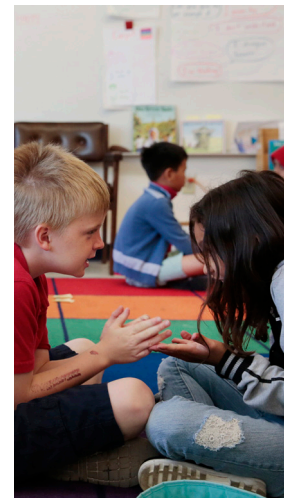# LEAD
BY LEARNING

Understand learning. Improve teaching. Build leadership.
A program of Mills College School of Education

Leading by Learning

Creating the Conditions for Adult Learning

MINDSETS

PRACTICES

weleadbylearning.org

Welcome

Dear school and district leaders,

Each year in March, at our Inquiry in Action Forum at Mills College in Oakland, California, we invite our teacher and leader partners to share what they are learning and how they are changing their instructional practice as they engage in collaborative inquiry. It's a festive evening celebrating curiosity and acknowledging the complexity of the work of teaching, leading, and learning. Without fail, at the end of the evening, a school or district leader will approach me and ask, "How do I get my staff to drive their own improvement in this way?"

The question itself highlights the problem that our work seeks to address. The transformational work of building a culture that drives improvement does not reside solely in a set of practices; rather, it requires holding certain beliefs about the work of teaching and the importance of adult learning in creating a more just and equitable education system. The question we encourage leaders to ask is: **"What do I need to believe and do in order to support my teachers in driving their own improvement?"**

Through her decades of work at Mills College School of Education, our founder, Dr. Anna Richert, researched, wrote, and advocated for supporting and valuing teachers as agents of their own learning. She insisted that this belief was critical to the effort to improve student learning.
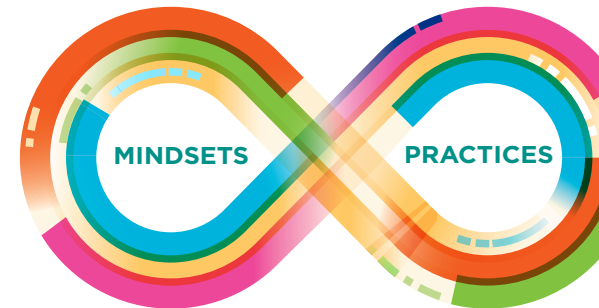
This playbook was developed as a guide to valuing, supporting, and leveraging the knowledge-building of those working closest to students and their families. At every level of the system, we are asking, "What is your goal? What are you learning? What is it that you need in order to learn?" Instead of hierarchical command and control, this is a partnership stance.

We are excited to share the mindsets and practices that have emerged from our last decade of learning alongside our school partners. We hope it helps you bolster your adult learning culture in service of improved learning for each and every student.
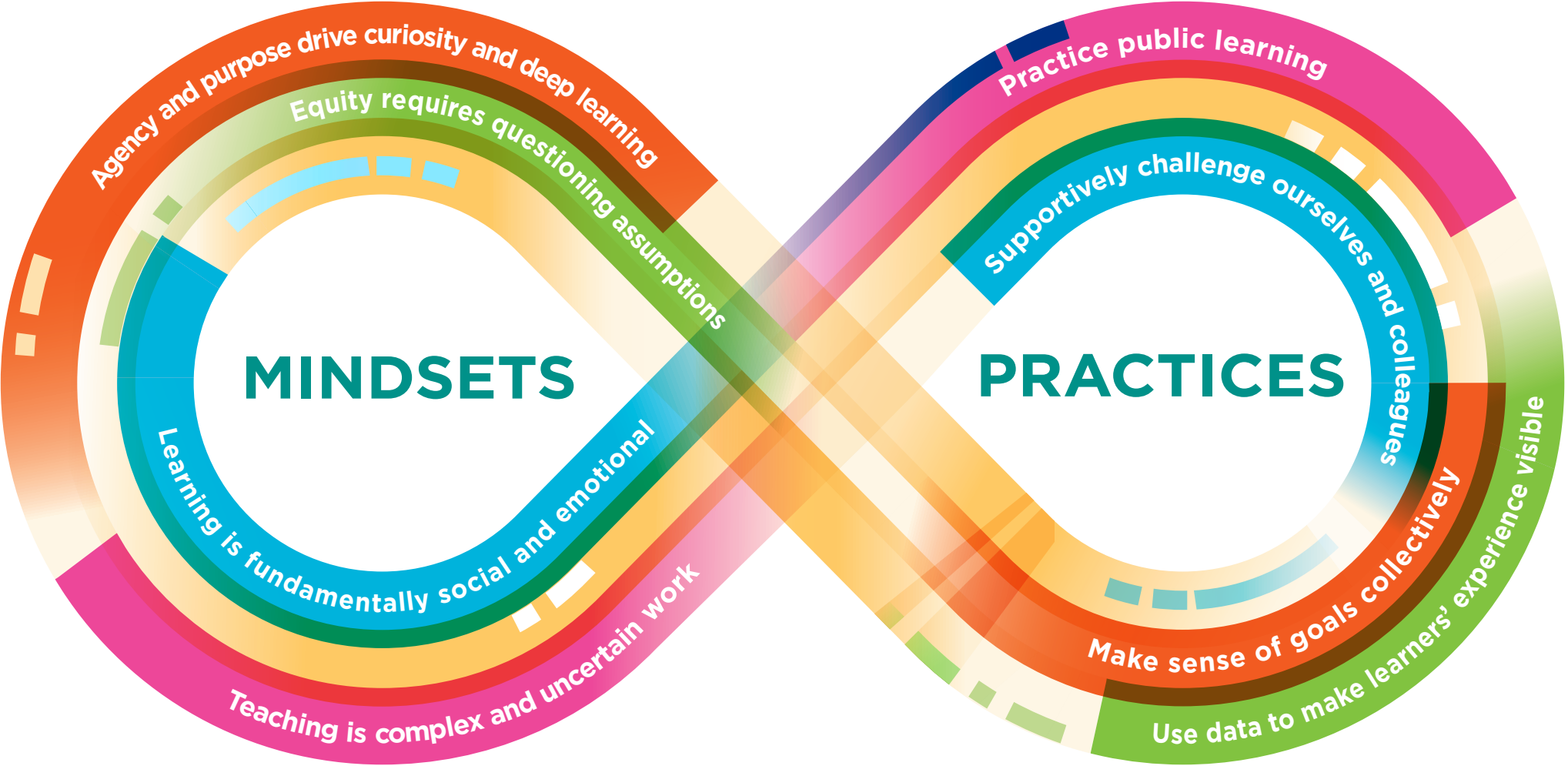
Warmly,

Carrie Wilson

Carrie Wilson
Executive Director, Lead by Learning

MINDSETS   PRACTICES

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING IN SERVICE OF EQUITY

Agency and purpose drive curiosity and deep learning

Equity requires questioning assumptions

Learning is fundamentally social and emotional

Teaching is complex and uncertain work

MINDSETS

Practice public learning

Supportively challenge ourselves and colleagues

Use data to make learners' experience visible

Make sense of goals collectively

PRACTICES

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SELF-IMPROVEMENT REQUIRES SELF-AWARENESS. SELF-AWARENESS IS BUILT IN COLLABORATION AND WITH COMPASSION.

"It is a relief to name the uncertainty in teaching by framing a question about one's work. In this way we undo the myth of certainty that pervades our field these days. It is liberating to know what you know and what you need to know more about so you can continuously improve your practice."

—Anna Richert, founder,
Lead by Learning

Contents

All students can learn and deserve access to instruction that honors and addresses their individual needs.
The mission of Lead by Learning is to support educational systems to create the conditions for adult learning that are necessary to make this vision a reality.

Introduction

If improving outcomes for students were simply about training teachers to implement a set of programs, we would be much farther along in our improvement efforts. But learning is more complex than this. Teacher learning that leads to improved opportunities for students across a system requires more than curricular training, program implementation, and dashboard monitoring. It requires a collaborative, disciplined curiosity about what is happening for learners inside classrooms. It requires honest conversations grounded in empathy, relevant data, and shared responsibility that allow us to confront our implicit biases and build awareness of our effectiveness.

The investment of attention and care in what individuals are learning about their practice is central to improvement, and it ripples across the educational system. For teachers to learn how to pay exquisite attention to students' thinking, school leaders must learn how to pay exquisite attention to teachers' thinking, and in turn, district leaders must learn how to pay exquisite attention to school leaders' thinking. The engine that drives this systemwide learning is leadership that values, supports, and leverages practitioners' construction of knowledge. By creating the conditions in which all educators can inquire into what is happening for their learners, leaders create a culture that is adaptive—where teachers shift instruction that results in more equitable outcomes for all students.


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Transformation will happen for students when the system is designed to support and value what the practitioners who work most closely with students and families are learning—about their teaching, about their learners, and about themselves.

The purpose of this playbook is to

- Prompt you to question the degree to which your adult learning spaces reflect the complexity of the work of teaching: Are your professional learning communities going beyond planning and progress monitoring to promoting adult learning?

- Provide you with concrete practices that you can try in order to develop an adult learning culture that results in improvements in learning opportunities for your students.

A Culture of Learning and Improvement at All Levels of the System

Student

Teacher

Principal

District Leader

Community
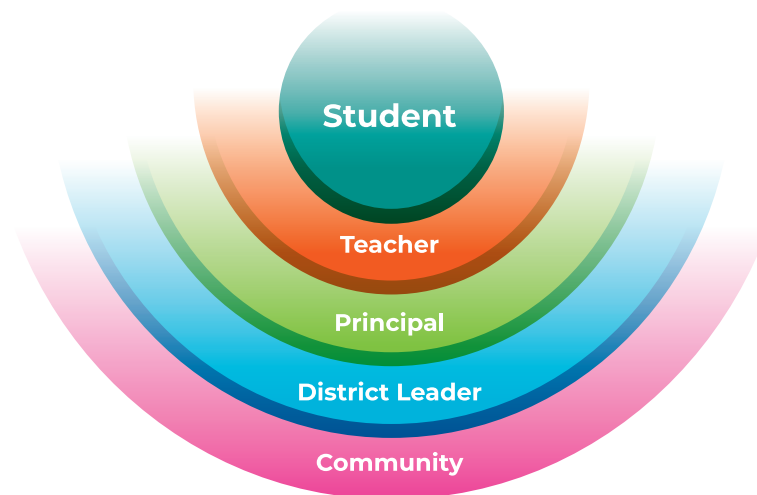
Everyone is asking:

What am I trying to do and why does it matter?

What's happening for my learners and how do I know?

What are the gaps in my understanding and how can I learn more?

How am I shifting my practice based on what I am learning?

Improvement requires adult social and emotional learning

Currently, improving an educational system is equated with implementing a new program. But implementing new programs and best practices is not enough. To meet the complex challenge of facilitating learning for a diverse group of learners, we need transformational change that falls in the realm of social and emotional learning (SEL).[1] SEL addresses the conditions, mindsets, and beliefs of human beings. To create a culture of learning across all levels of the system, the notion of what constitutes adult learning must extend beyond providing training about programs and curricula. Leaders must give educators the opportunity to build their social and emotional capacity so they can take on the challenge of improving together.

If you take only one thing from this playbook, we hope it's the idea that improvement—for adults as well as for students—is emotional work. Not emotional as in "tears and agony," though learning can feel like that, but emotional in that improvement is an exercise in becoming self-aware about effectiveness. Self-awareness is a social and emotional competency. And because the self-awareness that we promote in this playbook involves collaboration, our practices weave together many social and emotional competencies like social awareness and self-management.[2]

Colleagues boost our ability to build self-awareness about the impact of our practice by helping us to clarify our thinking, by shining a light on our blind spots and biases, and by adding another perspective to our understanding. **An individual's ability to feel whole inside of this collaborative, awareness-building exercise is key to a system's ability to improve.** We propose that leaders at all levels give their attention to nurturing this capacity for building self-awareness.

The conditions for building self-awareness are set, in large part, by the leader's beliefs about learning. These beliefs are communicated in a hundred different ways. They are largely invisible, residing "below the iceberg"[3] or "below the green line,"[4] but we can see them in how safe adults feel surfacing an honest uncertainty, in the level of professional agency they experience, and in the degree to which they feel they can get better at their work.

By definition, a playbook is about doing something; yet focusing solely on doing won't address the conditions for learning. That's why we're starting off by looking at the mindsets that promote a learning culture, and we will resurface them with each practice.

Four key mindsets that help create the conditions for adult learning in service of student learning

1 **Teaching, leading, and learning are uncertain and complex work.**

There is a pervasive myth in US culture that teaching is straightforward, technical work. If teachers simply implement an evidence-based best practice, the thinking goes, students will learn. Unfortunately, our students are bearing the burden of this oversimplification of teaching, leading, and

1 **Mindset in action**

Leaders support professional learning communities to expand beyond planning and comparing test score data by engaging in conversations that tackle complex questions like, "What do we mean by academic language?" or "How are we building on the assets of our English learners?" Leaders value teacher time spent reflecting on dilemmas of daily practice, relationships with individual learners, and the impact of teachers' own social and emotional learning on their practice.

learning. Using the best instructional practice is one aspect of improvement, but teaching effectively is far more complex and requires an adaptive stance. The most successful global systems cultivate cultures in which teachers support each other in making sense of their students' learning needs and their goals for their students.[5]

2 Equity requires questioning assumptions.

Improvements in educational systems hinge on our ability to make sense of the learners' process and assess their progress accurately. But brain-based research informs us that our blind spots inhibit our ability to accurately make sense of the world.[6] We walk around continuously making unconscious assumptions about student learning based on race, gender, class, and other social and political realities. One's own assumptions are practically impossible to see without the support of a trusted colleague. With meaningful classroom-based data and a trusted colleague or coach, teachers can begin to see, recognize, and change assumptions and biases that interfere with their ability to serve all students.

2 Mindset in action

Leaders who operate with this mindset understand implicit bias and insist that their teachers move beyond a "culture of nice" to compassionately help each other build their capacity to serve all of their students better. Teachers collaborate, sharing data that accurately surfaces students' classroom learning experiences, which helps them better understand how to accelerate learning.

3 Learning is fundamentally social and emotional for adults as well as students.

Early childhood educators have long known that learning has a strong emotional component. Brain imaging technology now enables us to see concrete evidence that learning is fundamentally emotional, for adults as well as students.[7] For students to improve, we need to attend to teachers' social and emotional learning skills as they work to improve their practice. In a school setting where teachers work in isolation and are expected to have all the answers on their own, it is not easy for anyone to acknowledge the shortcomings in their own teaching practice. Continuous improvement necessitates becoming self aware in order to recognize one's own level of effectiveness; it is best achieved in professional relationships with trusted colleagues.[8] Building the capacity for this kind of self-awareness in every individual across a system is a daunting—and necessary—task; this capacity is the social and emotional heartbeat of teacher learning.

3 Mindset in action

Leaders with this mindset acknowledge the vulnerability inherent in learning. They invest in relationship-building and value the process of collaborative learning and collective sense-making. Leaders with this mindset go beyond simply providing collaboration time for teachers; they pay attention to the quality of that collaboration and the way teachers interact.

④ Agency and purpose drive curiosity and deep learning.

Choice and relevance are key to learning. When learners are encouraged to ask questions that are relevant to their own experience, when they can choose their own path to learning that is connected to a larger purpose, they feel the kind of engagement that is foundational to learning.[9] This is as true for teachers as they learn about students as it is for their students. But if a teacher has never had the experience of asking relevant questions— questions that they choose—they may struggle to facilitate this process for students. By giving teachers a sense of agency and power to work towards their own valued goals, leaders are, in turn, helping them to empower their students.

④ Mindset in action

Leaders with this mindset establish a focus for school improvement and encourage teachers to pursue an area of their classroom instruction within that focus that they feel most curious, concerned, or passionate about. Instead of thinking, "We need to get teachers to _____ ," these leaders encourage teachers to get curious about their students' experiences within the broader school goal in order to understand how to support their students' learning.

How to use this playbook

The success of the practices in this playbook depends upon the clarity of purpose of those engaging with it and the degree of agency that teachers have to exercise their professional curiosity. If these practices are presented as "just another activity the district wants us to do," they will offer little value. To be transformative, they need to be framed within a system that acknowledges the complexity of teaching and learning and values the learning that occurs.

Each of the remaining chapters focuses on a different signature practice, and includes

- An overview of the practice
- 1 to 2 mindsets that are particularly relevant to the practice
- A case study
- A concrete way to engage in the practice
- A partnership approach to getting started

As you read this playbook, we invite you to think about

- **Mindsets:** What are your beliefs about adult learning? How do they show up in the conditions for learning at your site?
- **Practices:** What are you trying to do? What is the change that you want to see?
- **Partnership:** How will you support the adult learning that is required to support student learning? How will you partner with teachers to carry out this work?

Practice 1

Using Data to Make Learners' Experience Visible

When we acknowledge that teaching is uncertain work, classroom-based data that tells us what is happening for our learners becomes essential for understanding the impact of our practice.

MINDSETS **PRACTICES**

Why make learners' experience visible?

Dashboards and proficiency scores tell us what needs improvement, but they don't tell us how to improve it. To truly support student equity and advancement, educational systems must support the adult learning required to make these improvements possible.

When we value and prioritize data that provides a window into student thinking, teachers can shift instruction to honor and address students' needs. This involves exploding our traditional view of data as limited to numbers and test scores and expanding it to include records of student thinking and behavior that can be observed, listened to, and looked at.

We've been asked, "But, what does this kind of data actually *prove?*" The question itself reveals a bias towards using data to measure achievement. The intention is not to prove anything. Rather, it's to reveal information about how students think and learn that can drive improvement.[10]

> "By tracking data from our computer-based reading assessment along with running records, notes I took in small groups, and videos of students reading, I realized that 'intervention' was not one-size-fits-all and low readers were low readers for vastly different reasons."
>
> —Jessie, fifth grade teacher

Using data that goes beyond measuring achievement is an equity strategy. It gives teachers the opportunity to check their assumptions about student learning against what their data shows is actually happening for students. Data discussions shift from "What does this score reveal about what our students don't know?" to "What does this data reveal about what our students know and can do? And how can I build on that? What might be helping or hindering their learning?" By disrupting the narratives of "gaps, lacks, and deficits," we can build new narratives focused on our students' assets and funds of knowledge.[11] As a result, teachers can better develop a responsive plan that supports their students' learning.

Data that reveals learners' experience includes

- Notes from a conversation with a student about their learning
- Audio/video recordings of a partner discussion between students
- Observational notes from a vocabulary activity
- Students' written reflections on math problem-solving strategies
- Writing journals
- Classroom minutes comparing teacher talk time to student talk time

Teachers work with a large number of students. Focusing on this kind of data from just a few students, however, can create a powerful impact across the entire class.

Making learners' experience visible **is**	Making learners' experience visible **is not**
Shining a light on the learning process of the students furthest from opportunity	An airtight argument for implementing a certain initiative in a certain way
Seeing students' learning as more than a number	Just an activity for the beginning of the year
Understanding what is and is not working to support learning	Handing out a matrix with the goals, benchmarks, and a plan
Understanding students' assets in order to build on their strengths	Blaming or shaming teachers for data results
An opportunity to learn from student work that teachers are already collecting	Only about progress monitoring

Listening to students leads to change

As Bay View School was focused on developing students' academic language, fifth grade teacher Erin was excited by the possibility of connecting the wider school goal to her students' book clubs. Wanting to gain a better understanding of where her students were starting from and help them have more in-depth academic conversations about their books, Erin made an audio recording of several book club discussions.

"One huge 'Aha!' for me," Erin says, "was that my initial data just sounded like individual students presenting to a group with no real interaction. I had one group reading *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. Their topic that day was theme, and one student shared they thought the theme was, 'Never give up hope.' The next student said they thought the theme was, 'Hope isn't enough to save you.' The group all nodded and moved on to the next question. **Hearing that recording was so eye-opening for me—the group either didn't notice or didn't have the tools to address the fact that two members had completely conflicting ideas!**"

Erin focused in on that group and tried different instructional approaches, listening to snippets of new recordings with several colleagues each month. Together they worked to define what successful book club discussions would look like and understand Erin's students' progress. Erin found that having students discuss videos of other book clubs had the most impact on their ability to have academic conversations themselves.

Stepping into the Practice

Teachers tell us that the simple act of asking students questions about their learning experience has led to some of their most impactful changes in practice.

> **Invite teachers to talk to focal students individually about their learning.**

Listening closely to what several students have to say deepens teachers' understanding of their experience. A few individual conversations can open new instructional avenues that benefit the entire class.

Several steps help make the process a success:

1 Share the purpose behind the activity.

2 Revisit the school-wide learning goals.

3 Have teachers choose from one to three students whose educational experience they are curious about in light of these goals.

4 Provide some guidance around questions that will help teachers uncover students' experience in the focal learning area. For example,

- Tell me about a time when you ____ (activity related to goal). What made that easy/challenging for you? Why?

- What usually happens for you during ___ (activity related to goal)?

- What do we do in class that best helps you with ____ (activity related to goal)?

"I was surprised that taking a few minutes to listen individually to my focal students to understand a little more about their reading process could be so powerful. As it turned out, neither of them had tried to read a chapter book before. Our conversations helped me identify my starting point, and later I used the same intervention strategies for a similar band of students."

—Beth, fourth grade teacher

5 Have teachers decide how they will capture students' responses (take notes during the conversation, make an audio or video recording, or something else).

6 After teachers have recorded students' responses, provide time for them to share and discuss their data with each other. Invite teachers to see the resulting data as a way to help them understand their students' learning, a starting point for thinking about next steps. Ways to support these discussions are featured in the chapters on public learning and supportively challenging colleagues.

We suggest trying this partnership approach first...

Talk to 1 or 2 students about their learning process.

Collecting focal student data yourself signals to teachers that you're learning alongside them and allows you to build relationships and empathy as you experience what you want teachers to experience.

Activate these mindsets

- **Teaching is complex and uncertain work**
- **Learning is fundamentally social and emotional**

Suggested steps:

- Ask one or two students about their learning experience and take notes or record what they say.

- Invite a teacher from your Instructional Leadership Team to be your thought partner and look at your data together.
  Discuss what the data tells you about each student's learning experience. Reflect on the kinds of questions that encourage students to describe their learning.

- Use one of the conversations as a model for colleagues when you introduce the practice to the staff. Share what you learned from talking to this student.

Practice 2

Supportively Challenging Ourselves and Our Colleagues

Asking hard questions in supportive ways is an expression of care and nurtures collaborative learning.

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Why supportively challenge ourselves?

Building our understanding of our racial identity is central to creating a culture of learning focused on equity. This self-awareness impacts how we understand and interact with ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

We ask our partners to look inward and build awareness about how their lived experiences, racial identity, and positionality influence their leadership practice. Here is an activity that grounds their reflection:

Think of a particular moment that stretched your awareness of your racial identity. Examine this moment as a way to supportively challenge yourself.

- How **aware** were you of your race, positionality, and privilege in that moment? How did that influence the way you showed up?

- Returning to that time, what **feelings** came up for you? What comes up now?

- How is being **self-aware of your identity** (race, positionality, privilege) a strength in your work?

Our partners tell us that discussing these questions within racial affinity groups is helpful in building awareness about racial identity. When we group people we are transparent about the purpose and we invite feedback on how it felt.

Racial Affinity Groups and Supportively Challenging Ourselves

"As a teacher of color, I never had an experience in any racial affinity group in a professional setting. But after I experienced it once, I realized how important it is to have opportunities to enter a brave space with people who look like me. It is important that we acknowledge that we live in a white supremacist culture which means that it's often not safe for teachers of color to share and be vulnerable when it comes to matters dealing with race and identity. Therefore, I felt that it was important for everyone to have an experience of affirmation and being heard for who they are.

What is right and what is valued is the "white" way. A lot of us have internalized and compared ourselves to those white standards. When you ask people to bring up things that are personal it is powerful to be able to share that with people who look like you and to be seen for who you are."

~Malia Tayabas-Kim, Lead by Learning Program Associate, former Oakland Unified second-grade teacher and SEL teacher leader

Why supportively challenge colleagues?

Where are the adult learning conversations in our educational system? While conversations about planning and assessment are common, our partner teachers and leaders consistently report that learning conversations involving questioning a colleague's idea or tackling a deeper purpose together are rare. In addition, there is often a "culture of nice" surrounding professional collaboration. Trying to push a colleague to go deeper can be seen as unsupportive or asking too much, since the demands of teaching are hard enough.

How do we honor each other's hard work and simultaneously push each other to understand how our beliefs and practices are impacting our progress towards equity? One way is to work with teachers to reframe what it means to be a caring colleague. Showing care should include offering observations and asking questions that can help colleagues expand their thinking.

"Our entire school culture is now infused with a spirit of positivity, risk taking, and collaborative support. It is the best model for PD I have seen in 20 years. Teachers are invested and engaged."

—Principal, Oakland Unified School District

> "When we stopped focusing on what was already strong in each others' lesson plans and started trying to ask questions to push each other's thinking, that's when I felt like we started to have breakthroughs and make progress."
>
> —Maggie, tenth grade humanities teacher

When teachers engage in learning conversations grounded in empathy, data, and shared responsibility, they

- Benefit from multiple perspectives on their students' learning
- Build awareness of their blind spots and implicit biases
- Better understand the effectiveness of their instruction
- See themselves as part of a community of learners
- Become more open to change and new ideas
- Feel empowered to drive their next steps

Key roles in learning conversations

Supportive challenge happens within learning conversations. In a learning conversation, both the speaker (the learner) and the listener (the person supportively challenging) play essential roles in promoting learning.

Role of the speaker
- To build their self-awareness through surfacing honest uncertainties and inviting feedback

Common pitfall: Speaker gives a report on what they are doing and are planning to do without wondering aloud about uncertainties, tensions, or blindpspots.

Role of the listener
- To build the speaker's self-awareness by asking questions that deepen the speaker's understanding of their goals and of their current reality

Common pitfall: Listener offers solutions before the speaker has had time to do their own thinking. This doesn't mean listeners should not share an idea; however, the most powerful learning happens when the speaker is allowed time to clarify and stretch their thinking first.

Supportively challenging colleagues **is**	Supportively challenging colleagues **is not**
Asking questions and sharing data-based observations to help a colleague clarify their learning goals and next steps	Making suggestions or sharing your own experiences in the classroom
Asking questions and sharing data-based observations that help a colleague see what they may not be able to see on their own	Judging colleagues
Following a colleague's lead on what they want to better understand	Planning time
Focusing on what is happening with students' learning	Venting frustrations about students
Sometimes emotionally challenging	Making generalizations that are not tied to colleagues' data

What does supportive challenge sound like?

Example #1: Elementary teachers Jaymie and Aija discuss reading partnerships in Jaymie's first grade classroom.

J: An end goal would be that when students are reading, and they think of something, they're able to pause and share with their partner whatever they're thinking. But I don't know how I'm going to get there yet.

A: If you could envision what came right after the "Did you know ____?" sentence stem, what would you like to see?

J: I guess just back and forth about the statement that that person made.

A: [Pause.] And how might you model that?

J: [Pause.] That's a good question...I'm not sure. Because it seems like whenever I see it, it's just happening on its own, and I don't know how they're doing it.

A: It sounds like a next step for you is thinking about the back and forth that you want to see and how to design a mini-lesson or instruction showing students the back and forth after the sentence stem.

Aija's questions helped reveal a gap for Jaymie who didn't realize she hadn't fully visualized all of the steps of the process she wanted her students to follow.

Example #2: Computer science teachers Sam, Kendrick, and Joni discuss a video of Sam helping students Myleah and Alex with problem solving.

K: One thing I noticed in the videos is Alex had a longer session with Sam.

S: Well, Myleah described the problem so well I knew she knew how to fix it. So I turned the recording off and just said, "Go fix it."

J: What about with Alex?

S: With Alex, I've been confused about his process, what he does to try to solve a problem. So I helped him understand the problem.

K: Did you think you ended up helping him?

S: I think so. I mean...I, well I can see I talked a lot more with him. I didn't really understand what he was trying to do, so I just gave him that suggestion of what to move where. [Pause.] I guess I just gave him part of the answer so he could move on.

J: What do you ultimately want Alex to do when he gets stuck?

S: I want him to have some strategies for moving forward on his own, but I'm talking too much. [Pause.] OK, now I'm thinking I need to figure out what strategies would help struggling students move forward on their own without me robbing them of their thinking.

Joni and Kendrick's questions helped reveal a blind spot for Sam; he hadn't realized that he wasn't letting all students have a chance to solve the problems.

Stepping into the Practice

There are many dimensions to creating conditions for teachers to supportively challenge each other. One simple way to start the practice is by providing explicit support around the type of questions teachers ask each other.

> **Invite teachers to collaborate with you on the most effective ways to ask follow-up questions.**

In a culture of trust, the right question asked at the right time is a powerful tool for challenging thinking. What drives these follow-up questions is genuine care and the desire to deepen a colleague's understanding.

Several steps help make this process a success:

1 Return to the purpose of supportively challenging colleagues, and acknowledge that this is often uncomfortable, yet necessary to push our thinking forward.

2 Provide sample questions for teachers to practice with during small group learning conversations.

- How can you find out what students know/feel/think about that?

- Can you say more about what you mean by _____?

- I noticed you said _____. What are you seeing that makes you think that?

- What would success look like?

- What might be getting in the way?

- What might your next step be?

3 Ask teachers to reflect on their experience as a supportive challenger.

- How did it feel to be the listener in your conversation today?

- Was there a moment that moved the speaker's thinking? What supported that change?

- How was this learning conversation different from a planning or problem-solving conversation?

4 Continue to practice and reflect on asking follow-up questions throughout the year. This is a skill that takes time to develop.

5 For more ways to support teachers to engage in learning conversations, see the chapter on public learning.

We suggest trying this partnership approach first...

> **Watch a recorded model of a supportive challenge session with your staff. Reflect on how the teachers supportively challenged each other.**

Supportively challenging colleagues requires reflection, preparation, modeling, scaffolds, and meta moments.

Some steps you can take include:

- Share the larger purpose behind the practice of supportive challenge; we are working to create a space where we can actively help each other acknowledge the complexity of the work of teaching.

Activate these mindsets

- **Equity requires questioning assumptions**
- **Learning is fundamentally social and emotional**

A big part of this is relying on colleagues to help us see what we are not seeing ourselves.

- Find a video of a teacher learning conversation and watch it with your staff. You can use our video at http://bit.ly/collabconvo.

- Invite teachers to share what they noticed about the teachers' interactions.

- Together, unpack what makes it a learning conversation, as opposed to a planning or problem-solving conversation. Call out the "supportive challenge" moments—when an observation or question helped expand the speaker's thinking.

- Discuss the social and emotional competencies the speaker and the listeners used in this learning conversation.

- Ask teachers to reflect on their own social and emotional competencies. What would they find easy or hard about participating in a learning conversation?

- Find out what support teachers might need from you in order to feel comfortable having this kind of learning conversation with their colleagues and use this data to inform your next steps.

"One conversation led me to an important realization about what I want to provide for my newcomer students. With just a few questions from another teacher, I realized my students need opportunities to practice language that supports their needs in real life contexts."

—Emily, instructional coach

SEL and supportively challenging colleagues

For most of our partner teachers, this practice is difficult because it requires vulnerability. Building relationships, trust, and awareness is key to the practice's success. You may want to provide teachers additional experiences to further build their social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, such as:

- Collectively agree on discussion norms and check in on these regularly.

- Build self- and social awareness by providing time for teachers to think about what kind of language and tone works for them when they are supportively challenged.

- Start with the Partnership Approach on page 33 to surface the current social emotional reality for teachers.

- Create awareness and hold space for individuals' racial and socio-political realities and how this might impact their experience of supportively challenging or being challenged. Check in separately with individuals, then as a group.

Practice 3

Practicing Public Learning

To create an adult learning culture in service of every student, the process of learning must be visible and valued across all levels of the system.

MINDSETS   PRACTICES

Why practice public learning?

So often, in an effort to support instructional improvement, we instinctively highlight and display an educator's most successful teaching practices as a model. But if the aim is to build a learning culture for adults, then we also need to highlight that educator's learning process. Sharing uncertainties, articulating gaps in knowledge, and celebrating nuggets of discovery within a community are vital to establishing a learning culture.[12]

One of the most powerful ways to shift the adult learning culture in schools and districts is through public learning. By making learning public by design, we acknowledge the uncertainty and complexity inherent in the work of teaching. When teachers go public with

"As I listened to an upper-grade teacher talk about how she was trying to figure out the best way to give useful feedback on her students' writing, it made me remember that no one has all the answers. I left that conversation wondering how I could be just as bold in questioning the impact of the feedback I give to my own students."

— Funmilayo, kindergarten teacher

the questions they have about their students' learning and then share the data they collect to help answer those questions, learning becomes the centerpiece of powerful teaching.[13]

Public learning is not, however, a one-way street. It depends on a dialogue between the public learner and their colleagues. This dialogue requires social and emotional support—both to be vulnerable and share uncertainty, and to be open to supportive challenge from colleagues. Inviting multiple perspectives on the public learner's student data and thinking is also an equity strategy, as everyone shares the responsibility for supporting all students. (For more on supportive challenge, see page 26.)

Public learning

- Encourages a culture of questioning assumptions and biases
- Supports the vulnerability required for educators to question what is or isn't working in their own practice
- Encourages teachers to build their own knowledge about student learning
- Builds an asset-based stance towards students and adults

Public learning **is**	Public learning **is not**
A chance to explore a teaching dilemma honestly	A display of rehearsed perfection
A request that colleagues help you see what you can't see on your own	A chance to prove the value of an approach
Sometimes emotionally challenging	Complaining about students' problems
A chance for leadership to spotlight teachers' learning as a driver of improvement	Judging a teacher's competence
A way to build community and alignment	A time to jump to a solution

The power of public learning

Cheryl, the principal at Brookmont High, found the staff culture at her school to be a "bulletin-board culture"; teachers were great at presenting their best work, but when it came to getting real about the uncertainties they faced in the classroom, they were mostly silent. Cheryl realized this mirrored the students' experience; more emphasis was placed on students' polished end-of-year exhibitions and less on their learning experience. Like their students, teachers felt a reluctance to ask questions and voice uncertainties to move each other forward in their thinking. In response, Cheryl decided to dedicate 15 minutes of each staff meeting to practicing public learning.

One of the most powerful public learning experiences of the year was when Maria shared classroom data related to her dilemma. To figure out how to strengthen her students' writing, Maria audio recorded several writing conferences. She wanted to listen closely to what her students had to say about writing. She was surprised to discover her own bias in the conferences. She did a lot more of the talking with the students she considered less capable writers. She felt ashamed at the realization that she was not letting those students find their voices and articulate their ideas in the same way her more capable students were. But instead of keeping this realization private, she shared it publicly with colleagues. "They didn't judge me," Maria said. "They listened and then asked me what would help me have more equitable writing conferences." With their help, Maria decided to create a uniform set of questions she would stick to with each student.

Cheryl observed that because Maria modeled vulnerability in going public with her uncertainty, other teachers were willing to do the same.

Stepping into the practice

One of the best ways to begin practicing public learning is to provide teachers a model of what it looks like. Preparation and gathering data ahead of the exercise are key.

> **Invite one educator to model public learning in front of the group.**

This "fishbowl-style" conversation provides a common experience for the group to think about public learning together. It also helps build trust and community.

Several steps help make the process a success:

1 In advance of your meeting, invite one teacher to be the public learner and share a student learning dilemma. Consider choosing someone who is reflective and open to sharing uncertainties.

2 To help prepare your public learner:

- Ask them to collect relevant student data from two or three focal students.

- Ask them how they feel about sharing in front of the group. Is there anything that worries them about discussing their uncertainty and data with colleagues?

3 Open the session by framing the purpose of public learning not as searching for the right answer, but figuring out how to best serve students, and honoring the value of that complex process.

"When I was the public learner I felt valued, like my thinking mattered. My coworkers and principal were listening to me try to figure out how these three students were understanding ratios. And they cared enough to ask me questions that got me thinking even more. It seemed like what was happening in my classroom really mattered!"

—Carmina, seventh grade teacher

Activate these mindsets

- **Equity requires questioning assumptions**
- **Learning is fundamentally social and emotional**

4 Invite the public learner to share their student learning dilemma and some data related to it. Ask them to think aloud about what the data reveals about their students' understanding.

5 Take on the role of the listener in the conversation and ask the public learner questions that support their learning.

- What is your learning goal for students?
- What would success look like if students were meeting this goal?
- What do you notice in your data?
- What does your data tell you about your students' progress towards your goal?

6 Ask the group to discuss what they notice about the data.

7 Return to the public learner and ask them what they're thinking at the end of the conversation.

8 Express gratitude to the public learner and acknowledge that it isn't easy to share uncertainty in front of colleagues.

9 Invite all teachers to think about the public learning experience.

- What was it like to be the public learner?
- What was it like to be in the role of the listener?
- How did the public learner's thinking change during the conversation?

10 Provide time for teachers to go public with their learning by working in pairs or trios, and give everyone a chance to reflect on their experience of being the public learner.

We suggest you try this partnership approach first...

"Go public" with your own learning.

Going first and trying public learning out yourself signals to teachers that you're learning alongside them, and allows you to build empathy as you experience first hand what you want teachers to experience.

To demonstrate the process:

- Be honest with teachers about a professional dilemma.
- Model taking a learning stance by wondering aloud about your uncertainties related to the dilemma.
- Discuss what information might better help you understand what's happening for your learners.
- Model looking closely at that information to see what it reveals about learning.
- Invite teachers to share their perspectives on your thinking and data. Encourage them to ask you clarifying and/or probing questions to help you move forward.

> "I took on three focal students and did running records with them. I learned more in doing those running records than I have in any other professional development. I was in there and going 'I don't know why this kid's not advancing,' and then I took my questions to my teachers and reading specialists to try to make progress…"
>
> —Paco, principal

Practice 4

Making Sense of Goals Collectively

When leaders believe teachers' knowledge and expertise can guide improvement, they find ways to understand what teachers need to reach their goals.

Why make sense of goals collectively?

Research indicates that one of the most powerful predictors of increased student achievement is that teachers feel connected to shared goals and a larger purpose.[14] However, entrenched power dynamics in many schools make this connection difficult to foster; leaders set goals, teachers are expected to implement them. This compliance-based approach does not build the capacity for innovation and responsiveness, essential components of improvement and learning.[15]

We've witnessed leaders who are able to strike a balance between setting a clear vision and partnering with teachers on goals to get to that vision. **It starts with the leader's ability to energize teachers around the larger vision and with the leader's belief that what teachers know and come to know matters.**

MINDSETS

PRACTICES

Activate these mindsets

- Agency and purpose drive curiosity and deep learning
- Learning is fundamentally social and emotional

Making sense of goals collectively is more than just giving teachers time to understand why the goals are chosen and what they mean, though that is important. It's getting clear as a community on the change we want to see and what it looks like for all students to be successful. It's about continually asking ourselves how each of us understands what we are trying to do, what's happening for our learners, what we are learning, and where we need help. Resisting the urge to merely plow forward and instead repeatedly taking the time to return to our goals together keeps teachers connected to the larger purpose of their work.

MINDSETS   PRACTICES

How many goals?

We are often asked, "What is the right number of goals?" We don't suggest a magic number of goals. However, trying to improve everything leads to little improvement in anything. We suggest the number of goals be constrained by the ways your teachers' learning is set up to support the goals. For example, if you have three student learning goals, will teachers have adequate learning and sense-making opportunities around each of these goals throughout the year?

Making sense of goals collectively **is**	Making sense of goals collectively **is not**
Balancing leadership and direction with collective input and shared understanding	An airtight argument for implementing a certain initiative in a certain way
Collectively answering the question, "What are we trying to do?"	Just an activity for the beginning of the year
Making visible the patterns in students' learning across the school and showing how these patterns relate to a goal	Handing out a matrix with the goals, benchmarks, and a plan
A responsive activity that can be messy and unpredictable	Blaming or shaming teachers for data results
Valuing teachers' classroom-level knowledge and using it to support improvement	Only about progress monitoring

Spotlight on the Practice

Keeping school goals alive

Beth, a teacher leader at a K-8 school, is working to maintain the momentum towards the schoolwide goal. One month into the school year, she sent this email to her colleagues:

We are thinking about a problem in our teaching practice at Monte Vista. You remember that at our kickoff meeting we decided to focus on supporting and engaging English learners to develop their language skills. What aspect of this problem is grabbing your attention? Are you interested in focusing on newcomers whose language is primarily in the emerging stage of English? Are you interested in supporting students who are in the expanding stage? As you ponder these different stages, see if you can focus on one, two or three students. Decide how you might get some data about these focal students to help you start to understand them.

For her colleagues, this email was a touchpoint back to the goal, now that their classroom routines were up and running. Beth plans to co-facilitate the next staff meeting to surface what teachers are thinking and learning in relation to the goal. "I want us to be able to see student work and hear each other think about this across the grade levels. It would be amazing to get to some alignment on what success looks like," she says. "But, I'm not sure if we'll be able to get there next month. We might need to back up and see if we are on the same page about what we mean by 'language skills.'"

By returning her colleagues to the goal, and paying attention to their understanding of it, Beth is helping the staff work effectively towards a shared purpose.

Stepping into the Practice

It's easy to lose sight of the schoolwide goals once the school year is up and running. Our leaders and teachers have found that working in partnership to return their attention to the goals mid-year has a profound effect.

> **Partner with teachers to return to and unpack the priority goals mid-year.**

Collectively returning to the goals opens the opportunity to find out what everyone is learning and allows colleagues to build on each others' discoveries. Teachers deepen their understanding of student progress and what success looks like across grade levels and departments.

In advance of this meeting, work with your leadership team to:

- Select priority goals at the beginning of the year.
- Build in time at the beginning of the year for teachers to reflect on the data informing the goals and discuss their initial ideas about connecting these goals to their own classrooms.
- Create time to work with teacher leaders to gather some mid-year schoolwide data related to the goals.
- Support teachers to gather some mid-year classroom-level data related to the goals.

1 Set a purpose and signal partnership

Highlight the importance of the teachers' current classroom experience in helping the school community understand the goals.

"I used to do walk-throughs and get frustrated that I wasn't seeing our school-wide goals in what teachers were doing. Now, in almost every classroom, I can see how teachers are working towards our goals. What did I change? I started to build in time for teachers to think with me about our goals—why we have these particular goals and what they mean."

—John, principal

2 Make sense individually

Give teachers time to update their thinking about their goals.

- How is this showing up in your classroom? What have you noticed?

- What are the social and emotional capacities assumed in this goal?

- What would students have to know and do to reach this goal?

- What do you wonder in relation to the goal?

- What data would help you pursue the goal more deeply?

3 Make sense together

Have teachers share in grade-alike or discipline-alike teams. Encourage teachers to ground their conversations in data. Consider questions like:

- What are we learning about _____ together?

- What are our distinctive strengths?

- Where are the gaps in our knowledge?

- What data will we bring to the next meeting to dig in on this?

Ask teachers to record a synthesis of their ideas so you can use their input going forward.

4 Incorporate teacher thinking into the plan

Determine how you will use the input from teachers. Ask yourself:

- Do the goals still make sense?

- Does the data tell us anything that makes us want to revise the goals?

- What have teachers learned about what works/ doesn't work to help students reach these goals?

- How can you continue supporting teachers in their efforts to meet the goals?

We suggest trying this partnership approach first...

Consider your own feelings and experiences about goal-setting.

Thinking about your own feelings about goals allows you to use your insights to facilitate a better experience for teachers' work with goals.

- Take a few minutes to reflect on your own experience with goal-setting.

- To what degree do you need to feel agency in articulating and defining goals you are expected to carry out?

- What fears or concerns arise in you when goals are set?

- What do you need to feel sure that someone is invested in your learning and progress towards the goals?

Consider how you can use any insights from this empathy exercise as you prepare to facilitate teachers' sense-making around goals.

Lessons Learned

MINDSETS   PRACTICES

1. **Check in often with teachers.** When things get busy, it's easy to keep moving through task lists without attending to teachers' experiences. Schedule time to find out how collaboration is going for your teachers. As you get started with these practices, ask yourself, "What do I want to know about teachers' experience with this practice and how can I find that out?"

2. **Find colleagues who will supportively challenge you.** It's hard to lead something you haven't experienced yourself. As you create the conditions for teachers to supportively challenge each other, who will supportively challenge you? Having a community, or even one person, with whom you can have honest conversations about your work will move your own practice forward and provide you with insights into what you want teachers to experience.

3. **Messaging matters.** How you invite teachers to try something new can make or break your success.

Continuously guide teachers back to the larger purpose of what you are trying to do and articulate how the new practice you are trying out can help you get there. This will help teachers feel that they are engaging in a new practice *with* you instead of *for* you.

4. **Attend to the "nitty gritty" of facilitation.** Here are a few highlights:

   - **Limit your talk time.** Aim for a 1:4 ratio of facilitator talk to participant talk.

   - **Language carries meaning and sets tone.** Phrases like, "we are working towards…," "our work this year…," and "we're working together to figure out" signal partnership with teachers and invite them into the improvement process.

   - **Plan with input from teachers.** If you find yourself in deep planning mode without a teacher at the table, stop and partner with a teacher.

   - **Foster connection.** A warm welcoming activity at the beginning of a meeting and a few minutes of sharing reflections at the end will surface everyone's voices and help build community.

5. **Get started with something simple.** The work of leading, teaching, and learning is complex. But our approach is simple. Resist feeling like you have to have everything clear and planned before you begin—in fact it will support your partnership approach if you don't have it all figured out in advance! Choose one practice and start with one element of that practice.

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Acknowledgements

We dedicate this to our teacher scholars, in gratitude for their partnership over the last decade. We appreciate their time and generous efforts to help us understand which practices and mindsets best support them as they continuously learn and improve in service of equitable outcomes for their students.

A deep appreciation to the Lead by Learning team for always asking, "What are we trying to do?" To our inquiry facilitators, who developed our signature practices in partnership with teacher leaders, and to our advisors, who supported us along the way, including Anna Richert, Carrie Wilson, Claire Bove, Sarah Sugarman, Jennifer Ahn, Pilar Beccar-Varela, Elizabeth Shafer, Nina Portugal, Malia Tayabas-Kim, Julia Beers Moss, Jean Witzke, Daniela Mantilla, Aijeron Simmons, Marguerite Sheffer, Mary Hurley, and Claire Shorall.

To Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert, whose inquiry-based work with leaders and school systems across British Columbia is an inspiration.

We are grateful to the Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation and to the Stuart Foundation, whose belief in the transformative power of teacher learning and whose generous financial support have made this work possible.

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What We Believe

At Lead by Learning we believe that the quality of adult learning is critical to a system's ability to improve.

Students benefit when the education system is designed to support and value what the practitioners who work most closely with students and families are learning–about their teaching, about their learners, and about themselves. Our work over the past 12 years has proven that educators who learn about their own practice and its impact on their students become educators who can and will lead towards a more equitable future.

When we create an environment that welcomes and encourages brave, bold professional growth, we create a culture of learning. Grounded in empathy, courage, and shared responsibility, we can better look within ourselves and help each other to see what we cannot see on our own. By changing the way educators learn together, we learn to serve our most marginalized learners, making lasting, substantive improvements for students and the educators who serve and support them.

What We Do

We support education leaders and practitioners to prioritize and facilitate powerful adult learning spaces that focus on learners' experiences, disrupt unjust practices, cultivate curiosity, and drive continuous improvement across the education system. We work with teams of educators in school districts, county offices of education and in individual school sites.

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