

# Learning Acceleration for All: Planning for the Next Three to Five Years

June 2021

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### Introduction

Schools across the country have just endured the most challenging year in recent memory. In the face of unprecedented disruptions to regular school routines, school communities—from educators, to support staff, to families and caregivers—rallied to provide the social, emotional, and academic support students needed. They did this heroic work knowing all the while that even their best efforts would not be enough to make up for the trauma many students were experiencing.

Now, with more students returning to in-person instruction, school systems can begin to shift their focus from surviving the crisis to helping students recover. They will need to help students readjust to simply being in the classroom; reestablish their social identities after months of isolation; cope with ongoing physical, emotional, and economic challenges; and make up for interrupted teaching and learning.

This will be a difficult, years-long process. But it's also a once-in-a-generation opportunity—aided by a historic infusion of federal funding—to fundamentally improve student experiences and address longstanding inequities in our education system. Leaders at every level should challenge themselves to go beyond returning to a "normal" that wasn't working for far too many students—especially students of color, from low-income families, with learning and thinking differences, and who are learning English.

Above all else, that means ensuring every student has opportunities to do the grade-level work that will prepare them to reach their goals after high school. But remediation—asking students to spend most of their time in work below their grade level in the hopes that they'll eventually catch up—is the wrong approach to helping students recover unfinished learning.

Instead, systems should focus on accelerating students back to grade level—not by rushing through the curriculum, but by using proven strategies that help students engage with the most critical work of their grade as quickly as possible. [A recent study we co-authored with Zearn](#) found that students who experienced learning acceleration struggled less and learned more than those who experienced remediation, and that learning acceleration can be especially effective for students of color and those from low-income families.

School systems have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to interrogate and disrupt their historical approaches to teaching and learning in the pursuit of learning acceleration for all students, especially those who have been systematically denied access to high-quality academic experiences.

This guide is designed to help system leaders create a plan to do just that—starting with the critical decisions this summer that will shape what's possible for students and schools over the next several years. We offer recommendations not just on goals and instructional materials, but on the authentic community engagement, change management, and organizational development that are critical to any plan's long-term success. We also highlight the most effective ways leaders can use one-time federal resources from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) to support their learning acceleration plans—and avoid spending those resources on initiatives less likely to create meaningfully better experiences for students.

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## 1. What steps should we take to develop our learning acceleration strategy?

Developing and implementing a learning acceleration strategy requires several critical decisions right now—and a high degree of sustained focus over the next several years on a clear set of goals and priorities for students. In particular, leaders need to think carefully about how and when to spend one-time ESSER funds from the federal government. The most effective use of these funds to support dramatically better experiences for students may not be right now, and it may not be on the initiatives systems are feeling pressure to prioritize. A willingness to deprioritize efforts that will not support learning acceleration is as important as a commitment to prioritizing learning acceleration itself.

To develop your learning acceleration strategy, you'll want to move through four phases:



Throughout every phase, authentically engage and partner with students, caregivers, and the community.

### **Authentic Engagement:**

To realize the change you hope to see, you'll need to authentically engage all students, caregivers, and the community. [Section 2](#) of this document walks you through a cycle you can use to ensure that you're authentically engaging, listening to, and partnering with all of your most important stakeholders – especially those who have been systematically excluded from engaging in conversations about improving students' experiences.

### **Phase 1: Define your vision and goals.**

[Sections 3](#) and [4](#) of this resource walk you through the first phase of developing a long-term strategy, defining your vision and goals—articulating what you're trying to do. In this case, we've provided *The Opportunity Myth's* two commitments and a handful of meaningful goals and metrics that systems should strive for over the next three to five years. You'll want to make sure you engage in the process outlined in these sections to ensure that you have your own vision and goals. We've outlined the importance of listening, trust-building, and communicating with students, their families and caregivers, community members, and stakeholders to get to a shared vision and aim.

### **Phase 2: Diagnose your current state.**

Before determining the right long-term strategy for improving the student experience, systems must evaluate its current state—its current ability to realize these goals articulated above. At its most fundamental level, this phase focuses on assessing the health and strength of a system's instructional core. Systems can audit any number of elements during this time. In [Section 5](#), we present a set of levers that we believe are the most essential factors for a system to consider when determining its readiness to achieve these goals.

### **Phase 3: Create your strategy.**

After you understand where you are and where you want to go, you'll want to articulate a clear strategy for improving your students' experiences. This will involve articulating how you will improve your system year over year for the next three to five years (at minimum), as we've outlined in [Section 6](#).

### **Phase 4: Implement and continuously improve your strategy.**

Once you've developed your strategy – you'll need to manage the change to implement it. [Section 7](#) provides a set of helpful resources to think about managing change and continuous improvement.

Throughout all of this, you'll want to watch for the common pitfalls we outline in [Section 8](#).

## 2. How should we engage in our students, families, caregivers, and community members as we think about the next three to five years?

Across your system, your students and community have had a challenging experience as they adjusted to life during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pace of vaccinations increases around the country, it's likely that your system will find itself operating in a more "typical" way than you did across the 2020-2021 school year, with more students in school buildings. As always, it's vital that you engage your students, families, caregivers, and community members in your planning for the next three to five years, as it will take the efforts of the entire community to ensure that every child has the support they need to be successful – as our goal is not to return to the status quo pre-pandemic when most systems achieved inequitable academic results for students.

Secretary Cardona stressed the importance of community input when his team made stakeholder engagement a requirement in the plans states and school systems are submitting outlining their plans for their use of ESSER funds. According to [guidance from the Department of Education](#), "to ensure that the needs of students and communities are best reflected in state and local spending plans...stakeholder engagement must include students; families; Tribal Nations; civil rights organizations, including disability rights organizations; teachers, principals, school leaders, other educators, school staff and their unions, school and district administrators; superintendents; charter school leaders; and other stakeholders representing the interests of children with disabilities, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, children and youth in foster care, migratory students, children who are incarcerated, and other underserved students." This guidance aligns to TNTP's recommendations and should be the start to an ongoing commitment to student-centered, stakeholder engagement throughout the duration of the plan's implementation.

This sort of community and stakeholder engagement around your academic strategy might feel new or groundbreaking for your system, but if planned for and executed well, it will result in a more nuanced strategy and a set of community partnerships that will ensure that your strategy endures leadership transitions and political shifts in your community. For example, you might learn that it's important to families that their students have increased access to STEM courses or that stakeholders and students believe that your high schools need a more rigorous curriculum – issues you can address leveraging your federal stimulus dollars as a part of your ongoing strategy.

In our ["5 Essentials For Engaging Families and Community Partners in Reopening Efforts."](#) we named the five steps that every system should take to ensure that you are actively partnering with students, families, caregivers, and community members as you planned for the 2020-2021 school year. These steps are always essential and are especially applicable now as you consider how you'll approach the next three to five years, as well as determine how you'll invest your federal stimulus dollars to ensure students' success:

### **Reach Out: Start a dialogue with families and community partners right away.**

Before you create your plan, start a dialogue with families and community partners to understand their experiences with your system over the past year. Build on your 2020-2021 communication systems, ensuring that you have established strong two-way communication and have contacted students, families, and caregivers who aren't easily reached.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/strategies-to-engage-unreached-families-during-covid-19/>

**Listen: Collect input on student and family needs and preferences.**

Listen to students, families, caregivers, and community members about their needs, goals, and preferences. Begin by engaging your stakeholders in a conversation about your system's vision and goals. Then move to opportunities for stakeholders to share the strategies that will support them in reaching that vision. For additional resources to support these efforts, please visit our [Community Conversation Planning Guide](#).

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**Assess: Review data about existing needs.**

Review data from the past year to begin developing your overarching strategy. Understand the assets in your system—and the gaps you might have in your work over the past year. Share those assets and gaps openly in understandable ways so that your entire community is on the same page about the state of your system.

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**Plan: Develop a comprehensive education support plan.**

Work in partnership with parents, teachers, students, and community partners to develop a comprehensive education support plan that will provide equitably high-quality academic experiences to all of your students.

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**Engage: Share the plan with the community and work together to strengthen it.**

Share the draft of your plan. Partner with community leaders who are in close proximity to students and families to hear feedback on the draft, and provide regular opportunities for students, families, caregivers, and community members to hear about your shared priorities and offer feedback on your work towards them.

The rest of this guide is anchored in a vision and goals that we believe is applicable generally to every system – but it's vital that you engage your stakeholders in getting to a vision and set of goals that is specific to your community and the needs your students have – academically, socially, and emotionally. If you want more support reflecting on your authentic engagement efforts, consider referencing our ["Community Engagement Self-Assessment."](#)

### 3. What vision and principles should guide our planning for the next three to five years?

Given the myriad challenges that students, educators, and communities have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic—as well as the infusion of federal stimulus dollars designed to support addressing these challenges—systems should prepare for the next three to five years by getting exceptionally clear on the vision they have for their students’ educational experiences. The advice throughout this document is grounded in the vision we outlined in *The Opportunity Myth’s* two commitments:

**To ensure every student reaches the ambitious goals they have for themselves, we commit that:**

**Commitment #1:** Every student should have access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement and a sense of belonging, and teachers with high expectations for their success, every day, in every class – regardless of their race, ethnicity, or any other part of their identity.

**Commitment #2:** Every student and caregiver is an authentic partner and should have real opportunities to shape the experiences students have in school, receive accurate and accessible information about students’ progress, and have a legitimate role in decision-making.

Systems should engage their students, caregivers, educators, and communities in the specific language of the vision they set; ultimately, each system should have a vision that reflects students having the school-based experiences that will set them up to reach the ambitious goals that they and their families and caregivers have for themselves.

Given the vision we shared, we’ve grounded our next three to five years planning questions and the advice that follows in a set of values we believe should guide any school system’s decision-making about summer learning experiences:

**Authentically engage students, caregivers, and the community.**

Students, caregivers, and the broader community should have the opportunity to share their perspective about the approach and structures that will be most helpful in the next three to five years. Authentically engage your stakeholders in their ideas for your system’s efforts over the next three to five years—then partner with your community and organizations within it to offer experiences that will meet their needs.

**Student belonging is the social and emotional priority.**

Students’ sense of belonging is a critical and often underappreciated condition for academic success. As many students return to school buildings for the first time, it’s more important than ever that students believe that they belong in their learning environment and that we ensure that students have access to a classroom and school community that cultivates their sense of belonging and psychological safety.<sup>2</sup>

**Grade-level content is the academic priority for all students.**

Run every idea through a simple test: Will this help every student, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or other aspects of their identity, get back to grade level? You should prioritize accelerating all students’ exposure to grade-appropriate content while also addressing students’ social and emotional needs—so that every student, regardless of their identity, can get back to grade level.

<sup>2</sup> <https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/belonging-now-what-it-takes-to-create-the-conditions-for-belonging/>

**Address inequities  
in your system  
head-on.**

Losing so much time in school, along with the lack of access to virtual learning many students have experienced, has exacerbated existing inequities and opportunity gaps. Repeated high-profile instances of racism and violence against people of color have added to the trauma. Center your approaches on creating equitable experiences and outcomes for all your students, regardless of their race, identity, native language, learning and thinking differences, or other background characteristics. Examine every decision and piece of data you collect through the lens of how you are planning to ensure that *all* your students are successful in the coming school years.

This work is easy to skip over in the rush to prepare for the 2021-2022 school year. Spending time here will ultimately ensure that your system has a litmus test for the ideas you have. As you're planning, you should be consistently asking whether the strategy you've articulated is in alignment with your vision and the principles you've articulated will guide your decision-making.



#### 4. Given our vision, what goals should guide our planning for the next three to five years?

To provide all students experiences that will dramatically advance their learning, regardless of their identity or prior achievement, system leaders and educators need to identify exactly what their goals are for social, emotional, and academic learning. To ensure that you make progress towards your vision, we suggest that systems set the following goals for their work – and then set themselves up to measure their progress towards those goals:

## GOALS FOR THE NEXT THREE TO FIVE YEARS

1. All students will feel a sense of belonging and social connection in school.
2. All students, families, and caregivers will believe that our system used this crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally reset our vision for what our students can achieve and that we as a community successfully partnered to support our students.
3. All students will have meaningful, enriching classroom experiences that set them up academically, socially, and emotionally to reach the goals they have for themselves.

To measure your progress towards these goals for the next three to five years, you'll want to know what measure you're using to make progress towards those big goals.

GOAL	POTENTIAL MEASURES
All students will feel a sense of belonging and social connection in school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>100% of students feel a sense of belonging – and there are no disparities in belonging by race, ethnicity, gender, IEP status, multi-lingual learner (MLL) status, or other demographic characteristic.</li> <li>100% of your students have consistent access to a diverse set of educators that mirrors your students' racial and ethnic demographic characteristics.</li> </ul>
All students, families, and caregivers will believe that our system used this crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally reset our vision for what our students can achieve and that we as a community successfully partnered to support our students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>100% of caregivers have been contacted by their child's teacher at least once per quarter – and there are no disparities in contact by race, ethnicity, gender, IEP status, MLL status, or other demographic characteristic.</li> <li>100% of students and caregivers agree that their students' teachers have high expectations for their students' success – and there are no disparities in contact by race, ethnicity, gender, IEP status, MLL status, or other demographic characteristic.</li> <li>100% of students and caregivers believe that our school system used this crisis to reset our vision for what our students can achieve – and there are no disparities in contact by race, ethnicity, gender, IEP status, MLL status, or other demographic characteristic.</li> <li>100% of students and caregivers believe that our community successfully partnered to support all of our students – and there are no disparities in</li> </ul>

GOAL	POTENTIAL MEASURES
<p>All students will have meaningful, enriching classroom experiences that set them up academically, socially, and emotionally to reach the goals they have for themselves.</p>	<p>contact by race, ethnicity, gender, IEP status, MLL status, or other demographic characteristic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 75%<sup>3</sup> of the assignments our students experience are grade-appropriate, and there are no gaps in access to grade-appropriate assignments by classroom demographics (including racial demographic groups, students with IEPs, multilingual learners, or students who receive free and reduced lunch) across our school or system.</li> <li>• At least 75% of the observations we conduct represent strong instruction, and there are no gaps in access to strong instruction by classroom demographics (including racial demographic groups, students with IEPs, multilingual learners, or students who receive free and reduced lunch) across our school or system.</li> <li>• At least ___% of students meet standards of mastery on system-wide assessments. Any historical gaps in academic mastery by student demographics (including racial demographic groups, students with IEPs, multilingual learners, or students who receive free and reduced lunch) are shrinking by ___%.</li> </ul>

To see some ideas for how you might measure each of these goals, see some resources [here](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Note that we suggest a goal lower than 100% here because we realize that students may need to experience assignments that fill in gaps in below-grade-level content. This should not occur the majority of the time for any student, however.

## 5. Given our vision and goals for all students, what is our current state?

To establish your long-term strategy for improving all students' experiences, you'll want to understand your starting point and consider the different levers you have as a system leader to ensure high-quality experiences. In addition to understanding your baseline for the goals listed in [section 4](#), you'll want to understand the current state of your system's work in six key areas, all of which must work in tandem to ensure that your students are successful:

**Vision for the Student Experience:** How does your system envision, articulate, and enact the academic and cultural experience you expect all students<sup>4</sup> to have in your school buildings? How does your system measure the effectiveness and impact of the articulated vision? To what extent does your vision center on and address students that have historically been denied access to equitable, high-quality learning experiences?

**High-Quality Instructional Resources:** What resources and materials (i.e., curricular and classroom resources, assessments, intervention resources) does your system use to realize your vision? Are these resources and materials high-quality, and do they meet the needs of all students? Have you examined these resources to determine if and to what extent they attend to all learners—specifically, multilingual learners, students with learning and thinking differences, and students that have experienced continued over-remediation or unfinished instruction? How does your system measure how educators implement these resources and materials or how students engage with them? Are your instructional resources being implemented with integrity? How do you know?

**Educator Experience, Selection, Support, and Collaboration:** How does your system envision, articulate, and enact the educator experience and educator expectations? How does your system build and support educator capacity to improve practice and ensure that you retain your most vital educators? How does your system recruit and select educators – and do educators reflect the community they serve and your vision for educators?

**Authentic Community and Stakeholder Engagement:** How does your system build and manage the relationships and rapport between students, staff members, families, caregivers, and community members? How does your system share instructional data and progress monitoring trends with stakeholders? Do these engagement efforts provide stakeholders with the information that they need and request? How does your system share knowledge and data with community members and key stakeholders such that they can fully engage in and support your system in its instructional strategy, design, and implementation efforts? How does your system use input from stakeholders to advance the efforts and impact of your work? Do your family and caregiver engagement efforts resonate with and reflect the identities of all students within your system?

**Organizational Management:** How does your system utilize change management and continuous improvement processes to improve student and staff experiences? How does your system use these processes to expose potential and actual inequities within your system?

**Equity-Centered Policies and Daily Practices:** Do your system's policies and daily practices build or erode student and community trust in your system's ability to provide strong, equitable instruction for all students?

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this document terms and phrases like *students*, *all students*, *every student* and *all learners* are used to draw leaders' attention to the need to reflect on, deeply understand the assets of, and attend to the needs of *all* students within their instructional system. While attending to all students is critical, it is especially important for students that have historically been denied access to equitable, high-quality learning experiences (namely students of color, multi-lingual learners, students from low-income backgrounds, or students with learning and thinking differences).

How do these policies and practices attend to the sociopolitical realities that impact student success in ways that counteract and disrupt the systemic inequities baked into the education system?

You can use [this resource](#) to evaluate your system's current state against each of these six key levers so you that you ensure all of your students have access to belonging-rich systems and schools that provide them with the academic, social, and emotional supports needed to be college- and career- ready and prepared to achieve the future outcomes they envision.

## 6. Once I understand my current state, how do I create my strategy?

At this point, your system has moved through Phase 1 (defining your vision and goals) and Phase 2 (diagnosing your current state). You're now ready to begin Phase 3: creating your strategy. Typically, before designing a new strategy, we encourage our clients and partners to reflect on their system's past and present performance with designing and implementing strategies.

Consider for a moment the key strategies your system has embarked on in the past: curriculum adoption and implementation, educator evaluation, compensation analysis, or any other major shift. How a system has fared on prior strategies can give leaders evaluable insights into your system's strengths and challenges when designing or launching new initiatives. We've found Mary Lippitt's (1987) and Timothy Knoster's (1991) change management model to be a helpful resource to guide systems through this initial reflection.

Lippitt and Knoster argue that when systems engage in change management, leaders often have to balance six change management elements:

1. **Vision:** What change are we attempting? Why does this change need to occur? What are we aiming for, and what are we trying to achieve?
2. **Consensus:** Who are our stakeholders? Who do leaders need to marshal around this idea? How will leaders get buy-in?
3. **Skills:** What expertise and support is needed?
4. **Incentives:** How will this benefit our system as well as our stakeholders?
5. **Resources:** What resources do we need? What resources are readily available? Are they effective? Are resources allocated equitably?
6. **Action Plan:** How will we get there? Do we have a plan? Does this plan represent the needs of our system and its stakeholders?

Lippitt and Knoster developed the model below as a change management tool to help systems evaluate the impact and implementation of their prioritized strategies.

VISION+	CONSENSUS+	SKILLS+	INCENTIVES+	RESOURCES+	ACTION PLAN+	=CHANGE
Vision +	Consensus+	Skills+	Incentives+	Resources+	Action Plan+	= Success
	Consensus+	Skills+	Incentives+	Resources+	Action Plan+	= Confusion
Vision +		Skills+	Incentives+	Resources+	Action Plan+	= Sabotage
Vision +	Consensus+		Incentives+	Resources+	Action Plan+	= Anxiety
Vision +	Consensus+	Skills+		Resources+	Action Plan+	= Resistance
Vision +	Consensus+	Skills+	Incentives+		Action Plan+	= Frustration
Vision +	Consensus+	Skills+	Incentives+	Resources+		= Treadmill

Adapted from Villa, R and Thousand, J. (2000) *Restructuring for Caring and Effective Education: Piecing the Puzzle Together*. Knoster, T. (1991) Presentation at TASH Conference. Washington, D. C.

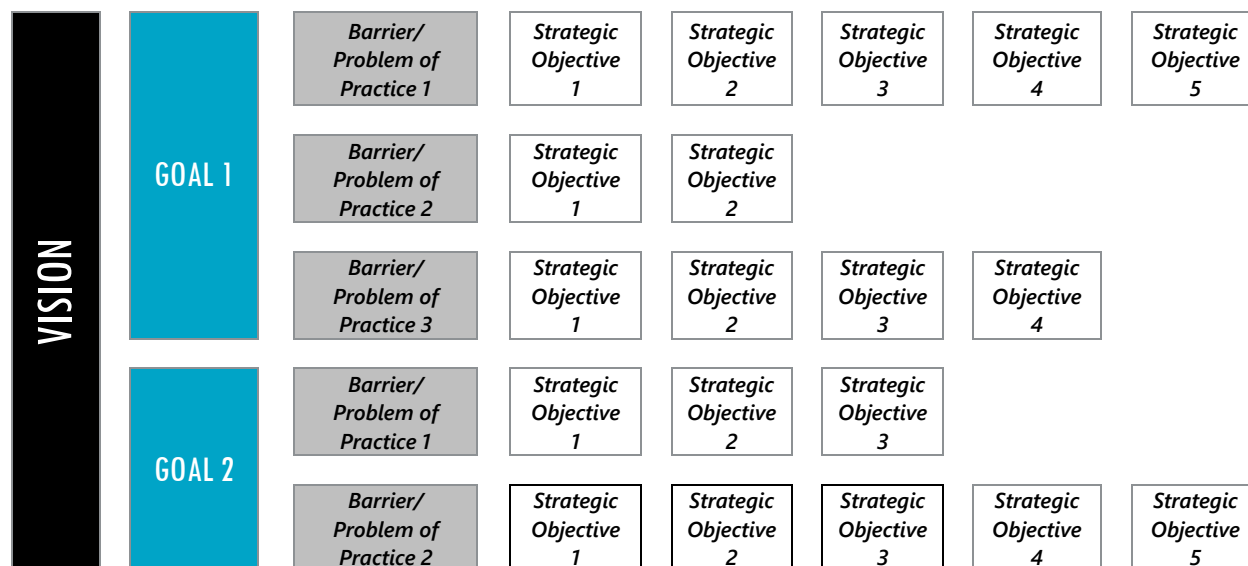
This model is a powerful tool to help systems diagnose the root cause of both their failures and successes when implementing change. Essentially, Lippitt and Knoster argue that if a system finds that its strategy is faltering, stagnating, or not getting off the ground, it is often because one of these six elements is missing. They suggest that systems can determine which element is missing by looking at the terms in the far-right column. For example, a system might reflect on past or present strategies and see that confusion or frustration surrounded the entire strategy. They might ultimately recognize that that strategy had roadblocks because it was missing a clear vision, or the system didn't adequately prepare its faculty and staff with the skills needed to carry out the strategy. We'll return to change management in Section 7, but before developing a new set of plans or tactics, it is essential to understand what's held your system back or propelled it forward in the past. If you failed, it might be because one or more of these elements was missing, and if you succeeded, it is often because all six elements were present.

Along with helping systems diagnose issues within a project or strategy, the Lippitt-Knostrer model also provides a consolidated illustration of all the elements needed in robust strategy design. We often see systems leapfrog from vision to action plan, negating the need for consensus building, skill development, or resource management. Thus, this model can help system leaders spot-check their initial thinking and strategy design.

Developing a strategy is a lengthy process. It can't be done overnight, and it should not be done in isolation. The next section of this document provides a high-level outline of what the strategy design process entails and examples of what this looks like at the system level. Keep in mind that this tool focuses on building a system-wide strategy for learning acceleration. While the [Learning Acceleration Guide](#) (2020) highlighted what learning acceleration looks like at the classroom level, this guide helps systems plan for and enable schools and environments where learning acceleration can take root.

Coming out of Phase 2, systems should have a shortlist of goals and an understanding of the challenges within your system that can impede your ability to achieve your goals and create the conditions in which students can accelerate their learning. These goals and understanding of the challenges in your current state will act as center points to the strategy that you design.

As with the prior two phases, you'll want to design your strategy with a cohort of stakeholders. These stakeholders should represent vast perspectives and needs and should be representative of your student body. Beyond marshaling this contingent of stakeholders, the first step in strategy design is designing a framework for your approach. There are literally millions of frameworks out there, but we typically begin by having systems list out the goals and problems of practice that they've developed and then use to begin writing their strategic objectives. The figure below is a quick illustration of this relationship.



The figure above not only illustrates the relationship between the vision, goals, problems of practice and strategic objectives, but also the importance of prioritization. Systems may come out of Phase 1 and 2 with several goals and problems of practices—but they should not assume all those goals can be accomplished in the first semester or even in the first year. This is a three-to-five-year planning guide because many of the issues that may be inhibiting learning acceleration may take some systems multiple years to resolve. As systems map out their goals, problems of practice, and strategic objectives, teams should consistently consider which goals, challenges, and objectives take precedent.

Now that you have a high-altitude vision for what strategy design looks like, let's dig deeper into the strategic objectives themselves. When designing strategic objectives for each problem of practice or barrier, it's important to keep the six levers mentioned earlier in mind. Addressing each problem of practice causes a ripple effect through

your system and impacts each lever in different ways. Therefore, in your planning process, you must consider how attending to a particular challenge will impact each lever and how your system will offset, mitigate or manage that ripple effect.

For example, suppose a system knows that one of its most significant barriers is low-quality materials in mathematics classrooms. In that case, the system can't simply have "purchase high-quality materials" as a strategic objective. It must think about the relationship between those materials and their vision for the student experience. Leaders also need to consider how they will engage the community, support their educators, and organize their system's change management resources and structures. The table below provides a set of questions that systems can use to think about what strategic objectives might be needed for a particular problem of practice or goal.

ESSENTIAL LEVERS	QUESTIONS		
Vision for the Student Experience	<i>To improve the student experience, what strategic objectives must we accomplish?</i>	<i>To reflect our values statement, which strategic objectives must we reach?</i>	<i>To achieve our vision statement, which strategic objectives must we reach?</i>
Authentic Community and Stakeholder Engagement	<i>To achieve our student experience objectives, what stakeholder needs must we address?</i>		
Educator Experience, Selection, Support, and Collaboration	<i>To meet our vision for the student experience and to meet the needs of our educators and students, what educator hiring, support, and collaboration practices do we need to engage in?</i>		
High-Quality Instructional Resources	<i>To meet the goals and objectives of our vision and strategy, what resources will we need to reinforce and build the capacity of our system, our educators, and our students?</i>		
Organizational Management	<i>To meet the goals and objectives of our vision and strategy, in what internal business processes do we need to excel, and what will we need to learn and understand as we engage in this work?</i>		
Equity-Centered Policies and Practices	<i>How will we strive to recognize and eliminate destructive biases and inequities from this strategy or the systems that support it to meet the goals of our vision?</i>		

Adapted from Strategy Consultants

Let's pause and look at a quick example of what this process looks like for one system with one of their goals and one barrier or problem of practice.

Phase 1: Define your vision and goals
<p>Vision: All students deserve access to high-quality instruction that prepares them for college, career, and the opportunities that they envision for themselves. It is the role of System A's faculty and staff to create rigorous, belong-rich, culturally, and linguistically responsive environments where all students, no matter aspects of their identity, can not only learn but can excel.</p> <p>Goal 1: All System A students, no matter their identity or background, experience rigorous, grade-level aligned instruction rooted in evidence-based academic practices and provides students with the academic, social, and emotion supports all children need to excel in college, their career, and their career life.</p>

All students will have meaningful, enriching classroom experiences that set them up academically, socially, and emotionally to reach the goals they have for themselves.

### Phase 2: Diagnose your current state

When reflecting on the Lippitt-Knostrer model, system leaders and stakeholders shared that System A often struggled to develop consensus and build educator and staff capacity and skill.

**System A** named the following Barriers and Problems of Practice during this phase of their work.

1. System A literacy data, specifically its K-2 literacy data, denotes that most students do not read at grade-level.
2. Elementary and literacy teachers have the highest turnover and mobility rates in the system.
3. 2 in 5 literacy classrooms utilize the district-adopted literacy curriculum
4. 1 in 5 literacy teachers implement the system-adopted literacy curriculum with integrated
5. 57% of System A students show some level of unfinished literacy instruction.
6. The challenges with K-2 literacy meant that System A's 4<sup>th</sup>-grade NAEP literacy scores fell.

### Phase 3: Create your strategy

Barrier 1: Literacy data is trailing behind district, region, and state averages.

B1 Strategic Objective 1: Research K-2 evidence-based literacy assessment and evaluation tools and best practices.

B1 Strategic Objective 2: Gather a cadre of educators and stakeholders to determine K-2 assessment and evaluation needs.

B1 Strategic Objective 3: Select assessment tools that align to system needs and common state or national K-2 benchmarks or measures of success.

B1 Strategic Objective 4: Develop an educator training strategy that builds educator capacity to administer and effectively utilize assessment data to inform and improve instruction and student performance for all students.

B1 Strategic Objective 5: Build or adopt a data management platform that supports leaders and educators to track academic progress at the district, school, classroom, and student level.

The example above is a small-scale representation of what this strategic design work can and should look like. Although small in scale, we do want to point a few key features. First, System A's list of barriers is not exhaustive. It is just five to six barriers. Moreover, this list focuses on a particular content area—literacy. As systems begin this process, leaders may find it helpful to limit teams to a specific number of barriers. For example, they might start by allowing each member of the planning team to generate an individual list of one to five barriers, but they should ultimately tell team members that they will look for trends and eventually develop a collective list of one to five barriers that the entire team can agree on. This work is challenging enough without having an infinite number of problems of practice to consider.

Another critical point is that System A focused on one content area first. Leaders should find a way to structure the planning process. Give your teams time to think about one content area, grade band, or system deeply instead of trying to tackle all your goals and strategies at once.

In looking at this example, we also hope you can more plainly see why this is a three-to-five-year strategy. The representation above focuses on one barrier, and the strategic objectives that System A's strategic planning team developed for that barrier. Doing this level of in-depth strategic planning acts as a natural forcing mechanism for systems. It pushes participants to step back and determine which priorities or objectives need to come first and on what timeline. In this example, System A might spend two to three months researching assessment and evaluation tools (Strategic Objective 1) and may not meet the goals of each of these objectives until year two or three.



## 7. How might you implement and manage change in your system to realize your long-term vision and strategy?

Once you've collaboratively articulated your vision and prioritized your yearly strategic priorities, you'll want to ensure that you have a change management approach that will act as your leadership team's strategy implementation framework. Effective management approaches help systems and teams manage the transitions and transformations experienced from new organizational goals, values, processes, or standards. The primary purpose of all change management initiatives is to help organizations or school systems undertake practices and behaviors that help stakeholders and individuals within that organization accept and adapt to change. Your efforts to realize your vision for the student experience and reach your goals will ultimately depend on every member of your system and community changing behaviors, some of which are longstanding and ingrained.

As you consider how you'll implement your strategy and manage your organizational improvement, it's important to select a change management framework that you consistently leverage in your system. You could choose from any number of models: [John Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change](#), [McKinsey's Influence Model](#) that describes the four building blocks of change, or Dan and Chip Heath's thinking in [Switch: How to Change Things when Change is Hard](#), are two examples. Which model you choose is ultimately less important than choosing one and leveraging it to manage the change in your system.

It's important to realize that having a change management approach does not negate the need for leaders to lead and managers to manage their teams, projects, and responsibilities. Even the best change management approach can fail if leaders don't engage in effective management practices like:

1. **Use Effective Decision Making:** A systematic process that supports teams and individuals in developing and selecting alternative solutions for solving common and sophisticated problems.
2. **Establish Clear Goals, Deliverables, and Timelines:** Broader strategic plans are often paired with more granular project- or work- plans that outline daily actions and owners and include key goals, deliverables, and due dates.
3. **Plan and Implement with Sustainability in Mind:** Systems experience incredible turnover and educator mobility. On average, superintendent tenure is approximately six years—much less if they are in large urban centers, women, or in poverty-stricken systems.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we can't develop plans and strategies that speak to a level of *personnel stasis* that doesn't exist in most scenarios. Build processes and procedures that are nimble and designed in ways that minimize or mitigate flaws that act as obstacles to long-term success.
4. **Delegate Tasks to the Right Teams and Individuals:** Effective managers often delegate responsibilities based on capacity rather than job titles. In the first few months or years of effective strategy implementation and change management, leaders may find that job titles and even job descriptions are not the best ways to assign responsibilities. These items may now be outdated and misaligned with your new vision. Managers may need to lean on leadership models like [situational leadership](#) to match team members and stakeholders with a specific strategic need or task.
5. **Train and Support Teams and Individuals When Needed:** We hope everyone in a role has the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits needed to be effective in that role, but more likely than not, they won't. Team members and stakeholders need and deserve learning experiences that help them build the knowledge and skills required to execute their roles effectively.
6. **Give and Receive Feedback:** Feedback should not be relegated to a person's failures, and it should not only be given to those you manage. Influential leaders recognize the importance of sharing positive and critical

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<sup>5</sup> Source: [Hire Expectations](#) (May 2018), The Broad Center

performance feedback and are receptive to similar input and feedback from those that they manage.

7. **Allow Time for Reflection:** Everyone's job feels urgent and critical, and building in time to pause, reflect, and critique can sometimes feel inefficient. Still, it is necessary if you move from one task to the next without autopsying your prior work to understand better what success was, what wasn't, and why you miss the opportunity to course-correct and get strategies that can be saved and put back on track.

So often, systems and educators, including us, stop at the planning process. We create beautiful spreadsheets and expect that that is enough. If systems do not take the time to select a change management approach and build leader skills in change management and continuous improvement practices, then education systems may go the way of thousands of organizations—launching visions and strategies that fail to reach our ambitious goals.

## 8. What are some common challenges or pitfalls in realizing our vision for the next three to five years?

As we've worked with systems around the country, we've seen some common challenges that hinder systems in realizing their ultimate vision and goals for students' experiences. We're sharing these challenges so that you can guard against them in your system as you work to develop and implement your long-term learning acceleration strategy.

### **Developing a strategy without engaging students, caregivers, and other community stakeholders.**

It's easy as an educator to assume that you know best—better than students, caregivers, or community members. We've seen many well-thought out reforms and change efforts fail due to a lack of stakeholder and community engagement, especially in times of leadership transition in a system.

If you believe your system has moved forward without authentically engaging students, caregivers, and other community stakeholders in your visioning and strategy planning, review [section 2 of this document](#). (For more resources, you can also consider [Walking Together](#) or [the CCSSO Restart and Recovery System Conditions Guidance](#).) Consider how your system might engage your students, caregivers, and other community stakeholders in all of the phases outlined in [section 1](#).

### **Moving forward without a common vision for students' experiences.**

We've seen systems move into planning for their future state without getting clear on their vision for students' experiences, leading to confusion as staff and stakeholders try to act in alignment with the strategy. Developing a vision takes time—but if your staff can't articulate a common, shared understanding of what your students' experiences should look, sound, and feel like, it's unlikely you'll make substantial improvements.

If you believe your system has moved forward without this common vision, review sections [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#) of this document. Consider how your system might engage your team and your stakeholders in a series of conversations about what students should experience in your system—and lead a series of inclusive conversations that ultimately result in a codified, simple vision for students' experiences that is grounded in equitable, high-quality experiences for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or other aspects of their identity.

### **Centering on the mythical “average” student rather than considering how to plan for high expectations for a diverse set of learners.**

We've seen some systems build a vision that is grounded in a mythical “average” student (who is often a white, middle-class, neurotypical, native English speaker). As you develop your vision, think deeply about who your students are. Do a gut check to verify that your vision and resources will serve all your students—rather than your “average” student—well.

If you believe your system might not have centered your vision and supporting resources on the diverse set of learners you serve, revisit sessions [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#) of this document. We've also been heavily influenced by [Shelley Moore's work](#), as well [NCLD's Forward Together](#) and [the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#).

### **Moving forward without high-quality curricular resources.**

We've seen systems move into trying to improve students' classroom experiences without providing teachers the resources they need to make those improvements. Providing students' access to high-quality academic experiences without a set of high-quality instructional materials and curricular resources is exceptionally difficult. As we saw in [The Opportunity Myth](#), educators spend significant time finding or creating assignments—but materials selected or created by educators were much less likely than those provided by high-quality instructional materials to meet the demands of grade-level standards.

If your system does not yet have high-quality instructional materials aligned to college and career ready standards, first start with [EdReports](#), where highly-trained educators have rated materials. Next, consider your vision for students' experiences and determine which highly-rated materials meet your community's needs. You can learn more about

resources to select high-quality instructional materials [here](#). [Curriculum Matters](#), a network of education leaders, shares research, resources, and reflections to support other leaders in making the shift to high-quality instructional material. EdReports outlines steps you should take to adopt materials [here](#). You can also learn more about how you might do that in [this case study about the Louisiana Department of Education](#). To ensure materials provide a window and mirror for the students you serve and are inclusive of all learners look to The Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative [Culturally Responsive Curriculum Score Cards](#) and the English Learners Success Forum [Materials and Instruction Guidelines](#).

**Assuming that a learning acceleration strategy does not require a long-term focus on the diversity of your educators.**

All students benefit from having diverse educators.<sup>6 7 8</sup> As you consider a learning acceleration strategy grounded in creating belonging-rich, rigorous learning experiences for all your students, a key component should be ensuring that your educator workforce’s demographics mirror the demographics of your student population.

In many systems, this would require a significant shift in the diversity of the teacher and leader population. Include a long-term approach to diversifying your workforce, ensuring that you recruit and select a diverse set of educators while also retaining the educators of color you currently employ. You can leverage our resources [here](#) to support in this planning.

**Creating a fiscal cliff by investing stimulus dollars primarily in new staff positions that you won’t be able to sustain long-term.**

As systems are planning their next three to five years, many (but not all) have a generation-defining infusion of federal stimulus dollars to draw on. As districts consider where to invest those dollars to ensure that they are addressing the challenges their students and educators have experienced, it’s vital that they invest in sustainable, high-leverage strategies that will result in improved student experiences.

EdTrust has released [helpful questions](#) that systems can ask themselves (or that community members can ask system leaders) regarding how they’ll ensure that these funds are used equitably. [The Edunomics Lab](#) and [Education Resource Services](#) have released helpful resources to support systems in thinking through these decisions. As you consider these resources, look for opportunities that would allow you to leverage these one-time dollars to effectively support your long-term strategy—like the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials and a set of intensive trainings for your educators on leveraging high-quality instructional materials, or the establishment of caregiver advisory councils that could serve as stakeholder engagement partners for your schools or districts.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://kappanonline.org/why-we-need-diverse-teacher-workforce-segregation-goldhaber-theobald-tien/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://research.upjohn.org/up\\_workingpapers/231/?mc\\_cid=cce1de6bda&mc\\_eid=bb7fef358](https://research.upjohn.org/up_workingpapers/231/?mc_cid=cce1de6bda&mc_eid=bb7fef358)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25254/w25254.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25254/w25254.pdf)