

A woman with short, curly brown hair and blue-rimmed glasses is speaking at a conference. She is wearing a black blazer and has her mouth open as if in the middle of a sentence. Her right hand is raised in a gesture. In the background, other people are seated at tables, and the setting appears to be a professional event.

UVA Partnership for Leaders in Education

Exploring New Frontiers for K-12 Systems Transformation

www.darden.virginia.edu/uva-ple



UVA

**PARTNERSHIP *for*
LEADERS *in* EDUCATION**

Introduction



For too long, change in public education has been pursued at the edges without disrupting the system conditions in which schools operate.”

Authors: William Robinson,
Amy Dujon, Margaret Graney

Project Leads: Laura Mitchell,
Ann Clark, Michael Moore

Contributors: LeAnn Buntrock,
Scott Guggenheimer, Biaze
Houston, Leighann Lenti

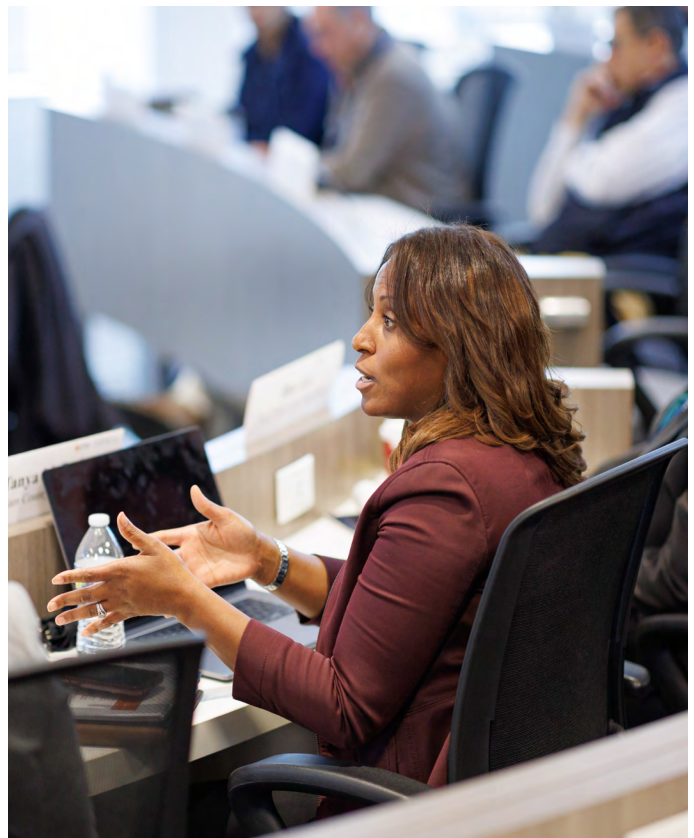
Photography: Avi Gerver

© 2023 UVA-PLE. All Rights Reserved.

This is an era for transformational change in K-12 education. The often heroic problem-solving and ingenuity required to respond to a shifting reality in recent years demonstrated that where there is strong, adaptable, and shared leadership, our school systems are more than capable of significantly changing the way they work. We must invest more in cultivating and insisting upon systems leadership that pursues courageous, inspiring goals while committing to the type of shared ownership necessary to truly solve the most pressing issues of our time.

This high-stakes moment requires a systemic leadership approach. For too long, change in public education has been pursued at the edges without disrupting the system conditions in which schools operate. Education leaders across the country have been explicit about the fact that they do not want a return to pre-pandemic practice. However, strong organizational inertia and incentives to maintain the status quo are prevalent. It will be imperative for educational leaders to pause and take stock. Leaders must make this moment count. **To that end, the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA-PLE) set out to learn from leaders across the country who were willing to challenge existing paradigms and tackle vexing challenges.** Though our organization has a proven, research-informed approach that provides a strong foundation for igniting systems to [establish conditions where schools thrive](#), we recognize that transformational success in this new era will require all K-12 organizations, including our own, to challenge their models and assumptions. Together, we can work to explore new possibilities.

The response to COVID-19 highlighted pre-existing vulnerabilities and exacerbated persistent inequities that have vexed the U.S. education system since its inception. Prior to the pandemic, Black and Hispanic students were by [many measures](#) half as likely to be proficient in reading and mathematics as white students. During the pandemic, students in majority-Black and Hispanic schools [fell at least four months behind historical achievement levels, while students in majority-White schools lost four months](#). The pandemic also negatively impacted already [alarming national trends](#) regarding the readiness of students across the economic spectrum for the problem-solving, collaboration, science, and writing skills critical for post-secondary success. Beyond their individual success, today's students will be called upon to solve future problems we have yet to



imagine. We must build on learning from the last few years to deliver dramatically improved organizational design and outcomes in our schools; we observe educators across the country igniting meaningful shifts to do just that.

The disruption created by the pandemic has brought us to the edge of a new frontier that provides unprecedented opportunities to leverage the lessons learned in recent years to meaningfully address fundamental flaws that plague us. Frustrated by the status quo and the rising politicization of K-12 education, educators are responding with openness and action to change efforts that invite them to help advance breakthrough solutions. To inspire shared ownership, successful leadership teams are prioritizing strategies that promote clearer focus, invest in their staff, invite new ideas from across their communities, and advance well-designed organizational strategies aimed to dramatically improve student learning. This moment requires courageous, visionary leadership and a fresh approach in which we acknowledge our daunting challenges while defying a business-as-usual response to build from where there is strength and promise.

Based on our observations of transformation efforts across the country, we identified four major themes where disruptive change at the school system level seems necessary. We conducted interviews with 18 strategically selected superintendents, half that engaged in our partnership with successful results at scale, and solicited feedback from another 25 leaders across the country at

multiple levels of the system. We are highlighting emergent insights on what seems critical as leaders explore new frontiers of transformation. We amplify spotlights and anecdotes not for the purpose of prescribing specific strategies but to share ideas that may provoke other teams to be more curious, creative, and courageous about what is possible for their communities.

The interviews revealed a number of common leadership threads around the most promising change endeavors, which we describe in more detail in the closing section. The common thread is the critical need for shared leadership that co-creates change with district (including disparate departments), school, and community stakeholders working differently together to create breakthroughs. Not least among similarities of promising systemic change endeavors is a shared recognition that disruptive change is essential, coupled with a commitment to motivate teams toward an inspiring future state.

These leaders explore, identify, and invest in breakthrough opportunities to accelerate progress towards this desired state. They also recognize solutions to their complex challenges require finding new ways of redesigning their organization, promoting collaboration across traditional boundaries, and disrupting the allocation of resources to align with strategic priorities and breakthroughs. To put an ambitious vision into existence, leaders are investing in their

people and capabilities to drive this change forward and in the continuous learning and adaptation it takes to drive lasting change.

While there are no easy answers to our complex challenges, leaders across all corners of our country are changing the paradigm to advance transformation. We will dive into four areas essential to address more creatively and successfully achieve dramatically improved results:

- 1. Innovative Secondary Models.** How are leaders redesigning the secondary experience to align with the needs of the future, their students, and their community?
- 2. Far-Reaching Academic Acceleration.** How do leaders ignite system-wide efforts to accelerate academic learning in a COVID-era environment that presents an increased span of student academic and social-emotional needs?
- 3. Creative Staffing.** How do leaders improve the status, experience, and impact of teaching and newly designed educator roles to attract, fill, grow, and retain a deeper and more diverse talent pool?
- 4. Equitable Resource Reallocation.** How do leaders ensure resources align with student needs, breakthrough opportunities like the ones above, and an authentic commitment to eradicating educational inequities?

We hope lessons learned from these four areas can inform other areas in which breakthroughs are needed, including redesigning school models in partnership with community stakeholders and reimagining early, language learning, and exceptional education strategies. Whether addressing the four areas highlighted or others, we believe leaders will need to cultivate shared ownership that: (1) embraces disruption, strategic opportunities, and risks; and (2) invests in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently. Thus, we conclude each section with strategies that embrace these shared ownership themes.



01

Innovative Secondary Models

The Why

Over the past decade, in reaction to the adoption of college and career readiness standards, districts across the country have enhanced articulation of pathways for both college bound and non-college bound students. New forms of [Career and Technical Education](#) (CTE) are starting to take hold, and an increasing number of students are participating in hands-on career exploration experiences and graduating high school with college credits, industry certification, and the ability to enter the workforce. As more districts in the COVID era started to disrupt secondary experiences, many realized that they were not preparing students for concrete opportunities. Even when students are better prepared academically, secondary schools need to better help students see a path to success. According to the [Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce](#), affluence is a better predictor of career outcomes than merit. For instance, students in the highest socio-economic quartile who score below the country's median math score in 10th grade are more likely to complete both Bachelor's and Associate's degrees than students in the lowest socio-economic quartile who score above the median.

For these opportunities to meaningfully address structural barriers, CTE and other future-oriented secondary student programs need to accelerate pathways for interested students to pursue degrees or jobs that unlock greater opportunity. These opportunities need to work in service of the community and of students, creating pathways for students to explore their passions and future vision.

Promising secondary redesigns and intentional community partnerships across the country prepare students to enter the community workforce and secure other post-secondary opportunities of their choice. Community context matters.

Forward-thinking leaders are redesigning the secondary experience in alignment with the needs of the future, their community, and their students, discovering new approaches to shift the paradigm.

The Work

Systems of innovation are strategically abandoning traditional approaches for a more inspired design. These leaders' efforts provide clues on what new frontiers will take that prepare students for a more diverse world, to do jobs that don't exist, to solve problems we don't even see coming, and to use technologies that have not yet been developed or conceived.

College and Industry Partnerships

When asked to define success after high school, the answer used to be a four-year post-secondary degree. The old view of success only equaling college is no longer prevalent. Instead, according to Superintendents, everyone needs some sort of advanced degree or extended learning and the credentialing for each might look different. These districts are **embracing the notion that authentically preparing students for college and career readiness opens pathways to students for both higher education and career.**

Leaders exploring new frontiers are expanding advanced coursework access and providing opportunities for students to explore a myriad of careers held by alumni with advanced degrees within the community. As a result, students see a mirror of themselves in those positions and consider college as a viable option. Systems where students define aspirations beyond "being in college" produce graduates better able to sustain motivation amidst barriers. Likewise, students choosing a trade define a trajectory beyond their first job.

We see districts **expanding local industry partnerships to promote career pathway training, experience, and credentialing**. Some promising partnerships deliberately link to industries and position students to be hireable right out of high school.

Warsaw Community (Indiana) Schools Superintendent David Hoffert shared how his district team is creating courses of study matched to local community needs. Warsaw is home to the country's largest orthopedics manufacturing companies. Hoffert started by asking the question: How do we help keep businesses in our community? Hoffert, noting the exodus of corporate offices, met with the industry leaders and asked what they needed in their future workforce and inspired his team to shift the messaging to promote high school and post-high school opportunities. The team created new opportunities via four different diploma types and 100 unique courses. Concurrently, high school graduation has increased to 95.6%, 1,028 students earned college credit during 2021-22, and now 72% of students are enrolled in Advanced Placement or Dual Credit classes. Additionally, for the first time in over 20 years, the district expanded their welding program. Since the surrounding county is known as the "Orthopedic Capital of the World," that expansion was needed to meet the community's needs. The district's partnership with post-secondary institutions allows students to graduate with certification, enhancing their ability to be hired locally and in neighboring states with the opportunity to make six-figure salaries.

Shifting in-person offerings is not enough to build bridges to opportunity for students. Many of the leaders we interviewed cited expanding virtual offerings, user-friendly access to financial aid, and emphasis on career exploration early in secondary experiences. For instance, in Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), Superintendent Eric Gordon noted the district secured 100% college tuition for high school students who graduate and get accepted to participating universities. This strategy also assists students in filling out financial aid forms and college



applications and provides opportunities for college visits. This created a tremendous opportunity for the approximately 50% of graduates who now go to college. But what about the other 50% who signaled they were not going to college? The reality was, they "got nothing." In response to this endemic issue across the country, CMSD created a 6-12th grade curriculum and ecosystem called PACE (Planning and Career Exploration). Every experience is tracked in an app with personal student portfolios to help students find their passion and link it to living-wage opportunities with over 75 different employers.

Rethinking School Models and Scheduling

This work also highlighted the need for districts to **creatively rethink school models and schedules**. So how do these organizations meet a combination of students' needs and passions and the broader community's needs? Most school leaders interviewed admitted to an iterative evolution in need of further refinement.

Other districts are strategically partnering with community organizations to provide new and meaningful ways to prepare students for post-secondary success. Aldine Independent School District in Texas opened two single-gender choice schools. The Aldine Young Women's Leadership Academy focuses on college preparatory academics for girls in grades 6-12, emphasizing college preparedness, leadership development, and STEM. The

INCREASING STUDENT READINESS FOR POST-SECONDARY Laramie County School District 1

school was made possible through a partnership with the nonprofit organization Young Women's Preparatory Network. Likewise, Cajon Valley (California) School District, alongside the San Diego Workforce Partnership, introduced a World of Work career center that inspires students to articulate broad interests and understand why and how their current classes will open doors.

Superintendent Lamar Goree and his team in Caddo Parish (Louisiana) also recognized the need to reinvent middle school years. His district's approach is to adapt the K-8 model to allow for extending and fostering relationships in ways that are typically seen only in elementary schools. Dr. Goree also believes high school hours and models are far too stringent and call for more creativity. So, Caddo Parish is piloting a new 4-day, 10-hour high school model with no school on Mondays. The idea for this initiative emerged from the community and the shaping of the pilot is shaped by campus and community leaders. To align systems towards strengthening the student experience, district leaders set expectations for how adults in the building will leverage the extra day while each building has flexibility in how to achieve those expectations. Promising community-driven models like this might be even more impactful if coupled with efforts to extend the school year and student apprenticeship opportunities.

To ensure a strong academic foundation that equips students for college and career exploration, districts such as CMSD are accelerating a shift away from traditional grading towards true content mastery, whether it is paper and pencil or real-world application practice, which promise to increase requisite competencies for each student. Schools today [too often base grades on matters such as punctuality](#) that might stifle equity and excellence rather than on mastery of learning that might help provide students more agency in their growth. Districts such as Shelby County in Memphis are also seeing benefits from [rethinking how literacy practice](#) is taught to students who arrive to secondary far behind. Districts such as Houston (Texas) Independent School

In 2021, when Dr. Margaret Crespo took the helm in Laramie County School District-1 in Wyoming, she asked her leaders, students, and community what they desired for their students' future. Three themes emerged for what would be the new strategic plan:



Margaret Crespo

Student Readiness, Community Engagement, and Healthy Environments. Previous strategic plans had been static. This one is a living, adaptable one.

As a vital part of the Student Readiness pillar, the district set out to create pathways for post-secondary readiness. Based on the team's discovery of stakeholder interests, increasing participation in dual enrollment courses became a keen area of focus. They also discovered that previous efforts to offer free college-level classes were not changing the paradigm of dual enrollment at scale.

Aware that students can take on problems bigger than they can imagine, the team met with students to identify what was preventing some students from taking the free college-level courses and what would inspire them. The Laramie team learned students were not enrolling in part because the schedule interfered with courses needed back at the high school campus. Making the pivot to strategic scheduling created conditions for success; they then ran targeted campaigns around enrollment to educate students and parents to build excitement and are leveraging student input to determine what classes to offer next.

The district is now able to provide better access points and build the expectation that if a student wants to sign up, they can. Laramie County leaders anticipate more than tripling participation since the plan began to the highest number of credits hours in the last five years and will further expand. Now students across Laramie are graduating high school with college credit and the district team is motivated to pursue other strategic goals in a manner that ensures transparency in decision-making, cross-communication across department roles, and increased focus on pivoting based on new learning.



Even when students are better prepared academically, secondary schools need to better help students see a path to success.

District (HISD) are also lifting students' learning and experiences by accelerating the incorporation of rigorous case studies and project-based application (linked to measures of competency growth) into high school curriculum by implementing 3DE and other forward-looking instructional models. Through this real-world application and integration of learning across the core academics, in just one year HISD is already seeing all participating 3DE schools outperform nonparticipating schools on state assessments and 40% fewer cases of chronic absenteeism. Based on similar implementation in the Atlanta Metro area, graduation rates are expected to increase by an average of 34% and college enrollment by 42%.

The Way Forward

There is no one formula to successfully innovate to shift the paradigm and expand opportunities for secondary students. K-12 leaders must make bold moves to challenge the status quo in the following ways:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Identify and invest in pilot systems that bolster student autonomy and leadership

- Begin career exploration in middle school, exposing students to a depth and breadth of opportunities and from employees who look like them
- Forge new partnerships with post-secondary schools and local industries
- Reimagine delivery models and incorporate virtual learning, flexible scheduling, and real-world application

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Examine district- and building-level systems to understand from school and community stakeholders where the current model could better elevate community needs, emphasize pathways to well-paying opportunities, and invest in STEM
- Challenge traditional grading and pedagogical systems to advance real-world mastery
- Invest in new staffing models and systems essential to advance designs that diverge from the status quo

Expanding Pathways to Technology: Dallas ISD

The Dallas Independent School District is the 17th-largest in the United States with 90% free and reduced lunch, 95% ethnic minorities, and 48% English Learners.

As Dr. Michael Hinojosa began his second stint as superintendent in Dallas ISD in 2015, one data point became a point of urgency. Only 7% of Dallas' students were earning a post-secondary degree within 6 years of graduation, and the impact was being felt not only by the school system, but the community. Dallas students were not leaving the system prepared to experience post-secondary success. Dr. Hinojosa challenged his leadership team to dig deeper into the data and to identify what was different about the 7% who were earning post-secondary degrees.



Michael Hinojosa

During their discovery, the team noted the students succeeding were graduating from 1 of 3 early college high schools. These schools were small in comparison to most of the comprehensive high schools in the district with approximately 300 students each. Students in the 3 schools were earning college credits at a higher rate than the national average for community colleges. Faced with the need to scale, Hinojosa and his team worked through a model he calls “Good IRS,” which stands for incubate, replicate, and scale.

What is now called the “P-Tech” program, Pathways in Technology, would come to serve as the early college model. The team created a blueprint and formula for the program, allowing it to be replicated across the district for all students who wanted access. A design team started by providing a designated principal, counselor, and workplace coordinator for P-Tech on every campus and then worked to obtain and maintain 90 varying industry partners within the Dallas community. Through these career institutes, industry partners provide specialized training to any interested students in areas with pathways to high-paying jobs such as cybersecurity, mechanical electronics, and HVAC systems.

During 2021–22, even amidst the pandemic, 1,100 students — nearly 12% of the senior class — graduated with an associate’s degree. A third of the students enrolled failed their 8th grade assessment, meaning that they did not even qualify to start high school, yet many of them now graduate with an associate’s degree. Today, 25% of Dallas ISD high school students (approximately 10,000) are enrolled in an early college high school or P-Tech. As a result, the district has more than tripled the number of students earning an associate’s degree over the past decade. The district projects that by 2025 nearly 1,500 graduates per year will earn an associate’s degree and 3,000 will earn stackable credits before graduation by 2025.

Dr. Hinojosa bases the district’s success, now expanding under new leadership, on several key factors. Foremost, his district had a strong sense of urgency tied to a shared vision grounded in better understanding the needs of students, their most critical stakeholder. Second, he tasked a cross-silo team with prioritizing this work, engaging others across the community with shared interests, and devoting resources to show staff and students the ways in which P-Tech would help them achieve their goals. Finally, the team aligned partners and stakeholders willing to fund P-Tech so that the staff and students had the materials and connections they needed. Dallas is creating a model for all students to have the opportunity to achieve at the post-secondary level.



02

Far-Reaching Academic Acceleration

The Why

Due to unfinished learning during the pandemic, already persistent student learning gaps widened, especially for Black students and those students in vulnerable and low socioeconomic subgroups.

What's more, the pandemic has shone a light on an [ever-increasing mental health crisis](#) stifling students and educators. While district leaders have leveraged ESSR funding to devote more resources to the mental health of students and staff in the short-term, the depth and breadth of the issue suggests more strategic, cross-institutional approaches are essential. Social-emotional standards and practices in isolation can look like one more thing on teachers' plates serving as a foundational remedy. We can create an environment in which every student and adult in every classroom feels a sense of connectedness and belonging alongside heightened expectations for what they can achieve.

Just as post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrated that it is possible to support rapid recovery and modernize outdated systems at the same time, we should recognize that educators and academic leaders are showing similar resiliency coming out of the pandemic. We cannot afford to gloss over the bright spots of academic acceleration across the country. Champions of this work will invest in strong core practices, advocate for students, and challenge traditional instructional systems to reach never achieved goals.

The Work

Strong Systems for Tier One Instruction and Re-Teaching

Districts that focus on accelerating academic achievement insist on raising the academic floor and expectations. At its heart, this still often starts with delivering strong student-centered tier one instruction. Such essential work suggests a clear focus on using [research-informed curriculum](#) and formative assessment cycles. [Our research](#) shows that a quality curriculum promotes equity by assuring all students and teachers have access to resources that define high expectations for student mastery. This research also shows effective leaders ensure teachers needs are met by providing timely, accurate student data to adjust instruction to meet student needs. UVA-PLE and [broader research](#) promotes that quality curriculum and assessments are most impactful when complemented by instructional collaboration and coaching that balance the identification of student learning and teacher practice gaps with professional growth opportunities to advance teacher effectiveness in delivery.

These types of core strategies are often executed poorly or are unresponsive to students' realities. **Effectively executing core academic strategies post-pandemic requires a deployment of resources aligned to a laser-focused set of priorities and monitoring progress to ensure practices and experiences in the classroom actually improve.** Centrally requiring too many new things at once does not provide school leaders the opportunity to innovate for their context. For instance, some systems are

now reevaluating their priority standards and pacing guides to reassess how content is mapped for the year to ensure schools, teachers, and students have the time to address gaps and adapt for context, while still ensuring students experience the grade-level, standards-aligned learning they deserve.

UVA-PLE is seeing partners across the country, including Henry County (Georgia) Schools (see sidebar on Page 13) and Winston-Salem Forsyth County's (North Carolina) Inspire 340 Zone, experiencing tremendous academic growth during 2021-22. Under the leadership of Tricia McManus and Timisha Barnes-Jones, the majority of schools in the Inspire 340 Zone experienced double-digit academic gains that year; four zone schools far exceeded state growth targets and were removed from the state "underperforming" list, even while that list doubled in size due to the pandemic. The zone ensured aligned resources to ensure high quality curriculum, strong PD on prioritized instructional delivery strategies, principal support aligned to focused 90-day school action plans, and data-informed adaptation to address learning gaps.

One strategy worthy of more attention is [extending the school year](#), via adding more instructional time across the year, more instructional days, or more rigorous summer options. Efforts such as those in Henry County, Winston-Salem, and Baltimore to leverage high quality, vetted curriculum go further if educators have more time to cover standards, spiral in and re-teach critical concepts identified via data and student work, and extend support to students via coordinated technology, small groups, or tutoring.

Leveraging strong, culturally rich curriculum also provides a foundation for school administrators and teachers to spend less time creating lessons and resources and more time creatively problem-solving how to meet students'



interests and learning needs. Curriculum serves as a starting point to create more student-centered, authentic learning environments and to scaffold learning for students that benefit from extra attention. Many superintendents we interviewed advocated for such a future and were in the beginning stages of advancing more opportunities for students to understand their progress, demonstrate mastery, and pursue enrichment. Such an environment, which [AASA suggests is central to the future of learning](#), at its best cultivates critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Doing this well may require teachers and school leaders to spend more time learning from their colleagues showing evidence of impact in leveraging promising student-centered practices.

Acceleration over Remediation

Leaders acknowledge that strong tier one instruction systems are not enough to advance the outcomes students deserve, but going back to traditional models of remediation is not the answer either. Instead, the most effective leaders focus on more innovative ways to complement core instruction to accelerate more equitable and excellent outcomes. Dallas ISD, like [many districts across the country](#), reinvented summer school and after-school approaches to ensure a results-oriented focus on accelerating student learning and readiness for grade-level instruction. Dallas' deep focus on execution resulted in increases in achievement in all 46 priority schools this

GUARANTEES FOR STUDENTS

Henry County

Another UVA-PLÉ partner district, Henry County Schools, has been laser-focused on high quality planning, pedagogy, and assessment and on ensuring learning gaps uncovered are filled as quickly as possible. Under the leadership of Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis prior to the pandemic, the district



Mary Elizabeth Davis

significantly boosted the availability of quality curriculum and instructional resources and in recent years significantly boosted support to teachers in usage of the resources. Superintendent Davis and the Henry board advanced articulation, execution, and monitoring of “guarantees” to provide all students a stable foundation of instruction.

The Superintendent articulates that, absent a strong foundation in student learning, a focus on innovation can leave too much to chance. The district prior to her team’s arrival was experiencing a steady decline in academic progress and losing public confidence. Upon Davis’ arrival, the Board of Education committed to advancing an aligned system of teaching and learning focused on articulating what to teach, how students are doing, and what would be done to close gaps in student learning. By focusing first on getting user-friendly, grade-level resources in the hands of every teacher and family, Davis and her team could build a stable foundation that provides more community trust. The district is now expanding world language, STEM, industry certification, and community wellness partnerships. Superintendent Davis articulates how these excellence goals are now more possible when the adults hold themselves accountable to foundational responsibilities.

Principals in Henry County consistently provide positive feedback on the value of the instructional resources including clearly articulated priority standards, vetted curricular materials, and common formative assessments, all which the district is continuously improving based on teacher input. This focus on the foundation helped the district amidst the pandemic perform well in the areas prioritized: Literacy, Algebra, and graduation. In Literacy, 19% more 3rd graders were proficient in MAP reading in 2022 compared to the same cohort of 1st graders in 2020. In Algebra I, students’ performance during 2021-22 outpaced all other metropolitan Atlanta districts and outpaced its own pre-pandemic performance. Given the hard work of teachers in pursuing the guarantees, the Class of 2022 experienced graduation rate gains in 8 out of 10 high schools and earned a graduation rate for students with disabilities six points higher than pre-pandemic levels.

year, and reading scores across economically disadvantaged, Black, and emergent bilingual students [often matched and sometimes exceeded pre-pandemic levels](#).

Tennessee, recognizing the magnitude of pandemic learning loss, started a statewide intensive tutoring initiative to complement a push towards a stronger early elementary tier one focus on curriculum that emphasizes the “science of reading.” Students in elementary, middle, and high school grade bands are [already performing at or above pre-pandemic levels of proficiency](#). Success is attributed to a handful of strategies implemented to accelerate learning, namely literacy materials aligned with the science of reading, high-quality professional development, and frequent formative assessment screeners.

Other district leaders are creatively finding opportunities to accelerate learning. In Long Beach, California, prior to the pandemic, if a student failed English I, the student would typically have to retake the course the next year. They learned they can accelerate students who failed freshman year get back on track to graduate by providing enough teacher support and access to quality resources to provide students opportunity to successfully double down on English I and II simultaneously, recouping the credit they missed their freshman year. Additionally, while many districts did away with virtual learning upon returning to face-to-face teaching, many of the district leaders we interviewed saw value in continuing to leverage anytime, anywhere learning through virtual/hybrid methods to expand access to highly effective teachers and advanced coursework.



Districts UVA-PLE observes making strong academic progress are also looking out for the well-being of their students and staff, often in new ways never attempted pre-pandemic.”

Cleveland Metropolitan School District recognized its instructional focus the past decade was incrementally improving outcomes though would not raise the ceiling enough on possible outcomes for its students. Their leadership team seeks strategies responsive enough to the massive impacts of the pandemic in Cleveland, underscored by recent [significant drops experienced by Cleveland’s students in the National Assessment of Education Progress](#). Thus, the district is now focused on four interlocking design elements: a shift to competency-based grading structures, “anytime, anywhere” learning, a concentration on the whole human, and the creation of additional agency and voice in what and how students learn. Each school employs a remote learning strategy aligned to the “anytime, anywhere” learning culture. Students in all grade levels (all from 100% economically disadvantaged families) are increasingly provided opportunities to work on cognitively complex tasks and to demonstrate their learning in authentic ways to advance measurable knowledge and transferable skills. The district is also extending summer learning, instructional time, and online tutoring help. While it is too early to know if this set of reforms will have a systemic impact, we commend the district for during 2021 and 2022 reimagining its approach to academic acceleration.

Supporting Academic Acceleration through Investments in Student Well-being

The districts that UVA-PLE observes making strong academic progress are also looking out for the well-being of their students and staff, often in new ways never attempted pre-pandemic. While there is much research to support what seems to work academically, huge gaps

exist when it comes to understanding what high-leverage strategies will help to ensure students are healthy and ready to learn. We need system leaders innovating in this space. Though the public health crisis, COVID-19, has plateaued, we are still faced with a clear and present [mental health](#)

[crisis](#) with a recent CDC study showing 44% of high school students reported they felt persistently sad or hopeless during the past year and NCES data demonstrates that 76% of schools reported an increase in staff voicing concerns about students exhibiting symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or trauma. While there is extreme polarization regarding educators’ role in advancing student support and well-being, it is essential for systems to build capabilities more responsive to their students’ realities.

We include student well-being in the academic acceleration section in part because of what Sonja Santelises, Superintendent of Baltimore City Public Schools, speaks to as the “healing power of doing school well.” Rather than asking teachers to be therapists and principals to be food supply experts, districts can make smart and creative investments that disrupt how we traditionally support student well-being and allow teachers and school leaders to focus even more time on creating rich academic experiences. Across the districts interviewed, including Baltimore City, a consistent shift has been made to hire more mental health-focused counselors, particularly in secondary, where counseling historically tends to focus on meeting graduation requirements. While mental health counselors provide an important layer of support for students, the adults within the organization also benefit from coaching, development, and options for their own self-care.

Forward-thinking innovations include an initiative in Atlanta Public Schools that provides all students with access to telehealth to complement on-site counseling and to better match students with the services they need. They are tracking impacts, including whether new services will reduce chronic absenteeism. Addressing student well-being often includes social services beyond counseling, as districts are finding social workers stretched very thin. Laramie County School District 1 in Wyoming is advancing a creative solution where they started by training over 300 community volunteers (EMS, firefighters, police, librarians, retirees, etc.) to provide initial support to students, freeing trained social workers to spend more time addressing the toughest issues and navigate systemic solutions linking community resources to address issues of poverty, trauma, and abuse.

The pandemic has resulted in incredible spending which often seems uncoordinated and lacks monitoring. To address this issue, there is an impetus for districts to commit to identifying their greatest student well-being needs standing in the way of enhancing students' readiness to learn and committing, alongside their community partners, to specific opportunities to address these needs, [monitor effectiveness](#), and learn from their efforts.

As these practices emerge, education leaders need to find avenues to scale models that work. Some districts are already doing that. Henry County Schools in Georgia created a CARE (Caring Adult Responding Every Day) team at every school to review data, actively identify disruptions impacting students' lives, and help educators across the school quickly intervene before problems get worse, including working with a facilitator, a role that did not frequently exist, pre-pandemic, who connects students and families with wellness services.

Superintendent Corey Miklus of the Seaford School District (Delaware) led his team pre-pandemic to redesign schools to promote the type of rigorous instructional focus described earlier and to eliminate school boundaries previously driven by socio-economic indicators. Through his team's hard work and UVA-PLC support, they witnessed incredible growth from having the lowest elementary proficiency scores in the state of Delaware to performing above the state average. He recognizes next-level change will require different investments. Seaford built teams of support to address mental health issues, hired additional social workers and deans of social-emotional learning, and provided teachers with social well-being curricular resources. The resources promise relationship-oriented strategies guaranteed to increase connectedness, uncover needs, and keep the primary focus on students' academic performance. Now, the team is measuring and adapting based on their learning.

Eric Gordon and his team in Cleveland recognized they could not solve these complex issues internally. Thus, the district reached out to a team of external practitioners and asked to urgently organize the most promising and implementable research-grounded strategies for advancing student well-being and ensuring students are better prepared for academic acceleration. The district is now piloting, alongside community [organizations, enhanced strategies receiving national attention](#). This type of bold willingness to act, measure, and learn is too often missing from our approach in this emergent area of focus.



Leaders acknowledge strong tier one instruction systems are not enough to advance the outcomes students deserve, but going back to traditional models of remediation is not the answer.

The Way Forward

Academic acceleration at scale will require more willingness to pilot and willingness to focus on measuring whether preferred solutions are actually leading to different results. The districts challenged with accelerating learning and student well-being may have more success by considering how to have the two work in concert with each other and how to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Invest in understanding bright spots of classrooms, schools, or zones delivering heightened student results and in replicating and expanding those systems and practices
- Ensure curriculum is high quality and includes resources that support acceleration of learning
- Expand access to rich instruction of core standards and unfinished learning via extended days, calendars, summer opportunities, and usage of digital assets that connect seamlessly to core instruction
- Seek collaboration and support with community members and external content experts to address the

complexity and context of your community's well-being needs

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Invest in high-quality professional development for teachers and support staff aligned to high quality curriculum and assessments while eliminating less strategic development
- Create pathways for strongest performing teachers and leaders to expand their impact, including by enriching grow-your-own efforts
- Create synergy and shared ownership between academic and student support teams, allowing time to plan, identify promising practices, and initiate new strategies together

Investing in Teacher Effectiveness: Ector County

In 2019, when Dr. Scott Muri began as Superintendent in Ector County, the district had an 18% teacher vacancy rate and was the lowest performing district in the state of Texas, with 16 out of the total 43 schools rated as “F” schools. Paraphrasing engineer W. Edwards Deming, Muri says, “the organization was perfectly designed to get the results it was getting.”

In response, Superintendent Muri championed his team to pause and reboot the recently completed strategic plan for a bold, data-driven, and collectively owned version. During a series of “look, listen, and learn” meetings, there was shock and awe when data became transparent, which led to a cohesive and undeniably strong “why” that became the driving force behind newly created strategic goals and workstreams. The board in concert with district leaders unanimously agreed to the shared plan and to focus on “indicators of success” metrics built by Muri’s team.

Central to the plan’s three main workstreams were human capital investments and accelerating student outcomes. The district started by raising average teacher pay over \$13,000 and leveraged a statewide opportunity and partnership with Public Impact, an education nonprofit, to better compensate and extend the number of students engaged with the most effective teachers.

Ector County then raised the bar for qualifications in both principal and teacher leader roles, which they identified as key factors in advancing school-wide academics, collaboration, and coaching. They then made strategic staff changes, and in certain schools, even reconstituted entirely. The district began investing in teachers interested in obtaining National Board Certification.

To support teacher effectiveness in the continuous improvement cycle and enhance students’ learning experience, the district redesigned teacher professional development by aligning offerings to focus on understanding and implementing newly adopted high-quality curricular resources, allowing personalization to teacher needs while eliminating curricular options that did not have evidence of meeting Ector’s needs. While the pandemic pressured the gains Ector’s students and staff were making, it also brought about financial resources that allowed the district to accelerate teacher development and other academic initiatives embedded in the strategic plan. As an example, the district leveraged the lost access to in-person tutors to invest in a fully virtual tutoring model. In 2021-22, over 6,000 students participated in virtual tutoring programs.

A quick glance at the results of a cohesively owned and monitored plan has produced:

- 130 teachers on path to National Board Certification compared to zero in 2019
- Most schools started the 2022 school year with zero vacancies
- Middle schools with reading and math scores exceeding pre-pandemic levels
- 7-point increase in college, career, and military readiness indicators
- Expansion of pre-K programing which has increased kindergarten readiness by 22%
- Half of all schools rated “A” or “B” while half of all were “D” or “F” in 2019

Given change resistance from both internal and external voices, Muri knew the community had to be brought along in the journey. A strong “why,” laser-focus on getting the work done, shared metrics, and staying connected with all stakeholders created the buy-in necessary to see systemic change. He credits his leadership team for their ability to drive the work and challenge the status quo. Now, for Muri, making the case for larger-scale legislative policy change both in his state and nationally, allows him to share with others the change efforts Ector County has made.



Scott Muri

Expanding High Quality Learning: Baltimore City Schools

Dr. Sonja Santelises inherited a Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) system with achievement levels below large urban city averages. Her initial two years were focused on rebuilding relationships, addressing budget deficits, and investing in critical building infrastructure and student wholeness. During the subsequent 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, the CEO and her team intensified its focus on core academics, fueling increases in City Schools' graduation rate and student learning metrics on the Maryland state assessments. However, the impact of the pandemic reversed some of those gains.

As City Schools navigated the pandemic, its leadership implemented strategies to maximize learning time, extend support to address unfinished learning needs, and expose students to enrichment. Leadership ensures this work is anchored in investments in high-quality and knowledge-rich literacy curriculum. Simultaneously, City Schools expanded how it equips teachers to deliver curriculum and empower students. The system tapped experienced teachers who had proven academic results, "teachers with receipts." Those teachers worked during the pandemic to expand quick feedback assessment models and integrate teaching of literacy skills and critical content knowledge across social studies and science. Since 2021, City Schools also invested over \$17 million in federal funds in high-dosage tutoring, with 13% of students participating and teacher leaders ensuring the tutoring experience is increasingly integrated with students' ongoing experiences.

Despite these promising investments, City Schools understood students needed more high-quality learning time. Strategically, it identified summer programming to add critical learning time and rallied external and government partners to fund this priority. The team studied strong existing summer programs across the city and drove community engagement and design toward ensuring access to rich learning and enrichment. The district forged partnerships with national literacy and robotics organizations, local organizations such as Alvin Alley dance troupe, Arts for Learning, and others. Each partner committed to offering academic enrichment as a part of the daily schedule, leveraging City Schools curricular materials and aligning content focus to units not fully covered in the regular school year. External partners were still provided great latitude on how to structure lessons, and teams across Baltimore City Public Schools made over 200 visits to help staff increase student engagement and connectivity.

The district also expanded internal summer learning. Its 24 internally run programs included 90 minutes of literacy and 90 minutes of math embedded with student well-being. In the afternoons, the community requested sports camps, gaming, cooking classes, and a Spanish theater camp.

The results include an increase from 8,500 to 17,000 summer learning participants annually since 2021. More than 400 additional students graduated during 2022 thanks to secondary summer learning opportunities to make up credits and connect with potential employers. Fall 2022 diagnostic literacy data shows students who participated in summer learning started the year further ahead than students who did not. The extension of high-quality learning via curriculum, high-dosage tutoring, and summer learning helped Baltimore withstand the worst results of the pandemic as 8th-grade reading held steady, avoiding the declines experienced across the state. Further, the city's Black, low-income, and Hispanic student groups posted slight increases in academic performance compared to 2019. These shifts in practice and initial results provide hope for what can and must come next for underserved students.

Progress is made possible by a clear vision coupled with a willingness to disrupt typical practices. The team invested in cultivating partnerships while raising expectations for what community groups could achieve. The team is closely monitoring the results, working to ensure greater attendance in the future, expand programs that are working, and better integrate high-dosage tutoring, extended learning, and home visits to address students' individualized needs.



Sonja Santelises

03

Creative Staffing

The Why

Amidst rising staff shortages, district leaders are grappling with attracting, filling, and retaining critical positions. This is happening alongside a [leadership crisis](#) with nearly 50% of our nation's largest districts turning over the superintendency since the pandemic began, creating an enormous ripple impact on the churn of leaders across the country. The last two years have forced district leaders to be more creative in staffing decisions. District and school leaders used the disruption of the pandemic and federal ESSER/ARP funds to try more creative staffing models, ranging from new positions to address SEL and learning loss to monetary incentives to staff classrooms. **As government pandemic response funds expire, leaders will need to apply what they learned from their pilots about resources and staffing to move to more effective models, making hard choices before the funding expires towards highest-leverage usage of positions and resources.**

Our K-12 staffing models are largely the same they were decades ago, despite rapidly changing workforce demands and the typical profile of senior education leaders as being white and male remaining mostly unchanged. Schools and districts with the greatest inequities in outcomes often have the hardest time attracting and retaining teacher and leader talent despite research suggesting their quality is the most important determinant of student success. To explore new frontiers, system leaders must grapple with how to diversify and modernize strategies for staffing, recruitment, and pipeline building. People, our greatest resource, leave organizations, when they don't feel valued. Creating value is possible anywhere through access to high-quality professional development and support, incentivizing our best and brightest to serve our historically marginalized populations, and providing a more engaging, growth-oriented, and care-centered employee experience.

The Work

Strategies to Grow Talent Pipelines Matching Student Needs

Districts are embracing ingenuity to develop pipeline-building strategies designed more around leveraging local assets and less on exerting efforts to attract talent outside the region. Grow-your-own initiatives seem to be paying off higher dividends. Dr. Scott Muri and the leadership team in Ector County Independent School District (Texas) advanced a district-owned-and-operated educator preparation program, currently enrolling 36 candidates, which focuses on what the district identified as the “most important skills effective educators bring to their classrooms.” The district also plans to employ another 18 teacher residents during 2022-23 and has launched a “para-to-teacher” program. Perhaps most interesting, the district identifies students starting in middle school who may want to become teachers. They cultivate the love of teaching throughout high school and then, through a partnership with local universities, the district offers the Teach in Three program. Ninety-one students are currently enrolled in this program for graduating students to be back in classrooms teaching after three years at no cost to the student. Henry County recently launched at a broader scale a similarly innovative “Tomorrow’s Teachers Today” strategy to provide high school students pathways to salaried teaching apprenticeships and the completion of an undergraduate degree. Taken together, these innovative strategies cultivate talent which reflects the student population and in turn helps those same students see their opportunities.

To complement grow-your-own strategies, districts must broaden recruitment strategies outside of traditional channels particularly to attract diverse staff more representative of the student population. Richland (South Carolina) and Long Beach (California), spotlighted in this section, invested new sourcing strategies toward this

diversity goal, which in turn raises the quality and pool for staffing across the district. Other complementary strategies to recruit include Duval County (Florida) taking action to improve the quality of candidates already in the pool and districts such as Beaufort County (South Carolina) [forging new university partnerships](#) to attract and prepare staff who may not have gone into education otherwise.

Districts also benefit from strategic focus in retention. Leslie Torres Rodriguez and her team in Hartford Public Schools (Connecticut) attacked retention by focusing on advancing teacher incentive programs while renegotiating employee contracts. Leveraging ESSER dollars for the initial investment, the district can now increase reimbursable amounts for continuing education and significantly raise the stipend for team mentors. The district also is now heavily marketing a new teacher referral program to fill openings. Staff receive \$1,500 when they recommend a candidate that is hired and makes it through the 90-day probationary period. The district says there is no better marketing than their current employees. Both Hartford and Ector County also introduced strategies with local universities for promising support staff to become teachers.

Attracting teachers to the most underserved schools can be daunting. Overdue adjusted funding formulas that recognize added costs for exceptional education, language learning, and trauma-informed care have started to push additional resources and staff to these campuses in many contexts but even when that happens, these vacancies are often the hardest to fill. We encourage leaders to raise the pay to all teachers in historically under-resourced buildings. **We particularly encourage pay raises for high-performing and hard-to-staff positions and a willingness to make courageous decisions amidst enrollment declines to reduce total school buildings, administrators, or non-essential positions to create resources for higher pay.** Districts too often layer on new change strategies and positions into the existing infrastructure without advancing



the hard conversations and decisions on less essential positions that stand in the way of ensuring essential staffing in underserved schools.

Another acute staffing challenge across the country the last few years has been substitute teaching. Rob Anderson and his leadership team in Boulder Valley (Colorado) looked hard at substitute coverage data metrics. Needing to address the 40-50% coverage rate, the team took a lesson from Uber and implemented surge pricing on days with higher staff call outs, mainly Fridays or days before or after a long holiday weekend. As a result, the coverage rate rose to 90%. Surge pricing, pay-for-performance, and pay-for-placement models may better respond to reality than traditional models.

Strategies to Invest in Talent

Finding talent is only part of the equation. **Leaders increasingly must cultivate an engaging, growth-oriented, and care-centered employee experience, in part by making your highest need schools the best place for educators to grow,** inclusive of more support and more access to higher education programs and skillset development. Michael Hinojosa's team in Dallas moved to a pay-for-performance model, paying top dollar for the district's brightest and best to go to historically the toughest places, and coupled this with investments in differentiated, high-quality (and ultimately high-rated) development that enhances teacher experience and impact.

INCREASING STAFF DIVERSITY TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Long Beach Unified

Many are leveraging partnerships with local universities to grow their own talent. David Hoffert and his leadership team in Warsaw Community Schools jumped into action when the state department of education removed structures for teachers to obtain master's degrees. The district created unique partnerships with universities where qualified district personnel taught courses and maintained program integrity. In return, the universities agreed to offer a more cost-effective degree program, which for the past two years came at no cost to teachers thanks to ESSER funding. Moving forward, general funds and partnerships with other districts will be used to sustain the program.

As students and staff returned to buildings, so did the impacts of isolation and world events. The adults within school and district offices are left trying to not only address impacts from lost instructional time, but they are also faced with managing trauma. Establishing well-designed avenues for staff support is paramount. Many districts have expanded their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offerings to include financial counseling, support for family needs, and 24/7 access to mental health apps. For example, Rosanna Mucetti in Napa Valley Unified (California) focused on the importance of tending to the emotional well-being of adults within the organization to better drive student results. A key strategy for their team is empowering building leaders with permission to advance creative strategies responsive to staff and student well-being and amplifying strategies with evidence of increasing social connectivity. Freeing building leaders to invest in new ideas around the relational aspect of school culture with adults may play a critical role in many contexts to accelerate results sustainably.

Dr. Jill Baker became Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District in 2020. The district is comprised of 69,000 students. A district identified by a pre-pandemic McKinsey study as one of the fastest growing in the world was not increasing staff diversity and preparedness nearly at the rate needed. They decided to focus on expanding diversity within their staff and doing so has played a significant role in mitigating previously persistent staffing challenges.



Jill Baker

The district is employing several strategies to diversify its workforce. The team began by gaining a better understanding of the current reality through an in-depth analysis. Of particular interest, identifying where staff members representative of their students of color resided and which schools did not have representative educators of the same race as their students (which research shows negatively impacts students). A cross-departmental team analyzed trends and brainstormed creative strategies and partnerships to target and source talent, forging new institutional relationships. The district team created new funding streams aimed at creating specialty contracts to help them hire promising diverse talent, even prior to a vacancy existing.

In tandem, the district team is clear they are dissatisfied with the current academic results, particularly for historically marginalized students. Better results will require cultivating strategies for a more inclusive, problem-solving culture and greater retention of diverse staff.

As a result of these investments, the Long Beach Unified School District attracted almost 400 additional certified educators, counselors, and social workers to their district in just two years, increasing the diversity of staff by double digit increments.



To explore new frontiers, system leaders must grapple with how to diversify and modernize strategies for staffing, recruitment, and pipeline building.

The Way Forward

Since 2020, system leaders have tested creative ways to staff classrooms, diversify and expand pipelines, address educator well-being, and use targeted career management strategies to retain effective teachers. Leaders now need to work with teams, policymakers, preparation programs, unions, and their local communities to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Take full responsibility for building and sustaining the pipelines that will fill classrooms with effective teachers, including personalization of support to promising applicants and community members to address certification and other needs
- Diversify recruitment strategies to grow the pool of applicants outside of traditional channels
- Challenge traditional pay structures to offer higher compensation rates, specifically to draw high performing teachers and leaders to the hardest-to-staff positions

- Create new ladders of opportunity that simplify pathways for community members to fill the district's positions of the future

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Unearth and invest in ideas for how to strategically grow their own human capital including mentorship and certification for paraprofessionals, leadership opportunities for strong teachers, and identification of potential future workforce within student interests
- Explore how to eliminate outdated or uninspired infrastructure to invest and create resource rich school buildings
- Cultivate an engaging, growth-centered employee experience in part by partnering with community and university programs in new manners and ensuring a welcoming candidate and new employee experience

Preparing Nontraditional Candidates to Succeed: Duval County

The 20th largest district in the nation, Duval County Schools (Florida) educates 120,000 students in 197 schools. The Jacksonville Metro region offers myriad opportunities competing for hourly and professional workers, including a wide variety of financial services, health care, and technology companies. Duval County is surrounded by smaller, less diverse, and higher paying school districts competing for teaching talent. These conditions combine to create a challenging environment for attracting and retaining talent.

In early 2019, a focus group of principals, when asked about the quality of the applicant pool, offered a surprising perspective: they passed over anyone who had previously been interviewed by a few other principals and had not been offered a position. Vicki Schultz, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, was taken aback but their rationale made sense: “I trust my colleagues. If they interviewed a candidate and didn’t move them forward, there must have been a reason.”

Schultz and her team began creating creative solutions to strengthen the applicant pool and improve the candidate experience as soon as they apply. The solution for the focus group’s challenge was to create “Jump Start,” providing interested candidates an internship opportunity working side-by-side with effective teachers in high-need schools. The 4–6-week boot camp focuses on both instruction and interviewing skills. The first three cohorts served 99 candidates, with a 73% success rate of being placed into a teaching position. This year, a Jump Start graduate was awarded “Teacher of the Year” in Duval. While the Jump Start program puts candidates on the pathway to effectiveness, an important driver of its success is the relationship-building that happens when principals observe and give feedback to participants. Candidates, many of whom are multi-language speakers, have significantly more opportunities to demonstrate their potential and effectiveness than in a traditional interview. Due to budget cuts and shallow candidate pools, the program has been paused, but an analysis of its return on investment will likely lead to a reimagination with smaller cohorts focused on hardest-to-staff areas, particularly in secondary and special education.

Duval’s human resources team also developed similar investment strategies to reduce attrition. During the 2019-20 school year, the HR team worked with principals to have one-on-one retention conversations with all teachers who were new to the district. In 2020, teacher retention improved from 69.1% to 77.5%. During and following the pandemic, though, attrition started to accelerate. In response, the district HR team is meeting those resignations with personalized support, leading to a plan for many teachers to return to the classroom while receiving additional targeted support.

Retention begins with a strong candidate experience and Duval County Schools has a variety of approaches for engendering loyalty. Its largest candidate offering is the LEAP program, which supports preparation for the successful completion of the required PRAXIS exam, paid fees for retaking the exam, and a temporary certification pathway for those who need additional time to complete the exam.

Duval County’s broader leadership team insists on using data to identify challenges and working creatively to find new solutions. And yet, leadership is not content just to advance these programs to influence recruitment and retention. Duval leadership is also challenging the system design via rethinking certification and compensation as barriers to entry and reimagining teacher development and the role of the principal to focus more centrally on raising the status of teaching and ensuring teacher success.



Vicki Schultz

Premier 100 Initiative to Attract Diverse Teachers: Richland School District Two

National data show Black teachers make up ~7% of the nation's public-school teachers. Fewer than 2% of teachers nationwide are minority males. Having at least one Black teacher in elementary school cuts the high school dropout rates of low-income Black students by over a third and raises college aspirations among low-income students of both sexes by 19%, according to a [2017 study](#). In 2019, 6% of teachers in Richland School District Two (South Carolina) were minority male teachers whereas over 55% of the student population is minority.

In August 2019, under the leadership of Dr. Baron Davis, Richland Two became the first school district in South Carolina to develop and unanimously approve an equity school board policy, which set in motion the use of an equity lens for resource allocation and decision-making. Shortly after conducting a personnel audit also in 2019, Richland Two launched the Premier 100 Initiative to strategically recruit and retain 100 minority male teachers (25 annually) by the year 2024. Ideally, they would like to provide all students with a minority teacher during their kindergarten through 12th-grade experience, with the goal of having at least one minority male teacher.

In Richland Two, they launched during the pandemic a new partnership with local historically Black colleges and universities and the Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Roles) program. They are hosting students and faculty from colleges and universities, community leaders, paraprofessionals, and male educators of color to uplift and intensify the conversation.

With the support of the Richland Two Board of Trustees and administration, the starting salary for new teachers recently increased to \$41,000 annually plus benefits, which compares favorably to the region. To equip new teachers coming into the district for success and thus better retain teachers of all races, Richland Two is strengthening its two-year induction program that gives new teachers access to an instructional coach and a teacher mentor. They also host a New to Two conference to engage new staff in the district's culture and practices and monthly meetings where new teachers can ask seasoned administrators and teachers their authentic questions.

This support strategy is even stronger for teachers in the Premier 100 program, as a gift from their custodial services partner Services Solutions helps the district team deliver small monetary bonuses and individualized professional growth plans.

The initial Premier 100 cohort consisted of 27 new male teachers of color. Recruiting efforts have yielded 55 total male teachers of color, which puts the district a little over halfway toward its four-year goal. Although Richland Two was above the national average of minority male teachers of color at 6% when launching the Premier 100 and has improved to approximately 8%, they know this barely scratches the surface of what is needed and possible.

The Premier 100 and programs like it provide school districts with a pathway to grow and diversify the teaching profession, reduce the cultural mismatch students of color routinely face, and lift what is possible by attracting a stronger workforce and increasing the cultural richness of the collaboration and learning environments. While the superintendent's resignation in January 2023 is another sign of a growing leadership crisis in K-12, Richland is well positioned to leverage lessons from the initial success of Premier 100 to learn from staff across the district which investments will help build critical capabilities and thereby help better retain teachers and advance the district's wildest aspirations.



Baron Davis

04

Equitable Resource Reallocation

The Why

Whether site-based or district based, school budgeting formulas have historically created inequities in per pupil funding. More and more districts are beginning to peel back this process and deeply examine whether historic practices are sufficient to create equitable outcomes.

Resource allocation is an area where K-12 leaders need more innovation and attribution. Creative and courageous moves are necessary if systems truly want to pursue academic acceleration, innovative secondary models, and creative staffing. Though [large-scale change and more fundamental rethinking](#) is needed at the federal and state levels, there are district leaders digging into the significant work within their control and starting to move the needle with pilots of innovation and strategic abandonment. When resources are working at optimal levels, organizations take bold moves to stop funding initiatives out of alignment with priorities. Instead, staff are energized by investments that grow capabilities essential for the future and help them experience a clear path to achieving their goals.

The Work

When Superintendent Leslie Torres Rodriguez started in Hartford Public Schools, she was faced with school closures and consolidation as the way to free dollars. However, what she uncovered in her pursuit of understanding root causes was that the current district budgeting formula allowed unintentional inequities by devoting far fewer resources to support her multilingual students, students with disabilities, and at-risk students with chronic absenteeism than essential. She championed her district departments and outside stakeholders to recreate an equity-centered formula by focusing on the end-user experience through transparency, flexibility, and engagement.

Complex districts need coherence, aligning dollars to strategic priorities. Instead of basing school resources strictly on student enrollment, districts are opting for a more layered approach to allow more dollars to follow the most vulnerable students. In Ector County, Scott Muri and his team added a weighted-funding formula based on poverty, special education, and English language learners solely out of general funds. Title I funds are now being used for innovation in alignment to the strategic plan. This shift would not have been achieved without opening the minds of the district and campus leaders and challenging them to rethink the opportunities provided by Title funds. Addressing inequitable funding takes time, data, and stakeholder buy-in. Districts committed to equitable funding models can better advance transformational long-term outcomes by developing external partnerships and holding these partners accountable to their role in advancing student access to life-changing opportunities.

Rob Anderson, Superintendent of Boulder County School District, took a hard look at the widespread and long-lived partnerships that were both community-based and vendor driven. Together with his leadership team, they evaluated each partnership, using data to determine which ones aligned with the district's strategic plan. In the end, many partnerships had to be dissolved and new ones were formed if there was a clear path showing how it worked in service of student needs and district priorities. As a result of equity-centered investments in leadership development, community-based student support partnerships, and stronger curriculum and professional development, the district's growth in 2021-22 outpaced the state and Boulder's two most historically underserved schools (both UVA-PLE partner schools) are now outpacing their pre-pandemic academic outcomes across most measures.



Resource allocation is an area where K-12 leaders need more innovation and attribution. Creative and courageous moves need to be made if systems truly want to pursue academic acceleration, innovative secondary models, and creative staffing.

The Way Forward

Systemic reform is needed in state, local, and district funding practices. Notwithstanding incredible inequities stemming from state and broader policies that need to be addressed, there are untapped opportunities at the local level to innovate, champion, and propel forward that are not widespread. These opportunities include how to:

Advance disruption, embracing strategic opportunities and risks that:

- Reimagine what funding would look like if aligned to most critical needs and challenging whether the current allocations work in service of strategic goals, equity, and excellence
- Create space to challenge predominant practices and inspire proposals that may attract governmental or philanthropic resources to the district
- Invest in pilots and learning from out-of-the-box ideas that inspire promise

Invest in people while working across traditional organizational silos differently to:

- Take a hard look at the current funding formula, leveraging a strong lens on [effective and equitable resource allocation](#)
- Navigate the internal and external politics surrounding strategic abandonment to create investment streams for a more inspired future
- Build staff efficacy and motivation to achieve mission-critical opportunities

Strategic Usage of Resources to Enrich Student Experiences: Aldine ISD

Aldine Independent School District, the 11th largest district in Texas, spans 111 square miles and encompasses 84 campuses. In 2018, when Dr. Goffney stepped in as Superintendent, she embarked her team on deep looking, listening, and learning. After review, and just as the pandemic emerged, the team in 2019 launch a dynamic strategic plan, A New Way Forward. The plan implemented focused initiatives and aggressive reallocation of resources with a focus on maximizing the “4 T’s”: Time, Talent, Tier One Instruction, and Targeted Support. The goal, to ensure every child in Aldine has equitable access to high-quality resources and caring, skillful teachers every day.

As part of their learning from stakeholders, the team determined that they did not have the necessary coherent resources and high instructional expectations necessary to drive systemic academic acceleration. Since then, Aldine developed instructional frameworks in literacy, math, science, social studies, multilingual, and early learning through grassroots efforts that involved collective studies of research.

An outside organization was brought in to conduct a program evaluation of all the resources and inform the efforts to strategically abandon any programs or resources misaligned with the emerging frameworks.

Where new curriculum was needed, Aldine researched and adopted a rigorous, accessible, and highly structured curriculum aligned to the new instructional frameworks. By leveling the playing field with providing and supporting teachers in delivering high-quality and culturally relevant curriculum and materials, the Aldine team is addressing inequities head on and ensuring consistent high expectations for students who are often transient across campuses. Students in Aldine are now increasingly taught about subjects they find exciting and engaging. More affluent districts have taught their gifted students this way for years, and Aldine is aiming to equalize education by offering the same rich experiences to all students via Tier One instruction while investing to accelerate unfinished learning. The district is investing in strategic scheduling to increase time for learning acceleration, new formative assessment strategies to identify high-leverage gaps towards grade-level mastery, and high-dosage tutoring to complement these efforts.

District leadership also invested differently in helping students arrive more ready to learn. During 2020, they saw one of the greatest declines in enrollment during the pandemic with only 48% of students at first returning to schools in the Fall to learn in person in part due to residents in the community working in industries such as hospitality, transportation, and food services. The community looked to the district for stability as district teams held clothing and food drives, ratcheted up home visits, and increased community partnership outreach to help students get what they needed to then be able to show up for class. These more responsive strategies will continue beyond the pandemic.

The district also took advantage of the state-funded Additional Day School Year (ADSY) initiative to better maximize the “4 T’s.” Through ADSY, Aldine added 30 school days and additional time devoted to students’ individual needs in four campuses across one feeder pattern.

This year, Aldine has seen marked improvement on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR:

- 33 campuses are rated A/B (almost double from 2019)
- Reading almost recovered to pre-COVID levels at the elementary level
- Elementary campuses and eighth-grade academic growth performance outpaced state averages in most subjects

Students in Aldine are further along because the Aldine team refused to take the easier route and postpone the implementation of the new strategic plan or curricular investments. In contrast, they accelerated the rollout of strategic investments focused on the needs of students and the community.



LaTonya Goffney

Strategic Realignment of Resources Toward Equity: Caddo Parish Public Schools

Dr. Lamar Goree has been the Superintendent of the Caddo Parish Public Schools district in Caddo Parish, Louisiana since 2013. The district serves approximately 37,000 students across 58 schools, which includes 3 charter agreements.

Dr. Goree ignited the team to re-allocate resources centrally to align with strategic priorities that address inequities. Of note, to ensure all students have access to Tier One resources and effective instructional delivery, all literacy resources and professional development are aligned to strategic priorities and the district eliminated significant lines of other professional development. The district also eliminated less-strategic positions to prioritize support to underserved schools via a position overseeing district transformation that marshals resources across the district to be responsive to the needs of schools in their zone.

To address staffing pipeline and equity challenges, Caddo Parish invested heavily in in-house certification, the Caddo Teaching Academy, and placed graduates into hard-to-staff schools, which 10 years ago had as many as 70% of their teachers comprised of long-term substitutes. Caddo Parish selectively identified Volunteers for America as a strategic partner to bring in Communities in Schools, which provides access to supportive resources for families outside the school day and greater mentorship opportunities for underserved students.

The school district also combined many previous non-strategic, one-off investments in wraparound supports to advance higher leverage usage aligned to their families' greatest needs. The Caddo team partnered with the district attorney's office as well as Volunteers for Youth Justice to create a one-stop shop in a vacant school building. The county matched the \$300,000 investment, in addition to \$100,000 provided by the mayor's office, to completely renovate and maximize an empty space proximal to the bus line. The space was transformed into a place where families can go to receive food stamps, child support services, mental health support, and more. Additionally, they work closely with juvenile judges to address truancy spikes and help families have what they need to ensure their students get to school.

Together, these academic and family support investments promote student success and have been critical contributors to:

- Title 1 Blue Ribbon status and removal from the state accountability clock for multiple schools and average student growth that far outpaces the state
- Student graduation rates at the highest in district history
- 90% certified staff in hard-to-staff schools

Dr. Goree has clearly set the vision and mission around a strategic plan anchored on equitable access to high academic standards, advanced coursework, and strong mental and physical health services. His cabinet aligns goals, solves challenges, and prioritizes departmental work accordingly. All district leadership professional learning, support, and conversations are designed to deepen and strengthen collective understanding of student and school needs and align resources to strategic goals.



Lamar Goree

Systems Leadership Matters

Based on learning from the spotlights and themes amplified across this report, we identified four primary leadership behaviors of leadership teams successfully defying a business-as-usual approach and creating systems that meet the complexity and student needs of our time:

1. They ignite their teams toward embracing disruptive change and advancing a compelling picture of a future state. While celebrating their stakeholders' heroic efforts throughout the pandemic, leaders also create significant dissatisfaction with the status quo and with existing inequities. This helps stakeholders see there is no option but to shift practice. They also engender significant hope for their ability to provide an excellent education experience for each student, enlisting a guiding coalition across boundaries to create an inspiring picture for student experiences and outcomes. They leverage the disruption of the last couple of years to their advantage, highlighting where previously unimaginable shifts have come to fruition. These leaders do not throw out all previous practices, which would contribute to the sense among educators that change is a constant pendulum swing. Rather, they ground their vision for the future in a strong understanding of the current state, including where there are existing strong assets in the organization to bring to bear. By naming and building on existing strengths, stakeholders are more motivated to embrace co-creating what is next.

2. They identify and prioritize clear opportunities that address critical stakeholder needs and take high-leverage, strategic risks that accelerate progress towards meeting those needs. A better understanding of stakeholders' greatest needs equipped leadership teams to achieve a compelling vision. Rather than determining the district's focus at cabinet and board meetings alone, leaders invite teams across the organization to name what type of risks or evolution must be pursued to achieve greater outcomes, particularly for underserved students. Leaders have too often felt the need to solve

problems in a "hurry up and get it done" manner to meet funding deadlines, staffing shortfalls, and COVID re-entry timelines. While this crisis response resulted in some overdue innovation, strategic and sustained attention to future-oriented opportunities is required to systemically address unmet needs. Leaders successfully advancing transformation often encourage teams to engage in small experiments and risks aligned to where there is the greatest hunger and need. They realize many risks will not pan out, some may be wild ideas, and some may involve redesign to emphasize core principles such as the science of reading, data-informed assessment cycles, student connection, and staff motivation. These leaders are using strategic risk-taking and increased engagement around a common vision to define clear, forward-looking opportunities to pursue across the organization or in learning labs designed to pilot the shifts. These leaders leverage every vehicle possible to communicate these opportunities and spotlight students, teachers, and staff achieving promising results using these strategies.

3. They insist on teams working differently across silos to redesign systems, staffing, and resource allocation to align with their desired future state. Igniting teams around clear, prioritized opportunities will not work without shifts in the organizational design needed in pursuit of those opportunities. Successful leaders are not layering pursuit of priorities on top of existing systems and job designs, but instead recognize their already stretched teams need to engage in new ways of working. They match the strategy for bold opportunities to the situation, leveraging core change teams to enlist others across organizational, power, and identity

boundaries to pursue a shared purpose and create a new story. They keep a focus on agility and insist on collaborating across silos, as the solutions to the messy challenges require collective ownership versus each department conquering their own priorities, which often results in incoherence. These leaders foster curiosity about what dramatically different outcomes will take to achieve, including how to rethink outdated processes, how to motivate and build capacity of staff differently, and how to engage stakeholders who may be misaligned with the vision. These leaders tackle ambiguity and confusion by being clear about what is tight in job and process designs and where there is encouragement to design differently and co-create the path to the future. These leaders tackle compliance and inertia by centering meetings, PLCs, and development on a shared purpose that inspires stakeholders and connects the need for action and problem-solving to aspirational goals.

- 4. They invest in people and support systems to learn, adapt, and execute towards achievement of a different state, developing both core and new capabilities across the organization.** One consistent practice that stood out in the most promising stories is an investment in people that builds critical capabilities, increases respect, and builds ladders of opportunity to grow contributions. Growing talent and relationships with local stakeholders is essential and requires outside-the-box solutions, especially given that many existing approaches for identifying and developing talent are not working. Improvement cycles can contribute to new forms of investment, but too often focus on rigid processes

or narrow goals. Fundamental reinvention requires support systems that incentivize measuring, learning, and adapting toward clear, student-centered long-term outcomes and key leading indicators of practice shifts. Yes, staff who are not on board with the desired state or who are not showing progress need to be held accountable. The ultimate goal is reinvention that builds buy-in across the organization and emphasizes a spirit of inclusivity to produce broad organizational ownership for the change initiative. Promoting this collective ownership and learning helps system leaders understand the on-ground reality, meet the interests of the many, and avoid being distracted by the loudest voices resisting changes. Doing this well requires staff to experience more investments in professional development and creative problem-solving opportunities that grow their efficacy and less time engaged in required activities that may not align to organizational priorities or their expressed interests for growth.

We hope these insights ignite a sense of possibilities and reflection on the type of change leadership and execution critical to your context. For those serious about advancing new frontiers, UVA-PLE provides unparalleled leadership development experiences and systems change support via our [Core Partnership](#). We would love to partner to ignite and equip your system and school teams to advance lasting transformation. We also welcome nominations for partnership as well as to be featured in a national repository, as we seek to connect teams across the country with ideas and stories that inspire and inform.



PARTNERSHIP *for*
LEADERS *in* EDUCATION

100 Darden Boulevard
Charlottesville, VA 22903
USA

+1-434-924-8719
uvaple@arden.virginia.edu
www.darden.virginia.edu/uva-ple