



An Overview of the Levers and Conditions for Transformation

System-level leaders must take ownership for addressing the root causes of its system's challenges and creating conditions in which schools can achieve remarkable, scalable, and lasting improvements. This is done best when pursued in partnership with school leaders and stakeholders to ensure systems change is informed by and in service to the improving the on-ground reality at individual schools while ultimately identifying opportunities to design and scale services and system conditions that better meet the needs of diverse schools and students. Dramatic, lasting systems improvement is possible. This is documented in recent rigorous research from two urban districts in Ohio¹ and eleven districts across New Mexico that partnered with UVA-PLE (to be published in upcoming study).

To achieve dramatic, lasting improvement districts must redesign how they support schools and commit to the collaboration with schools necessary to solve the most critical challenges. As the entity charged with establishing policy, allocating resources, coaching leaders and holding various stakeholders accountable, the district must establish an environment that enables leadership teams to drive results. By being willing to change their own practices and create an environment of urgency and hope, districts set the stage for improvement. District and school leaders must change how they typically work together to one where they become true partners in co-creating success.

This overview outlines the organizational conditions most critical for transformation success based on a review of the literature and more than 17 years of practice with over 80 districts from over 20 states. UVA-PLE identified four key levers at the district that drive successful and sustainable school transformation. The levers are: System Leadership, Support and Accountability, Talent Management, and Instructional Infrastructure. The following examines each of the four levers in more detail through providing the 13 Conditions comprising the levers, the definitions for Conditions, as well as implications for district leadership practice. The brief also provides examples of deepened work for each condition as well as a field-based vignette for each of the four levers.

While this overview highlights the conditions that research and experience suggests matter most, it is also a core UVA-PLE belief that a tailored approach to change is a critical component of empowering local leaders to identify and confront priorities based on their context and ultimately own the path forward. Any successful transformation effort ultimately has focus (versus simultaneously tackling all conditions robustly) driven by its community's needs, context, and stakeholders.



Lever 1: System Leadership

Will and Capacity to Do What's Necessary

Condition 1: Systems for Bold Change and Transformation

System leaders advance a coherent vision by prioritizing transformation efforts that address disparities, acts upon barriers, and builds coalition for change from multiple constituencies.²

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Systems for Bold Change and Transformation

System leaders advance a coherent vision by prioritizing transformation efforts that advance more equitable and excellent outcomes and act upon barriers by building support from multiple constituencies.

Deepened Work in Systems for Bold Change and Transformation

- ✓ *Change district norms, publicly support necessity of different student outcomes, and confront inequities or biases to establish a cross-stakeholder shared transformation vision.*
- ✓ *Make decisions aligned to their purpose and student needs.*
- ✓ *Commit to advancing focus and implementation capacity towards achieving system goals.*

Condition 2: Integrated Strategies to Enable Learning Focus for Every Student

System leaders co-create creating with schools ways to identify and secure, coordinate and deliver supports to enhance conditions for students to learn, including an enriching, culturally, and linguistically responsive school environment that fosters student belonging, and facilitate fair and differentiated distribution of resources based on schools' and underserved students' needs.³

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Integrated Strategies to Enable Learning Focus

In identifying needs to inform differentiation of resources, system leaders also provide feedback loops for school leaders on how to advance healthy and safe learning environments for students to thrive. Systems leaders integrate central office support services that respond to each transformation school's context and support each school with creating positive cultures grounded in students' experiences.

Deepened Work in Integrated Strategies to Enable Learning Focus for Every Student

- ✓ *Align resources with the needs of high-priority schools and community nuance.*
- ✓ *Secure additional resources and leverage strategic partners to advance support to underserved students.*
- ✓ *Provide feedback loops to school leaders on advancing positive, healthy, and safe learning environments.*

Insight from the Field: System Leadership

Example of Systems Leadership with Strong Purpose and Strategy

“This would not be happening if this was my child. This would not be happening if this were your child.” These are the words one impassioned district leader used to crystallize the moral imperative for educators charged with improving her district’s lowest performing schools. Through both a focus on the heart and rational planning for new systems, routines and structures to address inequities, this district’s leaders took on the moral imperative and led organizational improvement for students and communities who needed it most.

The district recognized the power of establishing a collective purpose that would propel those with impact and influence to commit to confronting barriers and systems that further entrenched their undesirable outcomes. The district leaders were strategic in orchestrating a series of schools visits to demonstrate and allow key stakeholders (other district leaders, school board members, and community members) to experience first-hand the disparity. During these visits, it became impossible not to compare the physical condition of the schools, the effectiveness of the teaching, and the engagement of students between the schools serving primarily minoritized students without financial privilege and the rest of the district. Experiences like these grabbed stakeholder attention and re-directed their intentions and understanding toward the purpose of improving outcomes for their most underserved students.

As key stakeholders began to embrace the district’s purpose of shedding inequitable outcomes, the work of strategic planning for how to change became the focus. One of the first procedural changes made had to do with disrupting ineffective and inequitable policies in talent management. Prior to the district developing a shared sense of purpose and commitment to serving its under-performing schools, ineffective teachers and other personnel were moved to the low performing schools. This approach was confronted and discontinued; instead the practice became infusing these underserved schools with capable talent and providing much needed professional learning for teachers who needed support in meeting high expectations. The district also became systematic about providing individualized supports for the holistic needs of a child.

Another change included developing ways for the district to authentically support schools by creating an extra position, the district “shepherd,” that served as a conduit and advocate between school leaders and district leaders in terms of resource allocation while also building school leaders’ capacity and better relationships with district and school. Collectively, these efforts ignited efforts in this district that led to ten historically underserved schools increasing attendance and student performance while two of those schools were for first time in top quartile in state growth multiple years and the two high schools experienced over 20-point gains in cohort graduation rates.





Lever 2: Support and Accountability

A Balanced Approach to School Leadership Growth

Condition 3: Structures for Support and Accountability

The district establishes a support and accountability framework to advance the work of principals and school leadership teams by adapting principal supervisor and other roles to enhance district/school partnership, responding rapidly to school leaders' needs, and intentionally designing opportunities to coordinate, differentiate, build capacity, and advance accountability.⁴

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Structures for Support and Accountability

District leaders adapt their own support structures and strategies to meet school needs; create and execute a strategy for effective site visits; rapidly respond to school leaders' needs; form a strong core change team committed to advancing systems and school transformation.

Deepened Work in Structures for Support and Accountability

- ✓ *Nurture a strong partnership with principals to solve leadership problems, build capacity, and remove barriers.*
- ✓ *Ensure opportunities to debrief school progress with cabinet*
- ✓ *Hold school leaders and themselves accountable for attaining goals rapidly*

Condition 4: Supervision and Development that Strengthens School Leaders

District leaders establish an intensive yet adaptive supervision and professional learning approach that tailors to individual school leader needs, reflects overall needs of priority school leaders, and grows leadership competencies and practice via creating a culture of high expectations, providing high quality, collaborative, and tailored leadership development, and broadening the leadership base.⁵

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Supervision and Development that Strengthens School Leaders

High quality, strategic, differentiated, and individualized learning for all high-priority school principals that creates a culture of learning and high expectations. This happens by providing constructive site visit feedback grounded in observing the leaders work in action and solving challenges and providing needs-driven, interactive, collaborative leadership development.

Deepened Work in Supervision and Development that Strengthens School Leaders

- ✓ *Leverages data about growth needs and interests to inform development program*
- ✓ *Address emergent needs via differentiated, responsive support that builds capacity.*
- ✓ *Be present in priority schools at least bi-weekly to impact practice and grow leaders through well-designed, peer-to-peer learning.*

Condition 5: Tight/Loose Defined Principal Autonomy

District leaders define autonomy for priority school principals that empowers principals to drive transformation in their particular schools and balance the bounds of the district's structures and expectations.⁶

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Tight/Loose Defined Principal Autonomy

District leaders extend defined autonomy to principals in hiring, schedules, programs, and resource utilization. District leaders ensure burdensome requirements or meetings do not distract principals. Priority school principals are held accountable for meeting instructional and foundational tight expectations and have a voice in how those evolve.

Deepened Work in Tight/Loose Defined Principal Autonomy

- ✓ *Dedicate resources to empower priority school principals to strategically design their schools' approaches to achieve initiative expectations*
- ✓ *Couple autonomy with high expectations in priority schools and aligned resources to ensure district leaders support achievement of those expectations*

Condition 6: Action Planning Strategy

District leaders provide ongoing support in the development and execution of short-cycle plans that leverage data to identify the most significant organizational challenges, articulates a clear, urgent path forward, actively monitors progress, and continuously adjusts to reflect learning.⁷

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Action Planning Strategy

When done well, district leaders engage in meaningful coaching of principals tied to big rocks and problems of practice both district and school leaders see as critical. District leaders conduct regularly observation for practices highlighted in the plan and then align their supports with plan advancement.

Deepened Work in Action Planning Strategy

District leaders identify short-cycle action planning as an ongoing improvement opportunity by:

- ✓ *Identifying significant challenges and then planning strategic responses to advance the progress on the challenge*
- ✓ *Ensuring school leadership teams have structured time throughout the academic year to advance their analysis, learning, and action tied to the plans*
- ✓ *Advancing their own short-cycle processes as a way to lead by example*



Insight from the Field: Support and Accountability

Two Different Examples of Creating Robust Systems

At the start of their partnership, an expansive rural district did not have a coherent approach to support school leadership growth and helps leaders solve challenges. Through establishment over a few years of a 90 day school planning process, year-end growth goals, and a common walk-through tool that clarifies district aspirations for rigor and cultural relevance, principal supervisors and other support staff are able to structure their school interactions to help advance what school leaders have identified as their most pressing challenges. The visits are always connected to classrooms, as during each visit the principal supervisor accompanies the principal on observations, observes the principal conducting a post-observation meeting with a teacher, and then engages in reflective conversation with the principal to provide advice, consultation, and coaching. These leaders connect learning from this to their next moves to advance the 90 day plan and what they need from the district. As a result of these efforts together, they have clarity on how they hope district interactions help grow school leaders and this contributed to the district having four straight years as a top growth district in their state.

On the accountability side, a different major urban district focused leaders on better leveraging data to inform practice. Teachers and administrators across all schools were trained and expected to review progress on short-term cycle assessments and in student work to inform instructional shifts. Through regular observations and planning meetings, transformation teams assessed progress and ensured adaptations both were responsive to student needs and within research-based literacy and math frameworks. Success required a shift in how the district allocated resources to support and monitor how leaders were supporting and holding their personnel accountable for changing their instructional practices. Principals noted that the culture of accountability increased staff sense of urgency, created high expectations that unleashed new teacher ideas while also weeding out low performers, generated opportunities for schools to learn from one another and led to meaningful progress in student achievement. This district experienced lasting gains in achievement across all the schools served including some schools that received national recognition for growth.





Lever 3: Effective Talent Management **School Leader and Teacher Recruitment and Retention** **Alongside Teacher Development**

Condition 7: Systems to Attract, Hire, Place, and Onboard School Leaders

District leaders implement intentional, rigorous, and prioritized key practices for hiring, placing, and onboarding school leaders in high-priority schools.⁸

Implications for District Leaders' Practice of Systems to Attract, Hire, Place, and Onboard School Leaders

When done well, district leaders attract highly capable leaders by heightening attractiveness of role; advertising to a broad, diverse pool, and funneling applicants to high-priority schools. District leaders include behavioral and other data in comprehensive hiring, placement, and onboarding processes. District leaders design individualized support and professional development plans for new principals.

Deepened Work in Systems to Attract, Hire, Place, and Onboard School Leaders

- ✓ *Intentionally leverage multiple points of data (competencies, past results, instructional leadership) when making hiring decisions for high-priority schools*
- ✓ *Facilitate development of robust, diverse school leadership teams with complementary skillsets, leveraging incentives to attract and retain top talent in high-priority schools*

Condition 8: Systems to Attract, Hire, and Retain Teachers and Staff

District leaders advance conditions to increase the number and impact of effective teachers and instructional staff in high-priority schools through recruitment, placement, and retention.⁹

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Systems to Attract, Hire, and Retain Teachers and Staff

District and school leaders work collaboratively for savvy recruitment, including incentives and/or branding strategies; recruitment of teachers reflective of the school community and that meet highest academic needs of student; preferential placing of effective teachers in high-priority schools.

Deepened Work in Systems to Attract, Hire, and Retain Teachers and Staff

- ✓ *Prioritize high-priority schools, cut bureaucratic delays, and provide high-quality teacher candidates with incentives or meaningful responsibilities to induce commitment*
- ✓ *Human resources maintains strategic and consistent focus on improving applicant pools*

Condition 9: Strategy to Develop Transformative Teachers

District leaders develop teachers in high-priority schools and then hold them accountable for instructional performance using key practices.¹⁰

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Strategy to Develop Transformative Teachers

District leaders align professional development to teacher and school needs in high-priority schools and ensure school leadership teams provide teachers with focused, formative feedback. This condition done well often ensuring strong induction for new instructional staff and implementation of a data-informed system for identifying, supporting, and removing underperforming teachers.

Deepened Work in Strategy to Develop Transformative Teachers

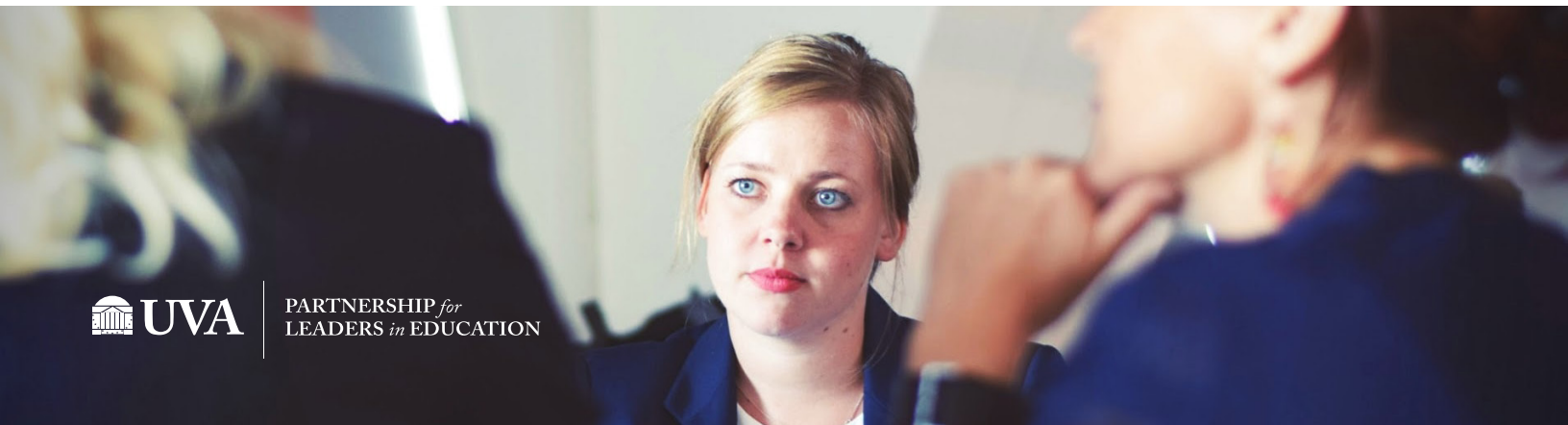
- ✓ Ensure execution of a robust talent management structure that promotes effectiveness of teachers in high-priority schools
- ✓ Monitor performance to identify, tailor support to, reward, and if necessary, dismiss
- ✓ Create data-informed, individualized coaching plans for all instructional staff

Insight from the Field: Talent Management

Enhancing Teacher and Principal Placement and Development

A mid-size school district that previously had half of the state's lowest performing schools and now has zero while seeing literacy and graduation rates rise for most of a decade focused on rethinking talent decisions. It formed relationships with external teacher preparation programs and networks for preservice teachers to be placed in its schools. This district's human resources department prioritizes these relationships through regular in-person visits to their points of contact and efforts to prioritize recruitment of most promising teachers to schools with greatest needs. Once a preservice teacher is assigned, human resources and the school principal ensure that the mentor teacher will provide a meaningful learning experience for the preservice teacher. Attention to details like a high quality assignment creates a solid reputation for the district that encourages both teacher prep programs and preservice teachers to continue to work with them. Additionally, preservice placement allows the district to have an extended timeframe in which it can gain a solid understanding of the future teacher. It also allows the district to shape new teachers' mindsets and approaches to teaching and learning through pairing them with a strong mentor teacher. The district finds that the quality of the initial mentoring and overall training entices teachers to remain.

This same district observed great growth in the effectiveness of school leaders by a behavioral event interview as central to hiring all school leaders and many non-educator positions which helps them understand their willingness and ability to drive change. According to former superintendent, "The behavioral event interview is simply an extension of resource allocation and meaningful and intelligent use of available resources." This enables leadership to hire people with the mindset and competencies the district (or a specific school) needs, to shape their leadership coaching to align with leaders' competency-based growth goals, and is less costly than having to remediate an unsuccessful hire.





Lever 4: Instructional Infrastructure

District's Role in Curriculum, Assessment, and Instructional Support

Condition 10: Assessment Strategy

District leaders ensure a rigorous assessment strategy, including components to understand learning against standards throughout the year and then leverage multiple points of data to shape instruction.¹¹

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Assessment Strategy

District leaders facilitate the enactment of a quality assessment strategy by providing interim assessments and question banks aligned to curriculum scope and sequence, ensuring each school establishes a data-informed process to support teacher instructional action planning, and supplying appropriate staffing and support resources to use analysis to improve instruction.

Deepened Work in Assessment Strategy

- ✓ Provide rigorous, cumulative interim assessments aligned to pacing and standards
- ✓ Identify resources to administer assessments and assist implementation for schools so they may provide short-cycle assessments and classroom checks-for-understanding to teachers
- ✓ Provide user-friendly assessment reports and support for analyzing and using

Condition 11: Curriculum Strategy

District leaders provide a coherent, detailed, and high-quality K-12 scope and sequence of learning objectives and resources aligned to standards that are rigorous and developmentally appropriate. District leaders facilitate teachers' understanding of each standard, guide their planning, and promote aligned instruction.¹²

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Curriculum Strategy

District leaders monitor and ensure use among all stakeholders; regularly assess the quality of district curriculum documents; and leverage district staff and high-performing teachers, to address opportunities to improve the curriculum; generate supportive resources that are culturally responsive; and hold schools accountable for effective curriculum design principles.

Deepened Work in Curriculum Strategy

- ✓ Have a clear, coherent, and high-quality K-12 curriculum with maps and pacing guides
- ✓ Include advanced components such as enrichment and re-teaching resources, instructional strategies for differentiation, and resources that support culturally responsive pedagogy
- ✓ Teachers supported to use the district curriculum to design and deliver rich instruction

Condition 12: Data-Informed Collaboration and Planning Strategy

District leaders ensure high-quality, data-driven collaboration, coaching, and culture intended to meet student learning needs by establishing structures, expectations, and supports for teachers that together improve teacher planning, data analysis, practice, and student outcomes.¹³

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Data-Informed Collaboration and Planning Strategy

Strong practices that advance this condition include removing barriers to ensure over an hour of weekly collaboration time, providing structure for analysis and action planning following interim assessments, ensuring strategies to build capacity in leading effective collaboration and utilize observations by district and school leaders of teacher collaboration to enhance the impact of collaboration time.

Deepened Work in Data-Informed Collaboration and Planning Strategy

- ✓ District and school leadership ensure teacher collaboration promotes productive critical analysis of and inquiry potential barriers to improving outcomes for each and every student
- ✓ Ensure both collaboration and coaching balance the identification of student learning and teacher practice gaps with opportunities for growth connected to tier one instruction

Condition 13: Instructional Monitoring and Support Strategy

District leaders establish data-driven monitoring systems to promote the hallmarks of high-quality instruction and support continuous development of instructional leadership.¹⁴

Implications for District Leaders' Practice in Instructional Monitoring and Support Strategy

The district implements a data-driven approach to monitoring instruction and building instructional leadership. This includes district leaders building: a cohesive district-wide data-system including from strategic observation of instruction; and, professional development plans that are aligned, evidence-based, and focused on building teacher capacity.

Deepened Work in Instructional Monitoring and Support Strategy

- ✓ The district works toward a clear, coherent approach to instructional monitoring and support to ensure that practices and systems lead to increases in performance
- ✓ District and school instructional resources work synchronously to build teachers' pedagogical capacities to provide high-quality instruction every day in every class



Insight from the Field: Instructional Infrastructure

Leading an Assessment Program Connected to Advancing Instructional Shifts

A district that had many schools become Title I distinguished schools ensures that the school leadership team facilitates teachers' deep understanding of the standards — i.e., what students are expected to know and be able to do, by subject and grade level. After ensuring only the usage of 'tier one curriculum' as rated by outside organizations, the district then began reimagining the content and usage of both assessments and curriculum support resources to provide the opportunity for teachers to better understand and address student needs. As these resources improved significantly, school leadership team members were supported to facilitate teacher collaboration in developing and reviewing lesson and unit plans that align each teacher's classroom instruction with the district's pacing guides and resources to ensure rigor to standard and cultural relevance. Principals in this district also facilitate teacher design and usage of CFAs. To address any alignment challenges, principals facilitate conversations with their teachers about ensuring that the level of rigor on the CFAs reflects that of the interim assessment. Principals also enlist the help of district coaches and coordinators to determine the types of support teachers need — to rethink not only their CFA approach but also their concept of mastery. Principals engage the district to help their teachers build skills for data analysis and for identifying and using instructional strategies aimed at supporting student needs that assessments. The result has also helped inform district-wide professional development and pipeline development efforts to create a district-wide culture that embraces these common tight practices while empowering leaders to innovate in how they design professional development and teacher coaching to meet these goals.

Notes

¹Comparing the performance index with raw proficiency rates between UVA-PLE partner schools and similar schools not in the program revealed that schools in the UVA-PLE showed statistically significant improvement (gains around .45 standard deviations on the state performance index) in the first year while the non-participating schools actually declined. These gains grew more pronounced in year two, with several schools achieving 30-point gains or more. Similar results with over .35 standard deviation were shown in another study of several districts in Missouri.

²Bryk et al. (2010), Greany (2018), Harris (2010), Honig et al. (2010), Leithwood, K. (2012), Player & Katz (2016)

³Fullan & Quinn (2016), Leithwood (2010), Sugai & Horner (2009), Trujillo (2013), Watterston & Caldwell (2011)

⁴Daly & Finnigan (2011), Honig et al. (2017), Honig et al. (2010), Hopkins et al. (2013), Johnson & Chrispeels (2010), Park & Datnow (2009)

⁵Allen et al. (2016), Casserly et al. (2013), Goldring et al. (2018), Handford & Leithwood (2019), Hatch et al. (2016) Meyers & Hitt (2018), Hitt et al. (2018), Sheppard & Dibbon (2011), Thessin (2019)

⁶Dou et al. (2016), Honig (2009), Leithwood et al. (2010), Pauffer (2018), West et al. (2014)

⁷Fernandez (2011), Huber & Conway (2015), Meyers & Hitt (2018), Meyers & VanGronigen (2019), Spillane et al. (2018), Strunk et al. (2016)

⁸Caraway et al. (2015), Clifford (2010), Grissom et al. (2013), Hitt et al. (2018), Hitt et al. (2019), Iatarola & Fructe (2004), Myung et al. (2011), Turnbull et al. (2015)

⁹Bruno & Strunk (2019), Boyd et al. (2011), Cannata et al. (2017), Cohen-Vogel et al. (2019), Guarino et al. (2006)

¹⁰Elfers & Stritikus (2013), Firestone et al. (2005), Fullan & Hargreaves (2014), Kraft & Gilmour (2016); Kraft & Papay (2014)

¹¹Bulkley et al. (2010), Carlson et al. (2011), Day et al. (2016), Johnson et al. (2019), Konstantopolous et al. (2013)

¹²Bryk et al. (2010), Durand et al. (2016), Francera & Bliss (2011), Penuel et al. (2007), Squires (2009)

¹³Hallam et al. (2015), Huguet et al. (2017), Levin & Datnow (2012), Moolenaar (2012), Spillane et al. (2018), Vescio et al. (2008), Volkeil & Chrispeels (2017), Wayman et al. (2012).

¹⁴Day et al. (2016), Datnow & Park (2018), Durand et al. (2016), Huguet et al. (2014) Neumerski et al. (2018), Wayman et al. (2012)