Finding simplicity on the other side of complexity

A *strategic planning process* streamlines district work and improves the system for all

By Jay Harnack and Matt Seebaum

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"The more elaborate his labyrinths, the further from the Sun his face." —Mikhail Naimy, *The Book of Mirdad*

Managing a public school district today has, most certainly, become a labyrinth of elaborate endeavors. Leaders at all levels find themselves pulling on a Gordian knot of processes that were intended to improve schools but have instead become asynchronous, disconnected, and redundant. As educators and leaders become increasingly frustrated by processes that they see as distracting from the core business of teaching and learning, the result is increased staff attrition, resource inefficiencies, initiative overload, and plateauing (or declining) achievement.

To escape the labyrinth, superintendents need to take a step back and look at their district from a systems perspective. While it's true that improving student outcomes is ultimately a function of what happens in the classroom, *sustainable* improvements can only occur when superintendents, along with their boards of education, establish and maintain the systemic conditions necessary to improve student performance and leverage the collective wisdom and expertise of all teachers and leaders in their districts.

This approach requires, for most superintendents, an upheaval of the way they think about and carry out their role as district leader. Those who have followed the common career trajectory from teacher to principal to superintendent have generally been successful with technical knowledge, team management, and managing day-to-day operations—but they also tend to focus on solving discrete, tactical problems.

In today's educational environment, effective district leadership requires complex and creative problem-solving skills, with a critical focus on implementing and evaluating solution frameworks as well as on the behavioral competencies required to motivate and direct others during implementation (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000).

Unfortunately, most district leaders haven't learned how to do this—or at least, not in any meaningful way. There is little evidence to suggest that what's taught in principal and superintendent preparation programs, what's addressed in leadership standards, or what's prioritized in state-level superintendent competency domains has any real degree of focus on the critical components of improvement science and systems thinking (Hess & Kelly, 2007; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

Training programs and education researchers alike have taken a mostly behaviorist approach to effective leadership. But in the quest to find the most desirable qualities of a school or district leader, perhaps we have overlooked the fact that our leaders work in complex systems that require highly functional organization and careful alignment. As a result, many superintendents, especially new ones, focus more on behaviors than strategy—when successful district leadership requires attention to both.

This expanded view means, for many leaders, a change in the way they think about and do business. We have to reexamine long-held assumptions and beliefs about leadership practices and domains;

think systematically and systemically as we adopt and implement new research-based frameworks; and provide our principals and teachers with the necessary support, feedback, and autonomy to do their jobs successfully, with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

This is a monumental investment—but one which, if done right, has the equally monumental payoff of a system that truly works for leaders, teachers, and all students.

Taking a systems approach to strategic planning

How, you may be thinking, can busy superintendents—who have limited time and resources—possibly begin to build systems thinking into the day-to-day work of their districts? The solution we propose lies in rethinking a process we're all intimately familiar with: strategic planning.

Whether you view strategic planning as helpful or a hindrance, the truth is the process is rarely used as it should be. Some school districts don't even have a plan—making them most certainly unaware of what needs to be done, where to begin, or how to do it. Those that do know what needs to be done are often so engrossed with the immediacy of pressing issues that they struggle to find the time or energy to create and implement a plan that will achieve their goals. We've also seen the rise of the strategic planning mega-goal, which looks good on district websites and makes for great sound bites (e.g., *Innovation and Excellence for All*), but in reality is often unrelated or weakly correlated to actually improving student achievement. It seems that far too often strategic plans are created merely to demonstrate they were created and are therefore viewed by many as meaningless.

Overall, current approaches to strategic planning have probably done more to *add* complexity to improvement efforts than they've done to lessen it. Educators are often so enamored with solving the question of *what* we should be doing that they frequently forget that *how* we do it is equally important. Chasing a problem to fit a solution contributes to the ongoing battle with unnecessary complexity.

It doesn't have to be this way. Districts looking to simplify their system can do so by taking strategic planning to the next level—with a *strategic planning process*. A strategic planning process differs in that it not only describes the plan (*what* the district will do); it also operationalizes the plan (*how* the district will accomplish the goals put forth in the plan through actions and strategies) in a way that taps deeply into the knowledge and experience of staff. It defines the parameters of *how* the *what* will be accomplished.

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Such a process builds a systems approach into both strategic planning and school improvement processes in a way that ensures the strategic plan has a positive impact on student achievement while simultaneously reducing complexity and workload. In other words, it can empower the ability of a district to cut through the noise and, if done right, *find simplicity on the other side of complexity*.

Bringing together plan and process

Most districts, at any given time, are juggling strategic planning and school improvement work while also striving to meet accreditation standards of quality. Most of the time, districts approach these efforts separately, creating unnecessary complexity, redundant and/or conflicting workloads, and a loss of focus on what matters most for students. A strategic planning process integrates these three processes into a single approach to keep the focus on critical work (see Figure 1 on p. 3).

Think of it like this: The way districts approach strategic planning is not unlike flying a plane. Some pilots stabilize their approach far from the runway,

Figure 1. Integrating Processes: The Critical Work of School Districts
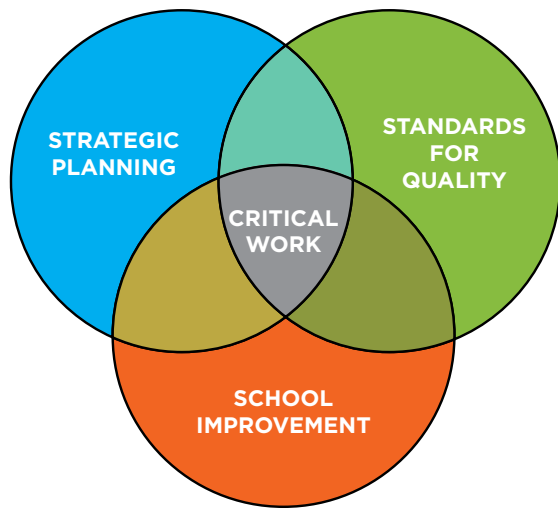
controlling variables early and then making small corrections as needed until touchdown; other pilots wait until they are close to the runway and then rapidly fly downward, continuously reacting to a wide range of high-stakes factors until their wheels touch the ground (Hackman, 2002).

Far too many strategic planning efforts, and in truth, far too many school district efforts, in general, take the latter approach—reacting in order to manage outcomes, rather than establishing the conditions needed for long-term success. This results in low-leverage symptomatic interventions that may produce short-term improvements in the measurable symptoms, but do little to improve underlying problems (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015).

For example, a school with low reading scores might set as its goal improving the number of students reading at grade level by the end of third grade. This will probably lead to new reading programs or instructional strategies that may, for example, focus on increasing decoding and reading fluency—solutions which may result in short-term improvements but don't address why the problem exists (e.g., poor reading comprehension).

Pilots seeking to stabilize their approach, on the other hand, use a flight plan. A good flight plan includes both *plan* and *process*, describing not only the departure and destination, but a specific route

designed for maximum fuel efficiency and safety, and the precise altitudes and speed the crew will fly. Similarly, districts using a strategic planning process have a plan (the goals the district wants to reach) as well as a process (the frameworks and tools) to get there.

This approach flips the paradigm of traditional strategic planning by putting the district's focus on establishing conditions for success rather than solely on fixing discrete problems. By focusing on the conditions that research shows lead to higher performance (Goodwin, 2010; McKinsey & McKinsey, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010), districts can not only improve in a more meaningful, lasting way but also reduce the need for many interventions and remediation programs.

Far too many strategic planning efforts, and in truth, far too many school district efforts, in general, react in order to manage outcomes, rather than establish the conditions needed for long-term success.

So how do districts establish these conditions? In a strategic planning process, districts organize their strategic planning and school improvement work around *research-based quality standards*. In other words, quality standards become the district's strategic planning goals and the lens through which all of the district's work occurs. Doing so provides a common language and knowledge base on how to improve student outcomes, simplifying the discussion on *what* should be done so that districts can focus on *how* to do it.

One district's journey

The standards of quality a district chooses as its strategic planning goals should have an essential focus on the core business of teaching and learning, but they can also address other factors necessary to improve the odds of student success for that particular district.

Figure 2. SCSD1's Strategic Planning Process
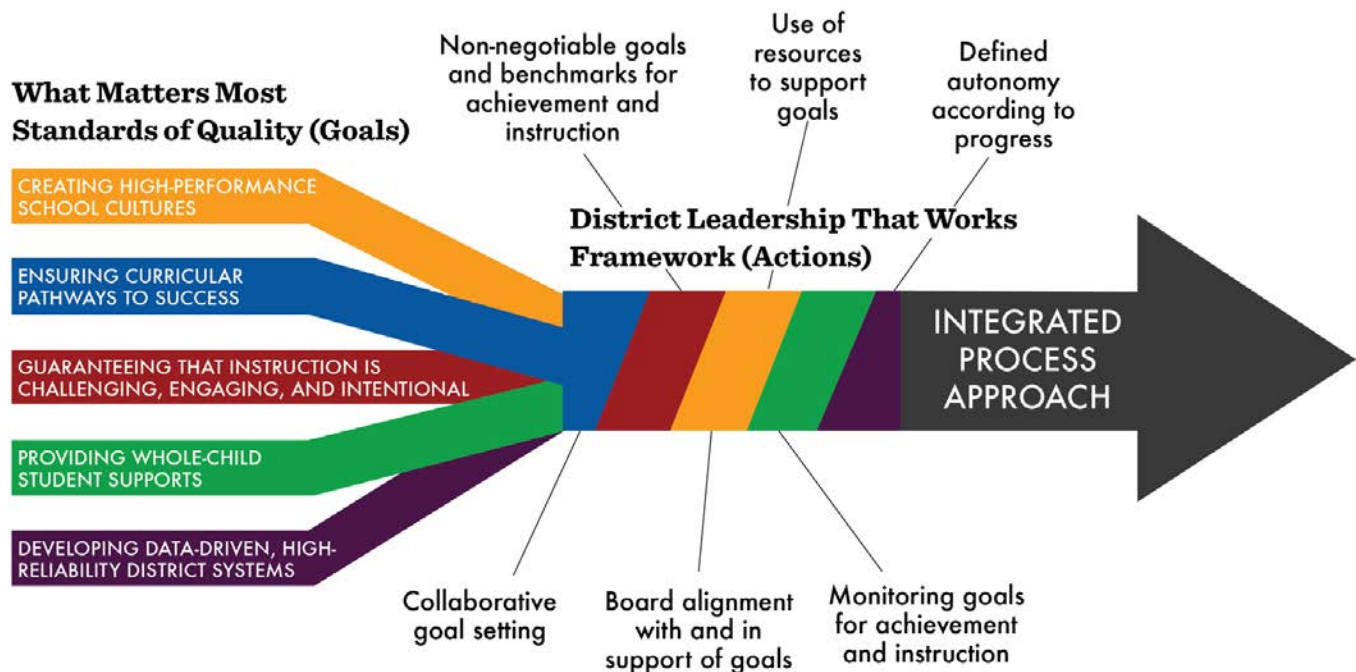
In our district, Sublette County School District #1 (SCSD1), a small, rural district in Pinedale, Wyoming, we initially adopted the AdvancED Standards for Quality, which our state uses for accreditation. However, over time we realized that we needed a set of standards that not only met accreditation requirements but also focused directly on improving student outcomes from the outset of planning and implementation. We found what we needed in McREL's What Matters Most Framework®.

This framework includes five areas of school practice that research shows have the greatest impact on student achievement:

- Guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction
- Ensure curricular pathways to success
- Provide whole-child student supports
- Create high-performance school cultures
- Develop data-driven, high reliability systems (Goodwin, 2010)

Once we had chosen the right standards for our district (our *plan*), we began thinking about *process*, or how to best operationalize them in a coherent manner. We found ourselves gravitating back toward McREL's research on district leadership, with which

we were familiar and which aligned with What Matters Most. The six domains linked to student achievement found in *District Leadership That Works* (Marzano & Waters, 2009) helped us define our roles and create a common vocabulary for improvement. We eventually decided to use these domains as our district-level framework to help translate What Matters Most into action steps toward achieving our goals (Figure 2). At the school level, the research-based practices of McREL's Balanced Leadership serve the same purpose.

The number of goals and action steps a district chooses to work on depends on resources, capacity, and priorities. In SCSD1, for example, our 2017–2021 strategic plan focuses on three of the quality standards—creating high-performance school cultures; guaranteeing that instruction is challenging, engaging, and intentional; and providing whole-child student supports.

The next step was establishing subcommittees for each domain, chaired by board members with facilitation support from district administrators. We ensured each committee comprised a broad range of stakeholders including students, parents, community members, and district staff from all levels of the organization.

The purpose of the subcommittees was to create a space for district stakeholders to, as Senge et al.

put it, "come together to tell the truth, think more deeply about what is happening, explore options beyond popular thinking, and search for higher leverage changes…" (2015, p. 30). Toward that end, we established ground rules for participation to ensure all discussions occurred within the confines of a safe and open environment in an effort to "conduct autopsies without blame" (Collins, 2001). The district made clear to all participants that the process was not a venue for personnel issues, collectively or individually, and any stakeholder wishing to engage in such discussions would recognize that process as separate, and follow the district's chain of command in that respect.

The district asked each committee not to discuss solutions (this remained the work of district staff) but to create action items that would support their specific standard of quality (one of the five What Matters Most areas) and help establish the conditions that promote student success. For example, the subcommittee whose goal was to "guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction," created an action item to "improve employee engagement and professional practice through peers and innovation." This action item supports a condition that we feel is critical to success: a culture where all staff members are receptive to feedback. We believe creating this kind of culture improves employee performance across multiple dimensions, thereby improving the overall student experience as well as student achievement. Indeed, we have found that establishing this condition has quickly proven to be empowering and beneficial in enhancing system-wide transparency.

To reduce complexity and increase clarity—and based on our district's prior experience with initiative fatigue—SCSD1 limited the work of the subcommittees to only highly critical action items and no more than one or two action items within a specific standard. The subcommittees went through an iterative process of identifying and presenting their action items to the entire strategic planning group, the broader community, and the Board of Trustees, and then revising items based on the feedback.

The role of board members in this process was to facilitate an open and honest discussion within their subcommittees and keep discussions focused on

the standards for quality. District administrators were assigned to subcommittees based on their knowledge and expertise, and were tasked with supporting the board members in facilitating the conversation. The role of the superintendent was to facilitate the entire process and ensure that the subcommittees remained focused on action items that truly supported their goal area.

The ultimate result was a coherent strategic plan with goals that were organized around quality standards and focused on factors that improve student outcomes, and with action items directly correlated to those factors and standards.

Moving from plan to action: Three key elements

Most strategic plans have an inherent weakness: They lack specifically defined actions and are generally written in passive language. It's imperative that plans roll up their sleeves and go to work like the rest of us. To put our plan into action, SCSD1 relied on both the district- and school-level leadership frameworks (District Leadership That Works and Balanced Leadership [see Appendix A]) to provide a research-based common language for the district and school teams and to help operationalize the district's action items. We focused on the following three key elements.

Key #1: Establish a pathway for defined autonomy

The first key element of operationalizing the strategic plan was establishing a pathway for *defined autonomy* for our schools. According to research, effective district leadership includes the superintendent's ability to set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority—or autonomy—for determining how to meet those goals (Marzano & Waters, 2009). As a part of the strategic planning process, the district establishes non-negotiable benchmarks for achievement and instruction. The district calls these benchmarks "quality indicators" to simplify the discussion with stakeholders, and the district adopts unique quality indicators for each organizational level (elementary, middle, and high school).

Key #2: Establish a systemic leadership framework

The second key element of operationalizing our strategic plan involved the implementation of the Balanced Leadership Framework at the school level. All SCSD1 administrators and teacher leaders, along with a large cadre of teachers in each building, were trained—and continue to be trained—in the Balanced Leadership Framework. Schools are required to adopt the district's quality indicators as their primary school improvement objectives. One exception is schools designated by the state as "exceeding expectations," which have the option of using the district's quality indicator or choosing their own.

Then, schools develop a plan using the Trilateral Planning Tool, a graphic organizer that guides the school leadership team in clearly identifying individual goals that are aligned with research-based supporting actions and leadership responsibilities (Goodwin, Cameron, & Hein, 2015). Having each school develop its own plan gives schools the autonomy to customize their approach to improvement while keeping building-level efforts clearly aligned to district priorities.

Key #3: Monitoring process and progress

The third key element is one that we're all familiar with but is easy to get wrong: monitoring. It's important to monitor process, progress, and the impact of change that invariably occurs when implementing the actions associated with the strategic plan. Through several less-than-successful attempts at measuring progress, SCSD1 learned that even though the district sets targets for improvement, monitoring should not focus on the targets themselves but rather on leading measures that provide staff with feedback on progress made toward establishing the conditions needed to move toward the quality indicators (via a "monitoring scorecard").

For example, when the district chose college and career readiness as a quality indicator for the high school, they implemented a plan to improve the academic behaviors of middle school students. While the assessment used to measure college and career readiness was the ACT (lagging measure), the district focused on a condition necessary to achieve college and career readiness—academic behaviors

in middle school—and monitored student progress toward improving that goal (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008).

The district's Data Advisory Committee, which is comprised of teachers and administrators, develops the metrics used to monitor progress towards successful completion of the strategic plan. This includes both the leading measures used in the monitoring scorecard and the lagging measures (quality indicators) used by the district. This data is provided to the board of trustees, but its primary use is for schools and PLC teams to make real-time adjustments to improvement strategies.

How to create a *strategic planning process*

1. Choose research-based quality standards that fit your district's needs; adapt these standards as your strategic planning goals.

2. Choose a research-based framework that will operationalize these goals; this framework establishes *how* the district will reach its goals.

3. Establish broad stakeholder subcommittees for each standard you've chosen to focus on.

4. Establish ground rules/processes for subcommittee work.

5. Subcommittees work together to create one or two highly critical action items that support their standard areas.

6. Integrate action items into district strategic plan.

7. Allow schools to choose from district goals and action items the area(s) of focus for school improvement.

8. Monitor schools' progress toward goals and support them in making adjustments.

Reducing complexity with shared leadership

In his book *The Checklist Manifesto,* Atul Gawande (2010) uses an example from the construction industry to describe how the extreme complexity required to build the modern superstructure has resulted in the demise of the "master builder," noting the "variety and sophistication of advancements in every stage of construction had overwhelmed the abilities of any individual to master them" (p. 58). While the construction industry has evolved new problem-solving methods for complex, dynamic systems, the educational leadership model continues to rely heavily on the "master builder" concept. However, the integrated processes of our strategic planning framework (District Leadership That Works) include complex, dynamic, non-linear problem solving that requires pushing the power of decision making away from the center to the periphery and providing time and space for educators to develop innovative solutions. This is the essence of shared leadership.

Districts that attempt to implement a strategic planning framework without first or simultaneously investing in leadership capacity at all levels will sooner or later find themselves going back to fill this gap. While many district administrators have embraced shared leadership, they often fail to provide two key elements required for its success: structure and capacity.

Using quality standards as the basis of strategic planning and school improvement work provides a structure that ensures shared leadership teams keep the focus on what matters most for students. Failing to provide this structure often results in the inevitable dilution, at each level of implementation, of critical elements of the goals and action items.

Of equal importance is adequately preparing principals and teacher leaders for the leadership roles they have been given. This is particularly true when sharing leadership with teachers, who may have little leadership experience. Helping teachers understand building-level leadership responsibilities and involving them in the leadership process significantly improves their engagement, assumption of leadership roles, and collaboration with principals.

> *The integrated processes of a strategic planning framework require pushing the power of decision making away from the center to the periphery and providing time and space for educators to develop innovative solutions. This is the essence of shared leadership.*

It should be noted that the use of the shared leadership concepts also has implications for the board-superintendent team. Shared leadership is ideally suited for leaders and boards that have embraced collaboration, building leadership capacity, and an inside-out approach to improvement—not for those seeking to drive predetermined agendas. In fact, districts that choose or need highly directive leadership may view this type of strategic planning as passive. As noted by Senge et al., "The conscious acts of creating space, of engaging people in genuine questions, and of convening around a clear intention with no hidden agenda, creates a very different type of energy from that which arises from seeking to get people committed to your plan" (2015, p. 30). Leaders and boards must be prepared for the ideas and opinions of stakeholders to effect the direction of the process; the strategic framework is what ensures the direction always aligns with what matters most for students.

Shared leadership is also not for boards with detached or impatient governance styles. As stated earlier, the work needed to establish the conditions necessary for the success of all students is generally much broader in scope than discrete, causal problem-solving models. Establishing the right conditions as a part of an inside-out improvement model requires, for example, the ability to review leading measures and make appropriate corrections to building-level strategies. While this promotes engagement and sustainability, it also requires time, patience, and board member engagement.

Board members become active participants in the development of the strategic plan, and their participation creates a critical link to both staff and community throughout the process. They also act corporately to approve the key components of the framework and the plan as a whole prior to beginning. In doing so, they become highly educated on the issues faced by the district and its efforts to address them, and cognizant of the timelines required to solve the complex problems faced by schools. In short, this creates significant board alignment and support for the plan, another critical piece of the *District Leadership That Works* research. Detachment by the board from this process will ultimately result in both a plan and a process for which they have little ownership— and often little faith. From the perspective of the board-superintendent team, building a purposeful community grounded in the fundamentals of a strategic framework begins with solid governance policies.

Providing long-term, sustainable dividends at all levels

Change is an ever-present thread that exists in public education. Effectively navigating and managing change seems to garner very little attention, yet affects the stability of nearly all educational improvement efforts. Research has shown that the leadership of school boards matters to student achievement; however, school board elections occur every two years and with them come changing agendas, expectations, and beliefs about how a district should operate. Research has also shown that the length of superintendent tenure is important in improving student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009), yet the nationwide average tenure for superintendents is less than five years. Further, we know that principal turnover adversely impacts schools, yet the average tenure for a principal is between three and four years (Hull, 2012). At every level of public education, the entropy of leadership erodes our continuous efforts to improve student achievement. Superintendents, new and experienced, often inherit organizations both demanding and resisting change.

As a result, today's superintendency exists in a politically charged, highly pressurized environment. Tenures are short, stress is high, and trust is often low. It is essential that districts seek governance practices and improvement strategies that are insulated from or, at the very least, resilient to the constant pressures of leadership change. When implemented with fidelity, a strategic planning framework can lead to districtwide improvement while both minimizing and withstanding the effects

When implemented with fidelity, a strategic planning framework can lead to districtwide improvement while both minimizing and withstanding the effects of leadership change.

of leadership change— particularly when it's linked to good board policy governance practices. While there is no doubt that integrating multiple district processes to create a strategic planning framework can require substantial front-end work, it's work that ultimately pays enormous leadership dividends at all levels of the organization.

Benefits of the Strategic Planning Process for School Districts

- Forms district practice around current research on what matters most for students, but is also flexible for local context.

- Clearly articulates the district's purpose by communicating values and beliefs about schooling and establishing a common language and understanding for improvement practices.

- Reduces complexity by integrating processes and flattens and shortens the implementation curve for district improvement practices. Recovered time and energy can be applied to the district's core business of teaching and learning.

- Increases the probability of positive board-superintendent relations and longer superintendent and principal tenures, a factor in improving student achievement.

- Focuses the district on creating conditions for continuous improvement rather than reacting to symptomatic causes.

- Prioritizes and aligns resources to the strategic plan.

Benefits of the Strategic Planning Process for Schools

- Creates an improvement mission shared by the board, superintendent, and all schools. Establishes a culture of shared purpose that reduces conflict both vertically and horizontally within the organization.

- Provides defined autonomy for principals and school leadership teams to adjust for contextual issues within their school.

- Operationalizes the collective knowledge and experience of teachers and reduces stress and workload on principals.

- Provides a "line of sight" from strategic planning goals and action items directly to school and classroom improvement strategies.

- Improves efficiencies across the district by integrating separate and/or redundant processes.

- Strengthens ownership of initiatives and increases staff engagement by utilizing a monitoring scorecard developed and implemented by the "players."

- Builds trust that the focus and purpose of district initiatives is truly student-centered.

In SCSD1, as we've put our strategic planning process into practice over the past five years, we've experienced all of these benefits to some degree as well as the one that, in the end, is most important: improved student achievement. Since beginning this work, we have seen consistent improvement across all the metrics the district uses to measure success. Results on our state assessments—including MAPS (Measures of Academic Progress) and PAWS (Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students)—have progressed steadily upward. On the ACT, the average score has also risen every year, from 19.4 in 2010 to 21.9 in 2013. Our elementary and high

school have been designated as achieving the highest level rating within our state accountability system (Exceeding Expectations) for the past two years (2014–15 and 2015–16)—and are, in fact, two of only four schools statewide to maintain such consecutive high ratings. In addition, during a recent external review by AdvancED, the district received the highest score in the state of Wyoming, on par with the best scores nationwide.

Since beginning this work, we have seen consistent improvement across all the metrics the district uses to measure success.

We don't believe this is a coincidence. We do believe that if districts and school boards commit to a strategic planning process—in which they choose quality standards as goals and a research-based framework that aligns with classroom practices, provide the right professional learning to all staff, and ensure implementation with fidelity—they *will* see greater effectiveness and efficiency across the system and, ultimately, greater success for leaders, teachers, and students. ■

About the Authors

Jay Harnack is a former science teacher, coach, and principal who has 13 years of experience as a superintendent, the last six in Sublette County School District #1 in Pinedale, Wyoming.

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About McREL

McREL International is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to improving education outcomes for all students through applied research, product development, and professional service to teachers and education leaders. We collaborate with schools and school systems across the country and worldwide to help educators think differently about their challenges, offering research-based solutions and guidance that help students flourish.

Appendix A

McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework®

After analyzing decades of research on effective school leaders, McREL identified 21 distinct responsibilities, actions, and behaviors that have the strongest connections to higher levels of student achievement. McREL further found that these 21 responsibilities could be grouped into three major components: choosing the *right focus* for school improvement efforts; effectively *leading change* in one's school; and transforming one's school culture into a *purposeful community* that believes it can make a difference.

Change	**Change Agent**: *Be willing to challenge, and actively challenge, the status quo* **Flexibility**: *Adapt one's leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and be comfortable with dissent* **Ideals and Beliefs***: *Communicate and operate from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling* **Intellectual Stimulation**: *Ensure faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and make the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture* **Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**: *Be knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices* **Monitor and Evaluate**: *Monitor the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on learning* **Optimize**: *Inspire and lead new and challenging innovations*
Focus	**Contingent Rewards**: *Recognize and reward individual accomplishments* **Discipline**: *Protect teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus* **Focus**: *Establish clear goals and keep those goals in the forefront of the school's attention* **Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**: *Be directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices* **Order**: *Establish a set of standard operating procedures and routines* **Outreach**: *Be an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders* **Resources**: *Provide teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs*
Community	**Affirmation**: *Recognize and celebrate school accomplishments, and acknowledge failures* **Communication**: *Establish strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students* **Culture**: *Foster shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation* **Ideals and Beliefs***: *Communicate and operate from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling* **Input**: *Involve teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies* **Relationships**: *Demonstrate an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff* **Situational Awareness**: *Be aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and use this information to address current and potential problems* **Visibility**: *Have quality contact and interactions with teachers and students*

***Ideals and Beliefs** are part of two components: Change and Community*

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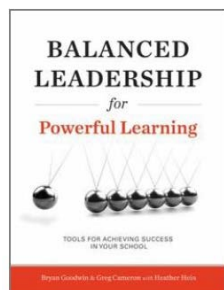
**Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning: Tools for Achieving Success in Your School**

Thousands of school leaders worldwide have improved their leadership skills and their students' achievement with our research-based Balanced Leadership® program. This book shares the lessons we've learned, the stories we've heard, and the guidance that has made the biggest difference in student achievement and staff success. You'll learn how a balanced approach enables more effective implementation of the fundamental components of leadership: establishing a clear focus on what matters most for the entire school; managing the challenges associated with change to sustain improvement efforts; and creating a committed, purposeful, and positive community of teachers and staff. Available at **http://shop.ascd.org/.**
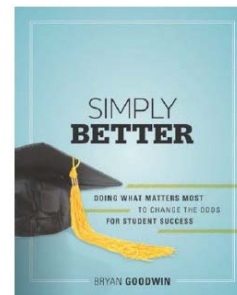
**Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success**

We all want—and strive for—student success. But increasing student success isn't about doing more or working harder as much as it is doing the right things—especially when resources available are limited. Bryan Goodwin presents research findings and real-life examples to show how "less is more" in education reform. Understand why the following five principles—instruction, curriculum, student support, high-performance school cultures, and data-driven districts—are the keys to helping all students succeed. Learn how strategic "touchstones" can challenge and nurture students, standardize yet personalize curriculum, counteract negative out-of-school factors, and reduce variance in teacher quality. Available at **http://shop.ascd.org/.**

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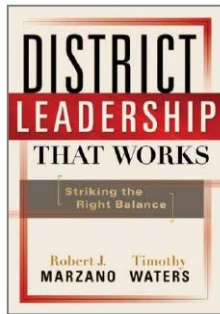
District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance

Bridge the great divide between district administrative duties and daily classroom impact. This book outlines six domains of effective district leadership and introduces the concept of defined autonomy, which enables a balance between centralized direction and building-level freedom to respond quickly to issues and support student achievement. Readers will also learn how to collaborate successfully with stakeholders, use formative assessment tools to monitor progress, and counteract negative resistance to second-order change. Available at **http://www.solution-tree. com/**.
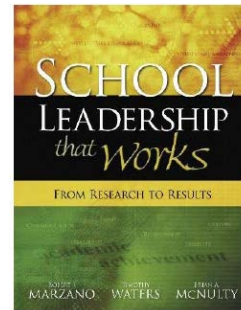
School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results

What can school leaders really do to increase student achievement, and which leadership practices have the biggest impact on school effectiveness and student achievement? This groundbreaking book answers these tough questions definitively and identifies practical leadership competencies. Drawing from 35 years of studies, the authors explain critical research-based leadership principles that every administrator needs to know, such as the pros and cons of comprehensive school reform models, the 21 leadership responsibilities that actually affect student learning and have a meaningful correlation to academic achievement gains, and the elements of a five-step plan for effective school leadership. Available at **http://shop.ascd.org/**.