



# LEAD CONNECTICUT

SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS. STRENGTHENING STUDENT LEARNING.

## Leading for Capacity and Coherence:

### The LEAD Connecticut District Leadership Capacity and Coherence Framework

#### A Call for Coherence

School districts—superintendents and boards of education—represent a central layer of educational governance in U.S. education. Recent research demonstrates that districts can help establish the conditions that enable school and classroom-level improvements to take hold. Moreover, superintendents and boards of education working together in a collaborative partnership can help level the playing field by implementing structures, systems, and policies that optimize equitable opportunities and outcomes across classrooms and schoolhouses.

A growing body of research and practice underscores a singular theme: coherent, instructionally focused districts are more successful at improving teaching, learning, and life outcomes for students while simultaneously shrinking the gaps that plague much of our U.S. educational system. By setting a clear vision, implementing research-based strategies well-matched to the local context, developing capacity, setting a culture focused on results, and buffering educators from distractions, districts can play critical roles in realizing the potential of American public education.

Unfortunately, research also demonstrates that not all districts are carrying out these responsibilities successfully. In too many places, superintendents and boards initiate projects or develop policies that atomize and distract from the central work of the district—creating optimal conditions for exceptional teaching and learning—therefore, sending mixed and conflicting signals to schools and classrooms. Some districts are pursuing strategies poorly designed to produce the desired outcomes and only indirectly targeting teaching and learning. Yet other districts create barriers to implementation by tacking on too many initiatives and not focusing on quality of execution.

#### Leading for Coherence

The LEAD CT District Leadership Capacity and Coherence Framework is intended to provide practical guidance to superintendents, boards of education and central office leaders to guide the continuous improvement work of their districts. To make lasting change, superintendents, boards of education and central office leaders need to build and sustain a coherent approach to improving student learning. Here are four ways to create coherence at the district level:

**Place your bets** — Superintendents and central office leaders must develop and communicate a shared, powerful vision for how their work will improve student outcomes. We call this a

District Leadership Theory of Action. Too often, districts try too many things at once and don't have a clear purpose for doing them. The result is teachers, principals, and central office staff working at cross purposes. In effective districts, superintendents, leadership teams, and school boards have a shared theory of action, which they use to shape and pursue a small number of strategies to improve teaching and learning. These districts focus on strategies that will have the biggest impact. They then ensure the whole district is organized to support successful implementation of those strategies. Without fail, one of those strategies prioritizes school leadership because effective district leaders know the core work of improving instruction only happens when the right school leaders are in place and get the support they need.

#### Coherence Principles for Leaders

1. **Place your bets**
2. **Focus on “how we do things around here”**
3. **Connect the dots.**
4. **Build leadership capacity**

**Focus on “how we do things around here”** — Not only do superintendents and central office leaders need to shape **what** will get done (strategy), but also **how** it will get done (culture). Culture can and must be a positive and powerful driver for system-wide improvement. Too often, district leaders take culture for granted. Consequently, their strategies have limited impact and traction, especially as leadership changes. In contrast, effective superintendents and leadership teams know that positive cultural practices and values — such as reminding central office staff that they are there to serve schools or reiterating that “all means all” when it comes to expecting students to succeed — have the power to infuse strategies with purpose and motivate behavior. So, they are attentive to “how we do things around here.”

**Connect the dots** — Superintendents and their teams must align and focus systems and structures so everyone knows how their work fits into the district's improvement theory of action. Districts are complex organizations and it is no small task to ensure that each part coordinates effectively with the whole in service of schools and students. Effective districts connect the dots, making collaboration the norm so that departments can align and coordinate their work.

**Build leadership capacity** — Articulating a strategy, fostering a culture, and aligning the work are critical . . . yet not enough. Superintendents and their central office leadership teams must take actions that create the conditions and capacities for strong and effective school leadership. Significantly improving teaching, learning, and outcomes for students will require talented and empowered building leadership.

#### District Leadership Capacity and Coherence Framework Components

In addition to practical guidance, the Framework serves as a capacity-building heuristic for superintendents and district leaders as they work to improve teaching and learning at scale. The Framework identifies and describes the various components of a coherent district (see Figure 1). Moreover, it describes the ways these components must align and integrate in service of building district coherence and capacity.

Figure 1: The LEAD Connecticut District Leadership Capacity and Coherence Framework

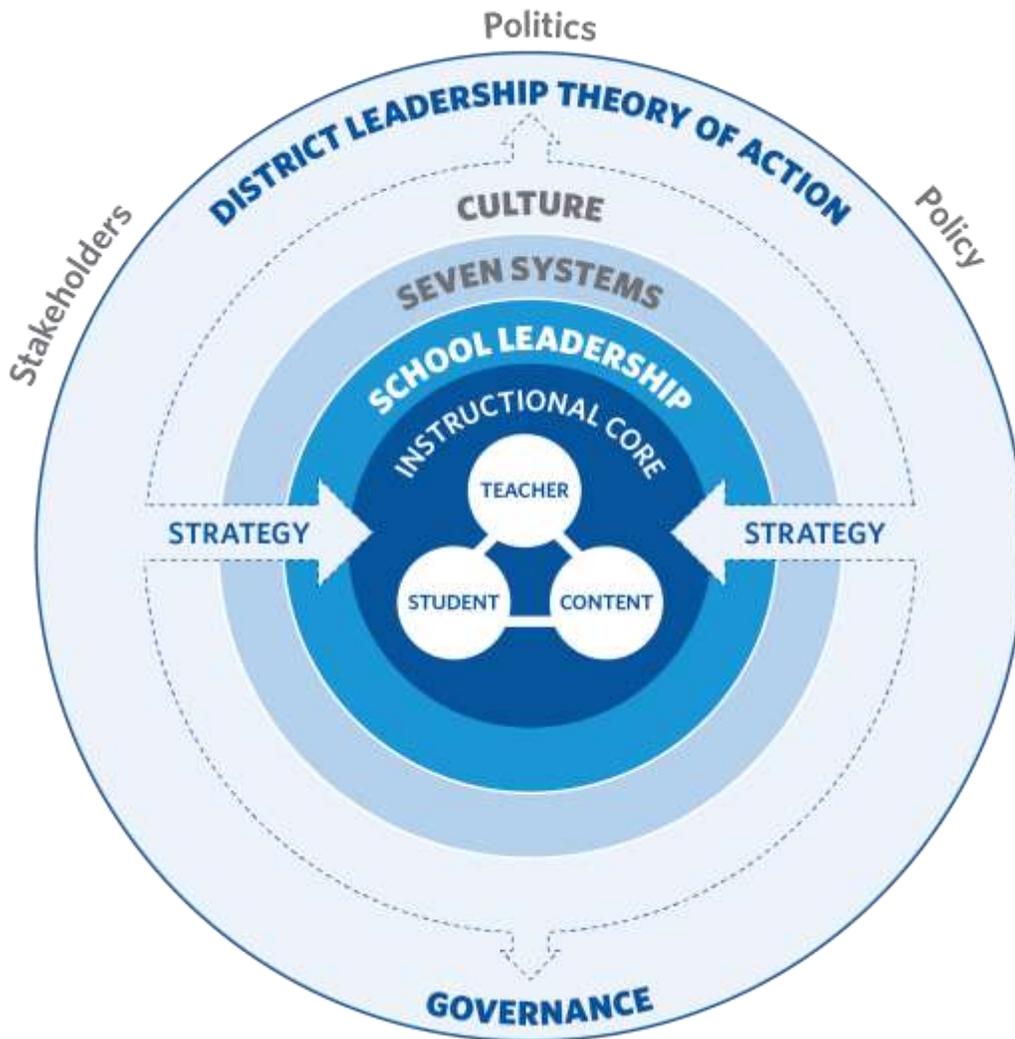
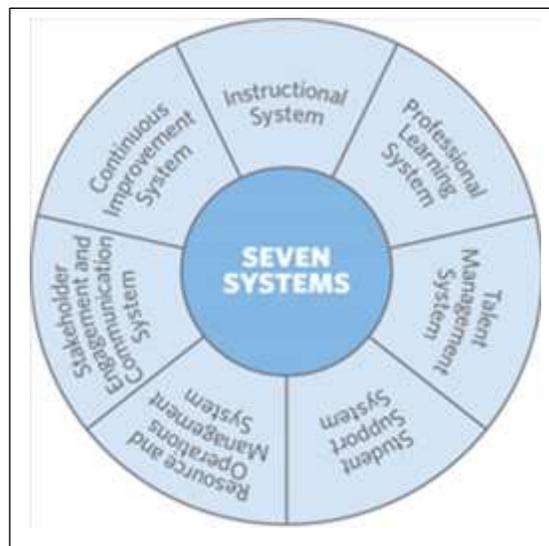


Figure 1A: Inset of Seven Systems



Managing the work of a district is complex. There are numerous demands—organizational, political, and symbolic—that the superintendent and other central office leaders face on a daily basis. Organizing the leadership of the district toward the improvement of teaching, learning, and student outcomes requires deliberate efforts by the superintendent and the board of education to align and cohere the aims, the strategy, and the systems of the district so that school-level and classroom-level improvements can emerge with consistency and predictability over time. The following is an exploration of the key components a district must bring into alignment in order to increase organizational capacity and coherence. The graphic on the preceding page represents these ideas in a single visual.

***Instructional Core:*** The central idea (articulated by Ball and Cohen, 1999) that improvement in learning in a classroom is a function of instructional capacity, which is through the interaction of three capacities: “teachers’ intellectual and personal resources;” “students’ experiences, understandings, interests, commitments, and engagement;” and content, or what students are engaged in. *“In focusing on this relationship as the basis for increased student achievement, school districts target their improvement efforts on providing capacity and support to the activities in the instructional core”* (Childress, 2004).

***School Leadership:*** District leadership creates the necessary conditions for effective school leadership. Research confirms that, other than the classroom teacher, school leadership is critically important to improving achievement as well as college and career readiness. For this reason, school leadership is the first ring outside the Framework’s instructional core. School leadership includes the **capacities** and **conditions** that need to be in place at the school level to drive improvements in the instructional core. By “capacities,” we refer to the skills, knowledge and dispositions of effective school leaders. To generate substantial improvement in the instructional core, a school must have a principal and leadership team that embody identified leadership competencies. By “conditions,” we refer to the ways in which a district is organized to help effective principals do their jobs well. A number of elements we would call conditions are spread throughout the framework, but here we specifically focus on the direct management and support of principals. Key conditions include: (a) a clear definition of the principal’s role that is feasible within resource constraints and enables leaders to make teaching and learning a priority; (b) a sound, fair, transparent, and rigorous evaluation process for principals; (c) on-going, high-quality professional learning opportunities focused on principals’ needs; and (d) capable principal supervisors with the bandwidth to effectively manage and support principals (Ikemoto et al, 2014).

***Seven Systems:*** The way in which a district organizes itself constrains and enables schools to act, align, and deploy resources. It also affects how a district monitors progress. Critically, ***the intersection of systems is one of the central ways a district achieves coherence in its improvement strategy.*** The creation, alignment, and continuous improvement of these systems at the district level are essential dimensions to developing district capacity. These systems are:

1. *Instructional System*: Includes resources that the district develops and/or makes available to schools for curriculum across all subject areas, instructional materials aligned to the curriculum, instructional strategies, and student assessments.
2. *Professional Learning System*: Includes the development and implementation of individual learning plans for individuals (informed by evidence gathered for formal evaluation), as well as structures for the development of leadership teams in schools and in the district.
3. *Talent Management System*: Includes processes for recruitment, selection, development, evaluation, advancement, retention, and compensation of employees, especially teachers and school leaders.
4. *Student Support System*: Includes the in-school and community-based supports for students' social and emotional development.
5. *Resource and Operations Management System*: Includes the investments that districts make in all aspects of instruction (see Systems 1-4), mechanisms for ensuring the equitable distribution of resources to schools and departments in alignment with district goals, and the systems for effective management of schools.
6. *Stakeholder Engagement and Communications System*: Includes the processes for ongoing, systematic engagement of boards of education, students, parents, and other community stakeholders in efforts to improve schools, as well as mechanisms for communicating clearly about district priorities.
7. *Continuous Improvement System*: Includes goals for improvement of important outcomes (leading indicators as well as indicators of improvement and success); data collection and analysis systems to monitor progress and to understand and respond to stakeholder input; and accountability and supports connected to the data.

**Culture:** The operating norms and behaviors in the district are purposely positioned as the next layer in the Framework. A healthy district culture sets the context for systems to operate effectively; the converse is true as well. Prominent features of a healthy district culture include: urgency and efficacy (a shared belief that educators and schools can, with effort, improve student outcomes); relational trust (the sense that individuals know what others are responsible for and hold a belief that those others will deliver) (Bryk et al, 2010); a commitment to serving schools (making rules and regulations work in support of continuous improvement rather than compliance); collective responsibility (support and discretion for school leaders to implement policies in ways that support students and maintain the intended focus) (Louis et al, 2010); and authentic collaboration (an orientation toward teamwork and lateral relationships to solve problems and manage dilemmas) (Fullan and Quinn, 2015).

**Strategy:** The “set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance district-wide” (Childress et al, 2007) and advancing educational opportunity for underserved students in particular. There are often multiple interrelated and coherent district improvement strategies based on a district’s vision, mission, and set of district improvement goals. As explained in the next section, these strategies are most often nested within the district improvement theory of action. Not all strategies are equal. Indeed, to be scalable and sustainable, these actions must adhere to a well-supported theory of action detailing how district actions will drive changes in the instructional core and, therefore, improve student performance. Further, as depicted visually in [Figure 1](#), an effective strategy is designed to act directly on the district’s culture and to influence practices across all of the systems that impact school leadership and the instructional core.

**District Leadership Theory of Action:** The operating theory about how all of a district’s investments and strategies will work together to produce improvements in the instructional core and, by extension, improvements in critical student outcomes. An effective district leadership theory of action based directly on the district’s vision, mission and improvement goals is shared by the board of education (see [Governance](#)), superintendent, and district leadership team. It is encapsulated in a strategic operating plan linking resources, strategies, and expected outcomes for all of the district’s work (see [Strategy](#)). And it is reflected in the leadership actions superintendents and district leaders take to build a healthy culture and drive coherence throughout all systems affecting the instructional core.

**Governance:** The policies and practices of the board of education that, in an effective system, reinforce and sustain the district’s theory of action. This is accomplished by active engagement of the board of education, the superintendent, and district leaders (see Attachments for the LEAD CT Superintendent Competency Framework). Governance is intentionally placed in the same layer of the Framework as the district leadership theory of action because in a coherent system district improvement strategies flow directly from the district’s vision, mission, and goals. The superintendent and board of education collaborate regularly to develop, communicate, and assess the effectiveness of the district improvement work. This pattern of collaborative governance and district leadership is critical to continuous and sustained improvement that consistently impacts the instructional core. The result is improved career and college readiness for all students in the system.

**External Factors:** Factors outside of a district’s direct control that have important and sustained effects on the district’s operation. District leaders and boards of education must establish patterns of engagement that take full advantage of the positive opportunities these factors present in support of the district’s goals and improvement theory of action. These include the ideas and power of *stakeholders*, state and local *politics*, state and federal *policy*, and public *funding* for education. It is essential that the district’s theory of action effectively address these external factors.

## **Assembling Coherence and Capacity Out of Disparate Parts**

The LEAD CT District Capacity and Coherence Framework helps identify key organizational and leadership components. Simply recognizing the existence of these components is not enough. Superintendent and districts leaders must aggressively and strategically act upon them in ways that develop the capacity and coherence needed to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes at scale. More specifically, this requires that:

1. Superintendents build a shared district leadership improvement theory of action with the board of education.
2. The district theory of action explicitly state how specific, key leadership actions and strategies are intended to support and drive improvements in the instructional core leading to high performing schools that prepare all students ready for college and career.
3. District and schools leaders work together to develop a collaborative culture that becomes a key, positive driver for district improvement.
4. Superintendents and district leaders purposely integrate and align the Seven Systems portrayed in the Framework to support the district improvement strategies and the nested school improvement plans.
5. Superintendent and district leaders design and implement systems and structures that create the necessary conditions for great school leadership. They must recognize and take actions that make this set of activities a district leadership priority.
6. All district leaders including the superintendent use the Framework as a district leadership lens and model for defining and prioritizing their work.