadership for Learning](#), we challenge the field to think more broadly about the people who lead complex change efforts and the knowledge and skills, preparation, and support they need. We want to spark thinking about the kind of leadership that can propel us into an era in which the student and learning, not the institution and instruction, are primary reference points – in which the system is not just responsible for identifying inequity but for enabling equity and fostering mobility that disrupts historical patterns of bias and patterns of privilege. This paper was developed with an eye towards those leading complex change efforts in local systems because they are sitting at the intersection of multiple systems within systems – those they are leading, those they can influence and those by which they are influenced.

We advance the idea that what is being learned at the local level about effective leadership should spiral up to inform broader policy change at the state level. We believe that each iteration of planning, doing, and reflecting should elevate the broader conversation and deepen understanding.

## Our Learning Process

We know that leading through transformation requires a learning community to 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.

And so, we leaned into this work guided by a learning agenda with one central question: “What does effective leadership mean in a system that has taken up complex change to meet the community’s goals for its children?” We invoked a broad notion of community including dimensions of geography, ethnicity, and culture. From this question, several other questions followed and formed our learning agenda. If learning becomes the culture and currency of a community working for a changed student experience, what, then, does that say about the leadership that will set the conditions for educators and the learning communities within which they work? What conditions must be put in place to develop a resilient learning culture that will spark and continue to fuel successful transformation? How can we describe the characteristics and capacities of those who are best prepared to create those conditions and lead through transformation? What does this tell us about the larger issues of policy and practice that impact leadership in our systems?

We set out to act on our learning agenda through:

- Convening leaders whom we saw trying to move in this direction
- Surfacing patterns of shared vision, understanding and challenges, which led to the identification of Key Dimensions of Leadership.
- Beginning to articulate the complexity of what we were learning by proposing the essential knowledge and skills, dispositions, and contextual understandings that could typify or underpin each Key Dimension.
- Using the paper to open dialogue with others about the policy and practice implications of what we were learning with others, to prompt further investigation of issues such as:
  - The redesign of systems that recruit, prepare, and select leaders.
  - Tools that support self-reflection and self-direction for those already in practice
  - A more coherent view of how systems and communities can work in collaboration to support powerful learning for all.

## Insights

Our initial insights are articulated in the 2016 release of [\*Leadership for Learning: What is Leadership’s Role in Supporting Success for Every Student?\*](#), by Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger, and Jim Rickabaugh. As we noted in the paper, we have learned that the central challenge facing education leadership today is “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.” Our paper examines several of the conditions that we believe are essential to creating a resilient learning culture capable of continuous improvement.

We also identified key dimensions of leadership and suggested essential knowledge and skills, dispositions (beliefs), and contextual understandings we think are critical to transformational leadership. We use the term “suggested” because we understand that any community will value and prioritize these elements differently and will need to translate our suggestions to match their own aspirations, context, and capacities.

Importantly, our work has underscored the primacy of community in such a way that we have updated how we define leadership. When we began this work, we defined leadership as *“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.” Today, as our thinking has evolved, we would shift focus from “readiness for every child” to “working in partnership with families, local industry, and civic leaders to design and deliver excellence and equity for every child.”*

Lastly, our learning agenda has produced both insights and wonderings that we continue to pursue:

- Leadership is situational and contextual. A standardized approach to leadership practice will be ineffective, at best, and may be harmful. Can a standardized approach to leadership development that takes place completely outside context ever be meaningful?
- To address the question of leadership effectively, we need to look at the practice of leadership upstream (i.e., at the state level) and in the larger context of changing roles and power shifts among federal, state, and local actors.
- The focus of leadership at the state level can mitigate or accelerate leadership initiatives at local levels. The pull back of Federal oversight is providing an opportunity for new kinds of leadership at the state level.
- The influence of existing partnerships between districts and the local institutions that prepare leaders should not be underestimated. They can perpetuate legacy beliefs and practices or they can accelerate a step away towards transformation. Engaging one without the other is a missed opportunity for meaningful, lasting change.
- Do aspiring leaders of color have adequate support structures and platforms for preparing and promoting themselves? How do groups generally under-represented in education leadership, find support and opportunities within and beyond the systems within which they are working?
- Coordination of leadership is itself a new essential competency. When leadership is distributed and power is shared, there needs to be clear intention and communication among partners about who will assume which key leadership role at what time and for what purpose.

## **Future Provocations and Connections**

Our big ideas about leadership are largely untested. A product of our thinking, experiences, and engagement with critical friends, we underestimated the depth of engagement with others that would have compelled those deeply vested in established practice to take the big leap. Ownership beyond CIE was an issue.

Today, working with effective state-local partnerships that have emerged from all strands of our work, we want to test a new model of leadership development to generate learning about how to recruit, prepare, select and support the new education leaders our nation needs. We are not seeking to establish a long-term, scalable solution housed in CIE, but to test these ideas as innovations that can be approximated, owned and scaled long-term by a state system. What we offer is thought partnership to initiate and foster shared endeavors, an approach that will enable the partners to tackle challenges and test solutions systemically, and connections to people and ideas that will deepen their learning.