

**SOLDWEDEL CONSULTING, LLC**

# **Leadership Success Stories**

Twenty-five stories, five for each Leadership Framework.

# Contents

## **Framework 1 — Creating a Bold Vision for Tomorrow**

1. Visioning Surveys Listening Before Leading
2. Family Vision Forums From Listening to Partnership
3. A Vision for Early Readiness From Hoping for Better Results to Creating Them
4. Learning from Others The XQ High School Transformation Journey
5. Future-Ready Schools When Students Challenge Adults to Rethink the Future

## **Framework 2 — Shaping Our Preferred Future**

1. Living the Plan
2. Defining Success
3. Why Does This Matter?
4. Moving Data to Action
5. Ensuring Coherence

## **Framework 3 — Defining Our Strategic Priorities**

1. Living the Plan
2. SMART Goals
3. Making a Difference
4. Distractions
5. Making a Difference

## **Framework 4 — Implementing from Strategy to Results**

1. Action Planning
2. Progress Monitoring
3. Setting a Target
4. Continuous Improvement
5. Check-in Meetings

## **Framework 5 — Reporting Our Results**

1. Accomplishments
2. Annual vs. Periodic Reporting
3. Impacts
4. Next Steps
5. The Power of Visuals

## Visioning Surveys Listening Before Leading

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

I'll never forget what one superintendent said during a strategic planning meeting. He looked around the room and quietly admitted,

**"We've spent six months writing a vision statement, but I'm not sure anyone outside this room believes it's theirs."**

That comment has stayed with me because it captures one of the biggest challenges in strategic planning.

Creating a vision statement isn't usually the hard part.

Creating a vision that people believe belongs to **them** is.

Too often, a small group of leaders develops a vision, presents it to the Board for approval, and hopes everyone will embrace it. While the words may be well written, the ownership is often missing.

Over the years, I've learned that before deciding **what** we will do, we must first listen carefully to **what future our community hopes to create together**.

That's why visioning surveys have become such an important part of my process.

They transform opinions into insight, individual voices into common themes, and community aspirations into a shared direction.

### The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

Rather than beginning by writing a vision statement, this district began by asking a different question:

**"What kind of future do we want to create together?"**

The leadership team identified several broad themes that emerged from early conversations about the future. They then developed a small number of thoughtful questions around each theme and invited students, staff, families, and community members to share their perspectives.

The survey wasn't simply collecting data.

It was inviting people into the conversation.

When the results were compiled, the planning team didn't just receive percentages and charts. They received something much more valuable—a clearer understanding of what their community valued

most.

Those themes became the foundation for shaping the district's future.

The survey itself was never the goal.

The goal was building relationships, strengthening ownership, and creating momentum for the work ahead.

I've learned that one of the quickest ways to lose ownership is to ask people to support a vision they never helped create.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As the planning team reviewed the survey results, something interesting happened.

The conversations changed.

Instead of debating personal opinions, leaders began discussing common themes that had emerged from hundreds of voices across the district.

The vision was no longer being written **for** the community.

It was being created **with** the community.

Because students, families, and staff could see their own hopes and aspirations reflected in the final vision, the conversation naturally shifted from:

**"Their plan..."**

to

**"Our future."**

Perhaps most importantly, implementation became easier.

People were already invested because they had helped shape the direction from the very beginning.

### **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has remained with me throughout my work with school districts.

**Great leaders don't create the future alone. They create the conditions for others to help shape it.**

Vision surveys are much more than a data collection tool.

They represent a leadership mindset.

A mindset that values listening before leading.

Learning before deciding.

Engaging before implementing.

Because one timeless truth continues to prove itself:

**People support what they help create.**

### **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, consider this question:

**If every student, family, staff member, and community partner shared their hopes for the future of your district, what common themes would emerge—and how well are those hopes reflected in your current vision?**

## Family Vision Forums From Listening to Partnership

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Does It Matter?

I'll never forget something a parent shared during a meeting with the district's President's Council.

She quietly said,

**"We want to support our schools, but too often it feels like decisions have already been made before anyone asks what families think."**

The room became very quiet.

No one argued with her.

Instead, her comment sparked one of the most honest conversations of the evening.

Parents spoke openly about their hopes for the future of the district. They talked about declining enrollment, more families choosing private schools or homeschooling, concerns about student well-being, and the importance of preparing students for a rapidly changing world.

As I listened, one thought kept coming back to me.

If the strategic plan was truly going to represent the community, families couldn't simply be asked to approve it after it was written.

They had to help create it.

### The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

Rather than sending another survey, the district decided to create something different.

They created opportunities for conversation.

Building on the work of the President's Council, the leadership team researched effective family engagement practices and discovered the **National PTA Advocacy Toolkit**. That research inspired the idea of hosting a series of **Family Vision Forums** throughout the district.

Three forums were held—one at an elementary school, one at a middle school, and one at the high school.

The goal wasn't to present information.

The goal was to listen.

Parents shared their hopes, concerns, and ideas for the future. Every conversation was documented. Common themes were identified, and a summary report was shared with both the community and the strategic planning team.

Those conversations became one of the most valuable resources used to shape the district's new strategic plan.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

As the planning team reviewed the results, clear themes began to emerge.

Families consistently emphasized the importance of future-ready skills, personalized learning, student well-being, career pathways, safety, equity, and real-world learning experiences.

They also spoke honestly about declining achievement, chronic absenteeism, and classroom disruptions.

But perhaps the most important discovery wasn't found in the data.

It was found in the relationships.

Families could see their own voices reflected in the district's Mission, Vision, and strategic priorities.

The strategic plan no longer felt like something created by the district.

It became something created **with** the district.

That shift built trust.

And trust made implementation much easier because families already believed they were partners in the work.

## **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has stayed with me.

**Great leaders don't create the future for their communities. They create it with their communities.**

Family Vision Forums are much more than public meetings.

They demonstrate a leadership mindset that values listening before deciding, partnership before persuasion, and trust before implementation.

When families believe their voices matter, they stop seeing themselves as observers of the district.

They begin seeing themselves as partners in its future.

## **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, consider this question:

**If your families were asked whether they genuinely influence the future of your district, what would they say? More importantly, what evidence would support their answer?**

## A Vision for Early Readiness From Hoping for Better Results to Creating Them

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Did This Matter?

During a strategic planning meeting, the leadership team reviewed three years of kindergarten readiness data.

No one liked what they saw.

Readiness had declined from **28% to 26% to 25%**.

For a few moments, the room was quiet.

Then someone asked a simple but powerful question:

**"At what point do we stop hoping these numbers improve and start doing something different?"**

I loved that question because it changed the conversation.

Too often, kindergarten readiness is viewed as something that happens before children ever arrive at school. If students aren't ready, we tend to assume there wasn't much the district could have done.

But this leadership team saw it differently.

They began asking,

**"What if kindergarten readiness isn't simply an early childhood issue? What if it's one of the most important strategic responsibilities our entire community shares?"**

That single shift in thinking changed everything.

### The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

Rather than treating readiness as the responsibility of preschool or kindergarten teachers alone, the district made it one of its strategic priorities.

That decision immediately broadened the conversation.

The leadership team adopted Illinois' **14 Kindergarten Readiness Indicators** as the district's common definition of readiness. Everyone—from teachers to administrators to community partners—began using the same language and measuring progress in the same way.

The district expanded preschool opportunities, aligned curriculum to the readiness indicators, and reached out to early childhood providers throughout the community.

Families also became part of the conversation.

Instead of receiving different messages from different organizations, they began hearing a common message about what children need to be successful when they enter kindergarten.

For the first time, the community was working toward the same goal.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As the work continued, the leadership team realized they had accomplished something much bigger than improving a data point.

They had created a shared definition of readiness.

They had aligned schools, families, and community partners around a common purpose.

They had shifted the conversation from,

**"Why aren't students ready?"**

to

**"How do we help every child become ready?"**

The numbers eventually began moving in the right direction.

After reaching a low of **25%**, the district's readiness rate increased to **32%**, exceeding the previous trend and moving above the statewide average of approximately **31.6%**.

But the greatest success wasn't the percentage.

It was knowing the district had built a system that could continue improving.

Most importantly, students were the beneficiaries.

### **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has stayed with me throughout my career.

**Data doesn't improve schools. Leaders who act on data improve schools.**

Kindergarten readiness data didn't solve the problem.

It helped leaders recognize the problem.

From there, they aligned resources, built partnerships, strengthened early learning opportunities, and continually monitored their progress.

That's what strategic leadership looks like.

It isn't reacting to data.

It's using data to create a better future.

## **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, consider these questions:

- Is kindergarten readiness one of our strategic priorities—or simply a statistic we report each year?
- Do we have a shared definition of what "ready" means?
- How well are our schools, families, and community partners working together to prepare children for success?
- What does our readiness data tell us about where we should focus our efforts next?

Remember...

**Children don't become kindergarten ready by chance. They become kindergarten ready when an entire community accepts responsibility for helping them succeed.**

# Learning from Others The XQ High School Transformation Journey

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

As the district refreshed its strategic plan, one message kept surfacing from students, families, staff, and community members.

"Our elementary and middle schools have changed over the years, but our high school still feels like it was designed for another era."

That comment started an important conversation.

Students wanted learning to feel more relevant. Families wanted stronger preparation for college, careers, and life. Teachers wanted greater flexibility to design meaningful learning experiences. Community members wanted graduates who were prepared for a rapidly changing world.

The leadership team faced an important decision.

Should they try to redesign the high school on their own?

Or should they learn from organizations that had already done this work successfully?

They chose to learn first.

## The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

Rather than beginning with solutions, the Action Team began with curiosity.

They researched several nationally recognized high school redesign models before selecting the **XQ Institute** because its vision closely matched the district's aspirations for future-ready learning.

The team was especially drawn to XQ's emphasis on:

- Student voice and agency.
- Meaningful, real-world learning.
- Caring and culturally responsive learning environments.
- Community ownership of education.

Instead of immediately changing programs, they invested time learning.

They studied the XQ Design Journey.

They explored graduate competencies.

They visited an XQ Super School.

They asked questions.

They listened.

They reflected.

Only then did they begin designing a transformation process that fit the unique needs of their own community.

They didn't copy another school's work.

They learned from it.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As the work continued, something interesting happened.

The conversation shifted.

Instead of asking,

**"How do we improve our high school?"**

leaders began asking,

**"What kind of learning experiences do today's students need to thrive tomorrow?"**

That single question changed everything.

Rather than simply revising schedules or adding new programs, the district began rethinking learning itself.

Students became partners in the design process.

Teachers became innovators.

Community members became collaborators.

The Action Team discovered that some of the best ideas already existed.

Their responsibility wasn't to invent them.

It was to learn from them, adapt them thoughtfully, and make them their own.

### **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has stayed with me throughout my career.

**Great leaders don't believe they have all the answers. They know where to find them.**

The most successful districts I've worked with are remarkably curious.

They visit other schools.

They study great organizations.

They ask thoughtful questions.

They learn from the successes—and the mistakes—of others.

Then they adapt those ideas to fit their own students, staff, and community.

Leadership isn't about inventing every solution.

It's about creating a culture that never stops learning.

## **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, consider these questions:

- Before choosing a strategy, do we spend enough time learning from others who have already been successful?
- Where could we look for ideas beyond our own district?
- Are we adapting promising practices—or simply copying programs?
- How might curiosity become one of our greatest leadership strengths?

Remember...

**The best leaders are lifelong learners. They don't lead because they know everything. They lead because they never stop learning.**

# Future-Ready Schools When Students Challenge Adults to Rethink the Future

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

If you've read the previous stories, I hope you've begun to see why I believe **visioning is the lynchpin of meaningful improvement.**

One of the greatest gifts of a visioning process is that it surfaces questions leaders may not even realize they should be asking.

That's exactly what happened in this district.

During one of our visioning conversations, it wasn't the adults who challenged our thinking.

It was the students.

They asked questions that stopped everyone in the room.

**"Why can't learning be more personalized?"**

**"Why doesn't technology do more than replace paper?"**

**"How are our schools preparing us for a world shaped by artificial intelligence and rapid technological change?"**

Those weren't complaints.

They were invitations to think differently.

And they reminded us of something every leader should remember:

**The students graduating tomorrow will live and work in a world very different from the one that shaped today's schools.**

The leadership team realized they couldn't answer tomorrow's questions with yesterday's thinking.

## The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

Rather than trying to invent a new model on their own, the leadership team began looking for organizations already helping schools prepare students for the future.

After studying several research-based approaches, they chose the **Future Ready Schools Framework** because it aligned closely with the district's vision for personalized, future-focused learning.

More importantly, the framework gave everyone a common language and a shared roadmap for innovation.

Instead of asking,

**"What should we change next?"**

leaders began asking,

**"What learning experiences will best prepare our students for the future they will inherit?"**

That subtle change in thinking influenced every conversation that followed.

The framework became more than a planning tool.

It became a lens for making decisions.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

Although this work is still in its early stages, the district is already seeing encouraging signs that the vision is becoming reality.

Students are experiencing more project-based and personalized learning.

Teachers are redesigning classrooms to support collaboration, creativity, and student ownership.

Technology is becoming a tool for learning rather than simply a tool for teaching.

Professional learning is becoming more personalized for educators, just as learning is becoming more personalized for students.

Community partnerships are expanding, helping connect classroom learning with future careers and workforce opportunities.

These accomplishments are encouraging.

But perhaps the most exciting part is this:

The district is no longer simply talking about future-ready learning.

It is beginning to live it.

And because this work is just beginning, the greatest impact still lies ahead.

### **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has become increasingly clear to me.

**Great frameworks don't limit innovation—they give innovation direction.**

The best leaders don't believe they must invent every solution.

They study great ideas.

They learn from proven practices.

Then they thoughtfully adapt those ideas to meet the unique needs of their students and community.

Vision creates possibility.

Frameworks help make that possibility achievable.

## **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, consider these questions:

- If your students could redesign learning for the future, what would they ask you to change?
- How well is your district preparing students for a world that is changing faster than ever before?
- What frameworks help guide your innovation?
- Do those frameworks inspire transformation—or simply organize existing practices?

Remember... **The future isn't something schools wait for. It's something great leaders help create.**

# Living the Plan

---

## **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

One of the biggest misconceptions in strategic planning is believing that a plan is effective simply because each section is well written.

A compelling mission.

An inspiring vision.

Meaningful core values.

Ambitious goals.

Thoughtful strategies.

Individually, each may be excellent.

But if they don't reinforce one another, the organization begins pulling in different directions. The result is not a weak strategic plan—it is a disconnected leadership system.

The leadership challenge became:

**How do we ensure every part of our strategic plan works together to create the future we envision?**

## **A Leadership Approach**

Great leaders understand that alignment doesn't happen by accident.

It happens by design.

One effective approach is to step back and examine how every component of the strategic plan connects to the district's preferred future. Leaders inventory the major elements of the plan, trace each one back to the mission and vision, examine whether people, time, and resources support the stated priorities, and ask whether progress measures truly reflect what matters most.

This is more than a planning exercise.

It is a leadership discipline.

Because every initiative should answer one simple question:

**How does this help us create the future we say we want?**

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

Alignment creates clarity.

When people understand how their daily work connects to a larger purpose, decisions become easier.

Resources become more intentional.

Priorities become more focused.

Accountability becomes more meaningful.

Instead of pursuing dozens of unrelated initiatives, the organization begins moving together toward a shared destination. Every classroom, department, and school understands not only **what** they are doing, but **why** it matters.

That is when a strategic plan becomes more than a document.

It becomes a leadership system.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders don't build organizations by adding more initiatives.

They build organizations by connecting the right initiatives.

Alignment transforms vision into action because it ensures that purpose, priorities, people, resources, and measures all reinforce one another.

When everything points in the same direction, progress accelerates—not because people are working harder, but because they are working together.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**If you traced every initiative, every budget decision, and every daily practice in your district back to your preferred future, would every connection be clear?**

If not...

**Where is the first break in the chain?**

## **Leadership Takeaway**

**The strength of a strategic plan is not found in the excellence of its individual parts. It is found in how well those parts work together to create a preferred future.**

# Defining Success

---

## **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

Every strategic planning process eventually arrives at one defining question:

### **How do we know if we've been successful?**

Most districts can describe their goals, initiatives, and improvement strategies.

Far fewer can clearly describe the kind of graduate they hope to develop, the kind of educators needed to make that vision a reality, or the kind of system required to support both.

Without a shared definition of success, even the best strategic plans can lose focus. People work hard, but not always toward the same destination.

The leadership challenge became:

### **How do we create a shared picture of the future that guides every important decision we make?**

## **A Leadership Approach**

Great leaders understand that defining success should never be the work of a few people around a conference table.

It should reflect the hopes and aspirations of an entire community.

One powerful approach is to engage students, educators, families, business leaders, and community members in creating a shared Portrait of a Graduate. As conversations deepen, many districts discover that the work shouldn't stop there. A truly aligned organization also benefits from defining the qualities of its educators and the characteristics of the system needed to support student success.

Together, these portraits become more than inspiring graphics.

They become the district's shared definition of success.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When a community agrees on what success looks like, decisions become clearer.

Students understand that success is measured by more than grades.

Teachers design learning experiences that develop the competencies the community values most.

Leaders begin evaluating hiring, professional learning, budgets, technology, and strategic priorities through one consistent question:

**Does this move us closer to the future we have defined together?**

Instead of creating another initiative, the portraits become the lens through which every important decision is made. A shared language emerges, priorities become more coherent, and the entire organization moves with greater purpose.

**Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders create clarity before they create change.

A clear definition of success becomes a compass for the entire organization.

It reduces initiative overload.

It strengthens alignment.

It simplifies decision-making.

Most importantly, it reminds everyone that success is not determined by individual programs or isolated accomplishments—it is determined by whether the organization is becoming the community it aspires to be.

**Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**Can every student, educator, parent, and board member describe what success looks like in your district?**

If the answers are different...

**Is your organization working toward one preferred future—or many different ones?**

**Leadership Takeaway**

**A preferred future becomes achievable when a community first agrees on what success looks like. Until success is clearly defined, alignment will always remain difficult.**

## Why Does This Matter?

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

Many school districts invest months creating a beautiful Portrait of a Graduate.

The community celebrates.

The Board adopts it.

Posters appear throughout the schools.

Everyone agrees it represents the future they want for students.

Then something unexpected happens.

Nothing changes in the classroom.

The Portrait becomes an aspiration instead of an instructional framework.

The leadership challenge became:

### **How do we move the Portrait from the wall into every classroom?**

### **A Leadership Approach**

Great leaders understand that a shared vision must eventually become a shared practice.

If students are expected to graduate as critical thinkers, communicators, collaborators, creative problem-solvers, and resilient learners, those competencies cannot be left to chance. They must be intentionally developed over time.

One powerful approach is to identify what each competency looks like at every stage of a student's journey. Educators work together to define developmental expectations, align them with curriculum, create authentic learning experiences, and develop common ways to monitor growth.

The question shifts from:

**"Do we have a Portrait?"**

to

**"How are we helping students become that Portrait every day?"**

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When the Portrait becomes part of daily instruction, everything begins to align.

Teachers understand how their grade level contributes to a student's long-term development.

Students recognize that success is measured by more than academic achievement alone.

Assessment expands beyond tests to include projects, presentations, collaboration, reflection, and authentic demonstrations of learning.

Most importantly, every classroom begins moving toward the same destination—even though each classroom takes students there in age-appropriate ways.

The Portrait is no longer something people admire.

It becomes something students experience.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders know that vision is only the beginning.

Transformation happens when vision shapes instruction.

A Portrait of a Graduate is not the destination.

It is the North Star.

The curriculum, instructional practices, assessments, professional learning, and grade-level progressions become the roadmap that helps every student reach that destination.

Without a roadmap, the Portrait remains an inspiring poster.

With a roadmap, it becomes a transformational educational system.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**If you walked into any classroom in your district today, could the teacher explain how today's lesson is helping students become the graduate your community envisioned?**

If the answer is yes...

Your Portrait is alive.

If the answer is no...

Your most important work still lies ahead.

## **Leadership Takeaway**

A Portrait of a Graduate fulfills its promise only when it shapes what students experience every day —not just what communities aspire to someday.

## Moving Data to Action

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

Every school district collects data.

Climate surveys.

Culture surveys.

Student achievement.

Attendance.

Engagement.

The question isn't whether leaders have information.

The question is what they do with it.

One district discovered this firsthand when its climate survey revealed declining results in four of the five Illinois 5Essentials categories. The greatest concerns—**Effective Leaders** and **Supportive Environment**—were both identified as areas of weakness. The data were clear.

The next step was not.

The leadership challenge became:

**How do we transform survey results into better learning and working conditions?**

### A Leadership Approach

Great leaders understand that a survey report is not the end of the improvement process.

It is the beginning.

Instead of simply reviewing the results and moving on, the leadership team used the data to start deeper conversations. They looked beyond district averages, examined school-level patterns, identified the indicators that mattered most, developed focused improvement plans, connected leadership development to identified needs, and monitored progress throughout the year.

The survey itself didn't provide the answers.

It pointed leaders toward the right questions.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When data become part of an ongoing leadership conversation, improvement becomes intentional.

People stop asking,

**"How did we score?"**

and begin asking,

**"What is this telling us about the experiences of our students and staff?"**

As leaders respond with purposeful action, trust grows.

Collaboration strengthens.

Learning and working conditions improve.

Over time, those improvements are reflected not only in better survey results but also in a stronger culture of continuous improvement.

The greatest success is not a higher score.

It is a stronger organization.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders don't collect data to complete reports.

They collect data to improve lives.

The value of any survey is never found in the questions that are asked.

It is found in the conversations those questions inspire and the actions leaders are willing to take.

Surveys do not improve schools.

Leaders who learn from surveys improve schools.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**What happens after your survey results are released?**

Do they become another report?

Or do they become the starting point for meaningful conversations, strategic actions, and measurable improvement?

Because the difference between collecting data and creating change is leadership.

## **Leadership Takeaway**

**Data inform improvement, but leadership transforms information into action. The true value of a survey is measured not by the report it produces, but by the better learning and working conditions it creates.**

## Ensuring Coherence

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

One of the first questions many leadership teams ask during strategic planning is:

**"Can we move on to the goals?"**

It's an understandable question.

Goals and strategies feel like action.

Mission, vision, core values, and portraits can feel like conversation.

But experienced leaders know something important:

If people haven't first agreed on **where they are going, why they exist, what they believe, and what success looks like**, they are not ready to write goals.

They are only ready to write activities.

The leadership challenge became:

**How do we ensure every part of our strategic plan tells the same story about our preferred future?**

### A Leadership Approach

Great leaders resist the temptation to rush.

Instead, they pause long enough to make sure the foundation is solid.

One effective approach is to revisit each element of the Preferred Future Statement before developing strategic priorities. Leaders clarify the purpose of the mission, vision, core values, and portraits, revisit what they learned through the visioning process, study exemplary models, and return to the voices of students, staff, families, and community members. Only after that shared understanding is established do they begin writing goals and strategies.

The work isn't about rewriting documents.

It's about creating shared understanding.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When every component of the Preferred Future Statement works together, the organization gains clarity.

People know why the district exists.

They understand where it is headed.

They share common beliefs.

They have a clear picture of what success looks like.

And because that foundation is clear, strategic priorities, performance measures, and daily decisions become easier to align. Instead of competing initiatives, the district develops one coherent direction that guides the work of everyone in the organization.

A preferred future is no longer a collection of separate statements.

It becomes one shared story.

## **Leadership Lesson**

One of the greatest responsibilities of leadership is creating coherence.

People perform at their best when they understand not only **what** they are expected to do, but **why** it matters and **how** their work contributes to something larger.

Strategy provides direction.

Culture provides commitment.

When purpose, beliefs, behaviors, and priorities reinforce one another, organizations stop pulling in different directions and begin moving together toward a common future.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**Does every part of your strategic plan point toward the same preferred future?**

Or... **Have individual components gradually begun traveling in different directions?**

## **Leadership Takeaway**

**A preferred future is more than a collection of inspiring statements. It is a coherent leadership system in which mission, vision, values, portraits, goals, and strategies all point toward the same destination.**

## Living the Plan

---

### **Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

When I visit a school district's website, I almost always begin in the same place.

I look for the strategic plan.

But I'm not simply reading the document.

I'm asking a different question:

#### **Is this plan alive?**

Can I find current progress reports?

Can I see evidence of improvement?

Are accomplishments, impacts, and next steps being shared?

Can I tell whether the district is making meaningful progress?

Too often, I discover thoughtful strategic priorities but very little evidence that anyone is measuring whether those priorities are producing better results.

The leadership challenge becomes:

#### **How do we transform important priorities into measurable organizational commitments?**

### **A Leadership Approach**

Great leaders understand that strategic priorities answer one question:

#### **What matters most?**

Long-range goals answer another:

#### **How will we know we are making progress?**

One effective approach is to transform broad priorities into measurable commitments. Leadership teams clarify what success looks like, establish meaningful indicators and targets, create systems for collecting and reporting evidence, and regularly examine accomplishments, impacts, and next steps to guide future decisions.

The goal isn't simply writing better goals.

The goal is creating a leadership system that keeps improvement visible.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When goals become measurable, conversations begin to change.

People spend less time discussing what they hope will happen and more time examining what is actually happening.

Resources become more intentional.

Progress becomes visible.

Accountability becomes constructive rather than punitive because everyone is working from the same evidence.

The organization shifts from managing activities to managing results, and leaders gain the confidence to celebrate successes, address challenges, and adjust strategies based on evidence rather than assumptions.

Measurement doesn't limit improvement.

It accelerates it.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders don't invest organizational resources in aspirations alone.

They invest in clearly defined results.

Long-range goals are not simply statements of intent.

They are commitments to measurable improvement.

When success is clearly defined, progress can be monitored, reported, celebrated, and continuously improved.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**If someone asked your leadership team today how each strategic priority is being measured, could everyone give the same answer?**

**There must be a return on the investment of strategic thinking and planning. Without ensuring the thinking and planning does not transition into action and results it is not worth doing.**

# SMART Goals

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

Many school districts establish long-range goals that are inspiring and well written. Yet they often struggle to answer one critical question:

### How will we know if we are making progress?

Without clear indicators, measures, and targets, goals become aspirations rather than management tools. Leadership must ensure every long-range goal is transformed into a SMART goal that clearly defines success and guides continuous improvement.

## A Leadership Approach

A goal without meaningful indicators, measures, and targets is simply a wish. Great leaders intentionally develop SMART goals that are **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound**.

In my work with school districts, I encourage leaders to go one step further by ensuring that goals also include meaningful indicators, measurable targets, and ongoing progress monitoring. SMART goals become the roadmap that connects vision to measurable results.

## What Leaders Often Discover

Leaders discover:

- SMART goals provide a shared definition of success for everyone in the organization.
- Indicators, measures, and targets shift conversations from opinions to evidence.
- Progress monitoring allows leaders to adjust strategies before problems become barriers.
- Clearly defined targets strengthen accountability and improve decision-making.
- Measuring progress builds confidence, motivation, and momentum throughout the organization.
- SMART goals transform strategic plans from documents into living management systems.

## **Leadership Lesson**

SMART goals do far more than measure success—they create clarity, focus, accountability, and continuous improvement. Leaders who define meaningful indicators, measures, and targets dramatically increase the likelihood that their vision becomes reality.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Consider one of your district's long-range goals.

- Is the goal truly SMART?
- What indicators tell you you are making progress?
- What measures provide evidence of success?
- What targets define what success looks like?
- What adjustments might improve your likelihood of achieving the goal?

**Leaders who define meaningful indicators, measures, and targets dramatically increase the likelihood that their vision becomes reality**

# Making a Difference

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter??

One of the most important questions leaders ask during strategic planning is surprisingly simple:

### How will we know if we're making a difference?

Many districts develop meaningful strategic priorities.

Some even create measurable long-range goals.

But too often they stop there.

Without meaningful indicators, clear measures, and ambitious targets, leaders struggle to answer one of the most important questions in education:

### Are our actions actually improving results?

The leadership challenge becomes:

### How do we create a system that tells us whether we are moving closer to the future we hope to create?

## A Leadership Approach

Great leaders understand that measurement is not about accountability alone.

It is about learning.

One effective approach is to ensure every long-range goal includes three essential elements:

- **Indicators** identify what matters most.
- **Measures** determine how progress will be monitored.
- **Targets** define the level of success the organization is striving to achieve.

Equally important, leaders balance **leading indicators**, which provide feedback during the work, with **lagging indicators**, which reveal the final results. Together, they create a more complete picture of organizational performance.

The goal is not simply to collect data.

It is to create confidence that the organization is moving in the right direction.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

When leaders know what to measure, conversations become more purposeful.

Teams stop relying on opinions alone and begin learning from evidence.

Progress becomes visible.

Successes are celebrated sooner.

Challenges are identified earlier.

Most importantly, leaders no longer wait until the end of the year to discover whether their strategies worked.

They learn while the work is happening and adjust before small challenges become major problems.

That is the power of measuring what matters.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Think about driving a car.

The rearview mirror tells you where you've been.

The windshield helps you see where you're going.

Effective leadership requires both.

Lagging indicators help leaders understand past performance.

Leading indicators help leaders influence future performance.

Organizations improve when leaders use both to guide better decisions and continuous improvement.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**If one of your leadership teams said, "We're making great progress," what evidence would they use to support that statement?**

Then ask another question:

**Are you measuring results after they happen, or are you monitoring progress while improvement is still possible?**

**Great leaders don't wait until the end to discover whether they succeeded. They build measurement systems that help them learn, adjust, and improve every step of the journey.**

# Distractions

---

## **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

Every leadership team I have worked with wanted to improve. None intended to become distracted. Yet many organizations found themselves overwhelmed—not because they lacked good ideas, but because they accumulated too many of them.

Each year, another initiative was added. Very few were ever removed.

Over time, the organization became increasingly busy, but less focused. People worked harder than ever, yet many felt they were making less progress.

The leadership challenge became:

**How do we stop trying to do everything and start doing the RIGHT things?**

## **A Leadership Approach**

Great leaders begin by listening before deciding.

Rather than assuming they knew what was creating distractions, one leadership team invited staff to identify the barriers to focusing on their most important work. They asked four simple but powerful questions:

- What most often pulls your attention away from our district's highest priorities?
- Where do you see unnecessary work, duplication, or competing initiatives?
- If we could simplify one thing, what would have the greatest impact?
- If we stopped doing one thing tomorrow, what would create the greatest capacity to do the RIGHT things even better?

The responses revealed something important.

The solution wasn't adding another initiative.

It was creating greater focus.

Leadership responded by making four commitments:

- Every new initiative would be paired with something the organization would stop doing.
- The strategic plan would focus on a limited number of improvement strategies rather than trying to address everything.
- New priorities would be clearly connected to stakeholder feedback and district needs.
- Meetings would be planned, purposeful, and regularly evaluated for their effectiveness.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

Leadership teams often discover that many distractions are self-created.

They discover meetings that no longer add value.

Processes that have outlived their purpose.

Initiatives that compete rather than complement one another.

Most importantly, they discover that focus is not achieved by working harder.

It is achieved by making better choices.

The most effective organizations are rarely those doing the most.

They are the ones that are most disciplined about doing what matters most.

### **Leadership Lesson**

One of the greatest responsibilities of leadership is not adding more work.

It is creating focus.

Every new initiative competes for people's time, energy, attention, and commitment.

Organizations rarely struggle because they lack ideas.

They struggle because they lack the discipline to choose which ideas deserve their greatest attention.

Leadership is not measured by how much we begin.

Leadership is measured by how well we choose.

### **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**What are we continuing to do simply because we've always done it?**

And perhaps an even more important question:

**What would happen if we gave ourselves permission to stop doing work that no longer advances our preferred future?**

**The greatest threat to strategic leadership is rarely resistance—it is distraction. Focus creates alignment. Alignment accelerates results. Choose to focus before you choose goals.**

# Making a Difference

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

One of the most common concerns I hear from leadership teams is this:

**"We're incredibly busy, but we're not always sure we're making the difference we hoped to make."**

Every day is filled with meetings, emails, reports, initiatives, and unexpected challenges.

People work hard.

They care deeply.

Yet many leaders wonder:

**Are we spending our time completing work—or accomplishing our mission?**

The leadership challenge becomes:

**How do we shift from measuring activity to measuring impact?**

## A Leadership Approach

Great leaders recognize that every activity should serve a purpose beyond simply getting work done.

One leadership team began by distinguishing between two very different ways of thinking.

**Activity-oriented leadership** focuses on what we do. It measures effort, celebrates implementation, and asks, *"Did we do it?"*

**Results-oriented leadership** focuses on what we accomplish. It measures impact, celebrates improvement, and asks, *"Did it make a difference?"*

To reinforce this mindset, the team added one simple question to the end of every important meeting:

**"Were we activity-oriented or results-oriented today? How do we know?"**

That single question gradually changed the nature of their conversations.

## What Leaders Often Discover

Leadership teams often discover that being busy is not the same as being effective.

Activity-oriented leaders tend to ask:

- Did we complete the action plan?
- Did everyone attend?
- Did we finish the project?

Results-oriented leaders ask different questions:

- What changed?
- How do we know?
- What evidence shows we improved?
- What should we do next?

Those questions shift attention from completing tasks to improving outcomes.

Over time, they transform the culture of the organization.

## **Leadership Lesson**

Activity creates motion.

Results create impact.

Organizations can become incredibly busy without becoming significantly better.

Strategic leaders make sure every major activity is connected to a measurable result. They don't stop asking whether the work was completed—they also ask whether it changed anything that matters.

## **Leadership Reflection**

Ask yourself:

**If someone observed your leadership team for a day, would they conclude you were managing activities or improving results?**

Then ask one more question:

**Which of your regular activities produces the greatest measurable impact on student success—and which simply consumes valuable time?**

## **Leadership Takeaway**

**Being busy is not the goal. Making a difference is. Every important activity should move the organization closer to the results it exists to achieve.**

**Vision defines where we're going.**

**Strategic priorities define what matters most.**

**Goals define what success looks like.**

**Indicators tell us if we're making progress.**

**Results prove we're making a difference.**

## Action Planning

---

### The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

One of the biggest misconceptions about school improvement is believing that identifying the problem is the hard part. In my experience, it rarely is. Most leadership teams already know their biggest challenges. The real challenge is turning that knowledge into meaningful action.

Over the years, I've watched districts invest months creating thoughtful strategic plans. The planning process was collaborative, the goals were clear, and everyone left feeling energized. But a year later, many of those same districts found themselves asking the same question:

#### "Why isn't more changing?"

As I worked with leadership teams, I noticed the same obstacles appearing again and again.

Sometimes leaders rushed to solutions before fully understanding the problem. Other times, the people expected to implement the work hadn't been involved in developing it, making ownership difficult to achieve.

Even great ideas struggled when there wasn't enough time, training, or support to implement them well.

And then there was the challenge every leader eventually faces—change. Most educators genuinely want what's best for students, but change requires people to think differently, work differently, and often step outside their comfort zones.

These experiences taught me one of the most important lessons of my career:

#### **Strategic plans don't improve schools. People do.**

The success of any improvement effort depends on developing the capacity, confidence, and commitment of the people responsible for making it happen.

### The Leadership Approach: What We Learned

As I reflected on why some districts successfully implemented their plans while others struggled, I realized the difference was rarely the quality of the strategic plan.

The difference was the quality of the implementation.

Rather than expecting one administrator to carry the work, we created **Action Teams** responsible for moving each strategic priority forward. Every team received clear expectations, practical training,

ongoing coaching, and the support they needed to succeed.

One of the most valuable tools we introduced was the **Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)** improvement cycle. It gave teams a simple, repeatable process for turning ideas into action while learning from experience along the way.

Our Action Teams learned to:

- Clearly define the problem using evidence.
- Understand the root causes before selecting solutions.
- Focus on a few high-impact actions.
- Assign clear ownership and responsibilities.
- Monitor both implementation and results.
- Adjust their approach based on what they were learning.
- Celebrate progress while maintaining momentum.
- Keep every conversation focused on improving student success.

The goal was never to complete another action plan.

The goal was to develop leaders who knew how to improve.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

As Action Teams gained confidence, leadership teams began making some powerful discoveries.

They discovered that leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about asking the right questions and empowering others to find the best solutions.

They discovered that ownership grows when people help create the work instead of simply being asked to carry it out.

They discovered that accountability feels very different when it is built on trust, clarity, and support rather than compliance.

Perhaps most importantly, they discovered that monitoring progress isn't about judging performance. It's about learning.

It's about understanding what's working, identifying what isn't, and making thoughtful adjustments before small problems become big ones.

Over time, something unexpected happened.

Action Teams stopped thinking of themselves as implementation teams.

They began seeing themselves as leadership teams.

## **Leadership Lesson**

One lesson has remained with me throughout my career.

**Strong leaders don't create followers. They develop leaders who know how to turn strategy into results.**

Action Teams are far more than another committee.

When designed well, they become one of the most powerful leadership development strategies a district can implement.

When leaders invest in people, ownership grows.

When ownership grows, implementation improves.

When implementation improves, better outcomes become possible.

In the end, the greatest competitive advantage isn't having a better strategic plan.

It's having more people who know how to bring that plan to life.

## **Leadership Reflection**

As you think about your own district, ask yourself:

- Are we solving the right problem, or simply treating the symptoms?
- Have we developed the people responsible for implementing the work?
- What evidence tells us our actions are making a meaningful difference?
- What should we continue, improve, or do differently moving forward?

Remember...

**Successful action planning isn't about completing a checklist.**

**It's about building a culture where people continuously learn, improve, and work together to create better outcomes for every student.**

# Progress Monitoring

---

## **The Leadership Challenge: What Does This Matter?**

Perhaps the single greatest opportunity for leaders to help their schools improve results is to carefully figure out how to help students, families, and staff see the value of progress monitoring

## **A Leadership Approach**

### **1. Begin with a Clear Target**

People cannot monitor progress unless they know what success looks like.

### **2. Identify a Few Meaningful Measures**

Avoid measuring everything.

### **3. Make Progress Visible**

People are more likely to improve what they can see. Visibility creates ownership.

### **4. Schedule Regular Check-Ins**

Monitoring should become part of the culture—not an event.

### **5. Celebrate Growth**

Celebrate both accomplishments and progress.

Recognition builds motivation and reinforces desired behaviors.

### **6. Adjust Rather Than Judge**

Progress monitoring is about learning—not evaluation.

When results fall short, ask:

"What are we learning?" rather than "Who is responsible?" That single shift changes the entire culture.

## What Leaders Often Discover

As leaders inspire students and staff to embrace progress monitoring, they often discover that the real transformation isn't found in the data—it's found in the conversations the data creates.

They discover that people become more motivated when they can see their own progress. Success no longer feels like a distant destination; it becomes something they experience one step at a time.

They discover that ownership grows when students and staff regularly reflect on where they are, where they want to be, and what they need to do next. Progress monitoring shifts from something done *to* people to something done *by* people.

They discover that evidence replaces opinion. Instead of relying on assumptions, teams begin making decisions based on facts, trends, and results.

They discover that setbacks become opportunities to learn rather than reasons to blame. When progress isn't where they hoped it would be, the conversation changes from "Who is at fault?" to "What are we learning, and how can we improve?"

Perhaps most importantly, they discover that progress monitoring builds hope. As students and staff see growth over time, confidence increases, momentum builds, and continuous improvement becomes part of the culture.

In the end, progress monitoring isn't about collecting more data. It's about helping every learner and every educator believe that growth is possible and that their daily efforts truly make a difference.

## Leadership Lesson

**Progress monitoring isn't about measuring performance—it's about inspiring continuous growth. Great leaders make progress visible so people believe improvement is possible. What gets monitored thoughtfully gets improved continuously.**

## Leadership Reflection

Ask yourself **"How are you inspiring students and staff to monitor their own progress and take ownership of their growth?"**

## Setting a Target

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

One of the lessons I learned early in strategic planning is that setting a target is both a science and an art. It sounds simple, but for many leadership teams, it's one of the most difficult parts of the planning process.

Why? Because a target is more than just a number. It represents a commitment. Once a target is established, everyone knows what success looks like.

As I worked with districts, I noticed four common challenges.

Some teams worried about choosing the wrong target. Others didn't have reliable baseline data to know where they were starting. Many struggled to determine what was ambitious yet realistic. And, if we're honest, some were concerned about the accountability that comes with making a target public.

There was another question that surfaced almost every time we met.

### **Who should set the target?**

That question often led to some of the best leadership conversations we had.

### **The Leadership Approach: What We Did**

Rather than answering the question for the team, we invited them into the process.

We began by asking two simple questions:

- **What should our target be?**
- **Who should help establish it?**

Then we turned to the people who would ultimately be responsible for achieving the target and asked four more questions:

- Is this a good target?
- What makes it a good target?
- What concerns do you have about it?
- What target would you recommend?

Those conversations changed everything.

Instead of assigning targets from the top down, we helped leadership teams develop them together. We provided training on the characteristics of high-quality targets, shared practical examples, and summarized the best practices into a simple resource that every student leader and staff member could use.

The goal wasn't simply to establish better targets. The goal was to help people understand them, believe in them, and take ownership of achieving them.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders involve the people closest to the work, they discover something important.

People are far more committed to achieving targets they helped create than targets that were handed to them.

Ownership grows because people understand the "why" behind the target.

Commitment increases because they see their ideas reflected in the final decision.

Accountability feels less like pressure and more like a shared commitment to success.

Perhaps most importantly, conversations begin to shift. Instead of defending results, teams begin asking, "What can we learn, and what should we do next?"

### **Leadership Lesson**

**The best targets are not assigned—they are developed collaboratively, owned collectively, and pursued with purpose.**

When leaders provide the vision and guardrails while engaging the people closest to the work, targets become more than numbers. They become commitments that inspire focus, ownership, and continuous improvement.

### **Leadership Reflection**

**Who should be involved in setting the targets that will define success in your district, and how can you give them meaningful ownership in the process?**

## Continuous Improvement

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

One lesson I've learned over the years is that mindset has a tremendous influence on results.

Students with a continuous improvement mindset are more likely to grow and achieve at higher levels. Teachers with that same mindset continually refine their practice. Leaders with a continuous improvement mindset not only improve themselves—they help others improve as well.

The reality is that every school has both mindsets. Some people naturally look for ways to learn, grow, and get better. Others are simply trying to get through the day, complete the task, and move on.

That led me to an important question:

### **How do we help people move from a compliance mindset to a continuous improvement mindset?**

I came to believe that lasting improvement isn't just about better strategies or better systems. It begins with the way people think about learning, challenges, and change.

### **The Leadership Approach: What We Did**

We didn't begin by talking about strategic plans or improvement cycles. We began with a conversation.

First, we asked everyone to describe the characteristics of a student with a continuous improvement mindset. The responses came quickly. Students who ask questions, learn from mistakes, seek feedback, persevere, and believe they can always improve.

Then we asked a second question that changed the conversation.

### **"Shouldn't the same be true for adults?"**

Suddenly, the discussion shifted. We weren't just talking about students anymore. We were talking about ourselves.

Together, we explored the differences between a continuous improvement mindset and a compliance mindset. We discussed how each one influences teaching, learning, leadership, and ultimately student success.

Those conversations helped people realize that continuous improvement isn't another initiative. It's a way of thinking that shapes every decision we make.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders encourage this way of thinking, they begin to notice some important changes.

They discover that people become more willing to ask questions than defend old practices.

They discover that feedback is viewed as an opportunity to grow rather than as criticism.

They discover that mistakes become learning opportunities instead of reasons to assign blame.

Most importantly, they discover that the greatest barrier to improvement is rarely a lack of knowledge or resources. More often, it's the belief that today's performance is good enough.

When that belief changes, improvement becomes possible.

### **Leadership Lesson**

**Continuous improvement begins the moment people believe they can always become better.**

### **Leadership Reflection**

**What are you doing to help students, staff, and leaders embrace a continuous improvement mindset rather than simply a compliance mindset?**

## Check-in Meetings

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

I've never met a superintendent who wanted more meetings.

Yet, one of the most common frustrations I hear from leadership teams is, "We spend a lot of time in meetings, but not enough seems to change."

Check-in meetings are a perfect example. They require valuable time and energy, yet many leave participants feeling that little was accomplished. The agenda is too full. The conversation drifts into updates. Decisions aren't made. Progress isn't celebrated. The meeting ends, and everyone returns to work without much clarity about what happens next.

Over time, I came to realize that the problem wasn't the meeting itself. The problem was the process.

If we wanted better results, we needed better conversations.

### **The Leadership Approach: What We Did**

Rather than creating another meeting agenda, we stepped back and evaluated our entire check-in process.

We asked a simple question:

#### **"What makes a check-in meeting valuable?"**

That question led us to examine what was getting in the way.

Did everyone understand the purpose of the meeting?

Were we reviewing the information that mattered most?

Were people prepared before they arrived?

Were we solving problems or simply giving updates?

Did every discussion end with a clear decision and a next step?

Most importantly, we kept bringing the conversation back to one question:

#### **"How is this improving outcomes for students?"**

As our process became simpler and more focused, our meetings became shorter, more productive, and far more meaningful.

## **What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders improve the quality of their check-in meetings, they begin to discover that the meeting itself isn't the goal.

The goal is learning.

They discover that meaningful conversations are more valuable than lengthy reports.

They discover that evidence leads to better decisions than opinions.

They discover that accountability grows when people leave with clear ownership and agreed-upon next steps.

Perhaps most importantly, they discover that the purpose of a check-in meeting isn't to review the past. It's to improve the future.

The best check-ins consistently answer four questions:

- What progress have we made?
- What evidence tells us that?
- What obstacles are getting in our way?
- What should we do next?

## **Leadership Lesson**

**Great check-in meetings don't measure accountability—they build accountability through learning, collaboration, and action.**

## **Leadership Reflection**

**If someone observed your next check-in meeting, would they see a team reporting information, or a team learning, solving problems, and improving together?**

# Accomplishments

---

## **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

It sounds simple but most stakeholders when asked, “What has the school district accomplished this year?” is not sure how to respond. In an era when public education in general is under scrutiny and many families are choosing other alternatives, this is an issue. On the other hand if we asked what the district goals were, most could not respond. Is it a communication problem? Is it a leadership problem? Who is best to tackle this challenge/

## **A Leadership Approach**

The obvious thing to begin with was to first spend time defining the problem and understanding its impacts.

## **People Don't Celebrate What They Don't Know**

If stakeholders can't describe recent accomplishments, they can't celebrate them, build pride around them, or become ambassadors for the district.

## **Success Became Invisible**

Districts often accomplish remarkable things, but without intentional communication, those successes remain known only to the people directly involved.

## **Trust Was Declining**

Communities gain confidence when they understand how the district is improving. When accomplishments aren't communicated, people may assume little progress is being made—even when the opposite is true.

## **The Strategic Plan Felt Distant**

When stakeholders can't connect accomplishments to the district's vision and strategic priorities, the strategic plan becomes a document rather than a living guide for improvement.

## **Staff Motivation Was Declining**

Educators want to know their hard work is making a difference. Recognizing accomplishments reinforces purpose, builds morale, and encourages continued improvement.

## **The Community Creates Its Own Story**

If the district doesn't consistently tell its story, others will. Those stories may focus on isolated problems rather than the broader progress being made.

## **Continuous Improvement Slows**

Celebrating accomplishments isn't just about recognition. It helps people understand **what is working** so those practices can be expanded and strengthened.

You can't solve problems without understanding them clearly

Once understood a task force group began to explore how to tackle the problem. The three solutions were:

### **1. Create a Clear Reporting Process**

Don't assume people know what's happening.

Develop a consistent process for identifying, collecting, and sharing accomplishments throughout the year. Define what constitutes an accomplishment, who reports it, and when it will be communicated.

#### **Key Question:**

*How will we consistently identify and report our accomplishments?*

### **2. Tell the Story of the Impact**

Don't just report activities.

Help stakeholders understand the difference between:

- What we did (accomplishment)
- The difference it made (impact)
- What we learned
- What comes next

People remember stories of impact far more than lists of activities.

#### **Key Question:**

*How did this accomplishment improve learning, teaching, or our organization?*

### **3. Engage Everyone in Celebrating Success**

Reporting results shouldn't belong only to the superintendent.

Invite students, teachers, principals, support staff, board members, and families to share success stories and recognize accomplishments.

When everyone helps tell the story, ownership, pride, and trust all increase.

**Key Question:**

*Who else should be helping tell our district's success story?*

**What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders become more intentional about reporting accomplishments; they begin to discover that communicating success is much more than a public relations effort. It is a leadership responsibility.

They discover that people support what they understand. When stakeholders know what the district has accomplished and why it matters, trust and confidence begin to grow.

They discover that celebrating accomplishments builds pride throughout the organization. Students, staff, families, and board members all want to be part of a district that is making a difference.

They discover that reporting accomplishments creates stronger alignment. People begin to connect daily work to the district's vision, strategic priorities, and long-range goals.

Perhaps most importantly, they discover that accomplishments inspire future success. When people see evidence that their efforts are making a difference, they become even more committed to the work ahead.

In the end, leaders realize that if stakeholders can't tell the district's success story, an important opportunity has been lost. But when everyone can clearly articulate the district's accomplishments, those accomplishments become a source of trust, momentum, and hope for the future.

**Leadership Lesson**

**Great leaders don't just achieve results—they help others understand, celebrate, and build upon them.**

Leadership isn't complete when the work is done; it's complete when people understand the impact of the work.

**If stakeholders can't tell your success story, your accomplishments aren't having the impact they could.**

**Reporting our results transforms accomplishments into trust, pride, and momentum for the future.**

## **Leadership Reflection**

If you asked ten students, ten staff members, ten parents, and ten board members to describe your district's greatest accomplishments this year, how similar would their answers be?

## Annual vs. Periodic Reporting

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

One thing I've always found interesting about school leadership is that improvement happens every day, but reporting often happens only once a year.

Schools operate on a 180-day calendar, yet district leaders work long after students and most staff have left for the summer. As one school year ends and another begins, there's a valuable opportunity to reflect on what we've accomplished and what we've learned.

Unfortunately, that's often the very time when the people who helped create those accomplishments aren't together.

Even during the school year, I found that many students, staff, families, and board members weren't fully aware of the progress the district was making. Great work was happening, but too much of it went unnoticed because it wasn't being shared consistently.

I came to realize that waiting until the end of the year to report our accomplishments wasn't enough. If we wanted people to stay connected to the district's vision, they needed to hear the success story all year long.

### **The Leadership Approach: What We Did**

We decided to make reporting accomplishments an ongoing leadership practice rather than an annual event.

First, we created a simple process for identifying accomplishments throughout the year. Every leadership team, school, and department was asked to regularly answer three questions:

- What did we accomplish?
- What evidence demonstrates our success?
- Why does this accomplishment matter?

Second, we changed the way we reported results. Instead of simply listing activities, we told the story behind the work. We explained the challenge we were trying to solve, what we accomplished, the impact it had, what we learned, and what we planned to do next.

Finally, we worked to make celebrating success part of our culture. We encouraged principals, teachers, students, board members, and leadership teams to recognize accomplishments throughout the year—in meetings, newsletters, board reports, social media, and community events.

Over time, reporting our accomplishments became less about producing a report and more about creating a shared understanding of our progress.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders become more intentional about sharing accomplishments, they begin to discover that reporting results is much more than a communication strategy.

They discover that people support what they understand.

They discover that celebrating accomplishments builds pride, strengthens trust, and reinforces the district's vision.

They discover that sharing success helps others learn from effective practices and inspires confidence for the work ahead.

Perhaps most importantly, they discover that celebration isn't the end of improvement. It's what gives people the energy and confidence to keep improving.

### **Leadership Lesson**

**What gets celebrated gets repeated, and what gets shared builds trust.**

### **Leadership Reflection**

**How are you keeping your district's success story alive throughout the year rather than waiting until the end of the school year to tell it?**

# Impacts

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

As I worked with school districts, I noticed something interesting. Most districts did a good job reporting their accomplishments, but very few reported their impacts.

They could describe what they had done, but they struggled to explain the difference those efforts had actually made.

That became a concern for me because accomplishments and impacts are not the same thing.

An accomplishment tells us **what** we did.

An impact tells us **why** it mattered.

Without evidence of impact, stakeholders are often left wondering whether all of the time, energy, and resources invested are truly improving outcomes for students.

I also realized that many reporting processes were missing four essential elements: accomplishments, impacts, evidence, and next steps.

When those pieces are missing, reporting becomes little more than a list of activities. When they are present, reporting becomes a powerful tool for learning, celebrating progress, and driving continuous improvement.

## The Leadership Approach: What We Did

To strengthen our reporting process, I worked with a team of Goal Champions to help them think differently about impacts.

We focused on three simple ideas.

First, we made sure everyone understood the difference between an accomplishment and an impact. That simple conversation changed the way people thought about reporting results.

Second, we stopped waiting until the end of the year to gather evidence. Instead, leadership teams, schools, and departments regularly documented what had changed, who benefited, and what evidence demonstrated that change.

Finally, we learned to tell the story behind the data. Rather than simply reporting activities, every report answered three questions:

- What did we accomplish?
- What impact did it have?
- Why does it matter?

When we combined evidence with meaningful stories, people began to understand not only what had happened but why it was important.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

As leaders become more intentional about reporting impacts, they begin to discover that people don't connect with activities—they connect with evidence that lives are being changed.

They discover that accomplishments explain the work, but impacts explain the value of the work.

They discover that evidence builds credibility, while stories help people remember the difference those accomplishments are making.

Most importantly, they discover that reporting impacts builds trust. When students, staff, families, board members, and community members can clearly see the difference the district is making, confidence grows and support for continued improvement becomes stronger.

In the end, leaders realize that every stakeholder is asking the same question:

**"Is the work we're doing making a meaningful difference for students?"**

Reporting impacts is how leaders answer that question.

### **Leadership Lesson**

**Great leaders don't just report what was done—they demonstrate the difference it made.**

**Impacts transform accomplishments into evidence that inspires trust, learning, and continuous improvement.**

**When leaders report impacts, they help people understand not just what changed, but why it mattered.**

**The true measure of leadership is not what we accomplish, but the difference our accomplishments make.**

### **Leadership Reflection**

**How well is your district demonstrating not just what it has accomplished, but the difference those accomplishments are making for students, staff, and the community?**

## Next Steps

---

### **The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?**

When reporting is done throughout the year, everything is ready at the end of the year for reflection and transitioning to the next year. When it is not done throughout the year it is either not reflected on or used to transition to next year, so it takes a great deal of time and effort for than to occur. This challenge is many school districts to a poor job of using the reporting data from yearly check-ins and annual reports to ask what is next/

### **A Leadership Approach**

#### **1. Reflect on the Evidence**

Great next steps begin with honest reflection.

Ask:

- What worked well?
- What didn't work as expected?
- What surprised us?
- What did we learn?

Reflection turns information into insight.

#### **2. Compare Results to Your Targets**

Targets provide the context for deciding what comes next.

Ask:

- Did we meet our target?
- If yes, how do we sustain or build upon our success?
- If no, what needs to change?

#### **3. Listen to Stakeholders**

Students, staff, families, and community members often see opportunities that leaders overlook.

Their perspectives help identify priorities for improvement.

#### **4. Focus on Root Causes**

Avoid simply reacting to results.

Instead ask:

"Why did this happen?"

Understanding the cause leads to better decisions.

#### **5. Prioritize the Most Important Improvements**

Not every opportunity deserves immediate attention.

The best districts identify the few improvements that will have the greatest impact on student success.

#### **6. Build the Next Action Plan**

Reflection without action changes nothing.

Every report should end with clear next steps:

- What will we continue?
- What will we improve?
- What will we stop doing?
- What new actions will we take?

#### **7. Commit to Continuous Improvement**

The strongest districts understand that every accomplishment becomes the starting point for the next cycle of improvement.

They don't ask,

"Are we finished?"

They ask,

"How can we become even better?"

#### **What Leaders Often Discover**

Leaders discover that next steps are not an admission that something failed—they are evidence that the organization is learning.

Every accomplishment, every impact, and every challenge provides information that helps the district make better decisions moving forward.

The best leaders create a culture where people expect every report to end with one final question:

"Based on what we've learned, what should we do next?"

Accomplishments tell us what we did.

Impacts tell us why it mattered.

Implications tell us what we should do next

### **Leadership Lesson**

Continuous improvement begins when every accomplishment leads to the next opportunity for growth.

Accomplishments, impacts, and next steps give leaders a natural way to structure board reports, leadership meetings, annual reports, and strategic planning discussions, while reinforcing that reporting is not the end of the work—it is the beginning of the next cycle of improvement.

### **Leadership Reflection**

Continuous improvement begins when every accomplishment leads to the next opportunity for growth.

# The Power of Visuals

---

## The Leadership Challenge: Why Does This Matter?

One of the lessons I learned is that reporting results isn't just about providing information—it's about creating understanding.

Too often, districts produce reports filled with pages of narrative, spreadsheets, and tables of numbers. While the information is accurate, it can be difficult for busy board members, staff, families, and community members to quickly understand the story.

If people have to work hard to understand the results, many simply won't.

I came to realize that one picture, one graph, or one simple visual framework often communicates more effectively than several pages of text.

The challenge wasn't having enough information.

The challenge was making the information easy to understand.

## A Leadership Approach

We began asking one simple question whenever we prepared a report:

### "How can we help people see the story?"

Instead of relying primarily on text, we used visuals whenever possible.

- Scorecards to summarize progress.
- Dashboards to monitor key indicators.
- Charts to display trends over time.
- Infographics to explain accomplishments and impacts.
- Color coding to quickly identify strengths and opportunities.
- Before-and-after comparisons to demonstrate growth.
- Simple frameworks to organize complex ideas.

Our goal wasn't to impress people with graphics.

Our goal was to improve understanding.

When stakeholders could see the results, conversations became richer and decisions became better.

### **What Leaders Often Discover**

Leaders discover that visuals do more than make reports attractive.

They make information understandable.

They help people recognize patterns, celebrate progress, and identify opportunities more quickly.

They discover that visuals create a shared understanding among students, staff, board members, and the community because everyone is looking at the same evidence.

Perhaps most importantly, they discover that people remember pictures long after they forget numbers.

Great visuals don't replace data.

They bring data to life.

### **Leadership Lesson**

Great leaders don't just present information—they make it easy for others to understand, remember, and act upon.

### **Leadership Reflection**

If someone looked at your district's report for just five minutes, would they clearly understand your accomplishments, impacts, and next steps?

**Simple visuals create significant understanding.**

**If people can see the story, they are more likely to understand it, remember it, and act on it.**