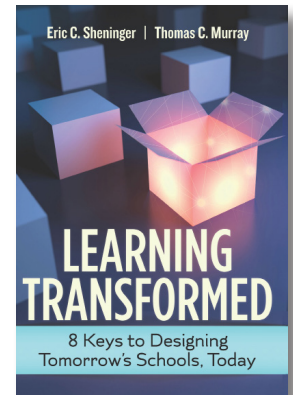


# ASCD® LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

## Learning Transformed

8 Keys to Designing Tomorrow's Schools, Today

by **Eric C. Sheninger and Thomas C. Murray**



### Contents

Introduction: A Sense of Urgency

Page 2

Creating a Culture of Innovation

Page 2

Redesigning the Learning Experience

Page 3

Ensuring a Return on Instruction

Page 3

Designing Learner-Centered Spaces

Page 4

Making Professional Learning Personal

Page 5

Leveraging Technology

Page 5

Collaborating and Engaging with the Community

Page 6

Leading the Charge

Page 6

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

With all that we know about how students learn, the nature of the world they will face after graduation, and the educational inequities that have existed for centuries, maintaining a traditional, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning is tantamount to instructional malpractice.

It's our obligation to prepare our students for their future—not our past. In *Learning Transformed* authors Eric C. Sheninger and Thomas C. Murray outline eight keys—each a piece of a puzzle for transforming the K-12 education system of teaching and learning—to intentionally design tomorrow's schools so today's learners are prepared for success.

If we want our students to become successful citizens in a global society, we must dramatically shift to a more personal approach. We can no longer wait. Let *Learning Transformed* show you how you can be part of the solution.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- School improvement relies on high-quality, collaborative leadership.
- Students need real-world tools to do real-world work that matters.
- Learning spaces need to be flexible to unleash student genius.
- Professional learning needs a shift to a more personal approach.



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## Introduction: A Sense of Urgency

### The American Education Crisis

The idea of the “American Education Crisis” is not a new topic. Outcries for reforming a broken system and the need to better prepare our nation’s students for their future have in fact gone on for hundreds of years. The difference today, however, is that the global world of work is evolving at an unprecedented pace, with the speed of change continuously accelerating.

A study published by The Education Trust found that only 8 percent of U.S. high school graduates actually complete a curriculum that is rigorous enough to prepare them for college and the workplace.

As the outcry for education reform continues, the opportunities available for those with only a high school diploma remain in a freefall. As corporations move manufacturing jobs overseas, the availability of lower-level positions moves with them. Simultaneously, the process of automation through technology has made many jobs that were commonplace for decades now completely obsolete.

Today’s pace of technological change is staggering, and the speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent. Consumers may seem well-versed with the latest personal gadgets, yet growth in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, autonomous vehicles, the Internet of Things (IoT), and nano-technology remains hardly known except by technology gurus who live and breathe ones and zeros.

How are our schools preparing students for the jobs that will exist in this future global workforce? The traditional model of schooling in which students are taught to regurgitate information, ultimately preparing them for the industrial model of the past, must dramatically shift to a more personal approach if we are to prepare this generation of students to become successful citizens in a global society.

Next, we introduce eight keys to intentionally designing tomorrow’s schools so that today’s learners are prepared for success far beyond earning a high school diploma.

## Creating a Culture of Innovation

### Key: Leadership and School Culture Lay the Foundation

What is true leadership? Great leaders don’t tell people what to do but instead take them to where they need to be.

There is no agenda to create a harem of followers or disciples. True leaders know that their success is intimately tied to the work of the collective. As such, they encourage risk taking and create a culture of innovation and trust. One person doesn’t win a war, an election, or a football game.

The pinnacle of success comes from a dynamic team approach where each person knows that they have an important role to play—that the work has meaning.

The following acronym has been developed to add context to the evolving role of leadership in schools today. The best leaders do the following on a consistent basis:

- **L**earn,
- **E**mpower,
- **A**dapt,
- **D**elegate,
- **E**ngage,
- **R**eflect, and
- **S**erve.

### Change Agents Build Relationships: A Key to Culture

Meaningful change has and always will begin at the individual level. The hardest, but most gratifying, work in which a leader might ever engage is empowering colleagues to change. School leaders need to remove barriers to the change process, eradicate the fear of failure, provide autonomy, and empower teachers to drive change at the classroom level. Dynamic relationships propel this change to happen.

Consider trying the following strategies to help your colleagues begin the process of changing their professional practice.

- Lead by example even when (initially) it might be a lonely place.
- Share current research and practices that support the change you are championing.
- Encourage colleagues who might be resistant to change to attend professional learning opportunities with you. Get them involved in high-quality professional learning related to the change effort.
- Tackle fears head-on to alleviate concerns.

- Help others see the value of the change on their own.
- Clearly articulate how the change will improve professional practice and result in improved student learning and achievement outcomes.
- Be patient. Like you would with your students, treat your colleagues with respect and remember how satisfying and rewarding it is when you help students succeed.
- Get your students involved. There is no better way to convince educators to change than when they can see firsthand the impact it has on kids.
- Work on building better relationships.

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### Redesigning the Learning Experience

**Key: The Learning Experience Must Be Redesigned and Made Personal**

Most often, students are told what to learn, when to learn it, and how it should be learned, which has ultimately led to an engagement crisis. Very rarely do students have the opportunity to follow their passions, explore their interests, and engage in personal and authentic learning opportunities. Therefore, massive disengagement has become a natural byproduct of a traditional education experience.

Intentionally designed schools not only break from the traditional one-size-fits-all lock-step progression of teaching and learning but also redesign the learning experience to one that is personal and authentic for students. To be globally competitive in the years ahead, students must be given the opportunity to exercise more agency and ownership over their learning. This can only be accomplished through intentional design.

#### The Educational Technology Fallacy

Research on educational technology indicates that access to devices alone is simply not enough to shift the learning paradigm. Educational technology is not, and never will be, a silver bullet to prepare students for their future. Technology provides many opportunities to engage learners like never before, yet it is imperative that this engagement also leads to high levels of learning in which students create a variety of artifacts that demonstrate conceptual mastery.

The 2016 National Education Technology Plan coined the term “digital use divide,” which is defined as “the disparity between students who use technology to create, design, build, explore, and collaborate and those who simply use

technology to consume media passively.” School leaders who intentionally design schools are cognizant of this divide, and they work to ensure technology is used actively.

#### Building Student Agency

For schools to transform learning, student agency must be a core component and value of all involved. Student agency is about empowering kids to own their learning (and school) through greater autonomy. It is driven by choice, voice, and advocacy. How can school leaders make student agency a reality? For example, they can,

- Develop pedagogically sound learning activities with standards-aligned assessments and enable students to select the right tool for the task to demonstrate conceptual mastery.
- Empower students to co-create rules and expectations.
- Provide avenues for students to provide honest feedback on school culture.
- Implement portfolios as a means of authentic assessment.
- When hiring new teachers and administrators, have students sit on the interview committee.

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### Ensuring a Return on Instruction

**Key: Decisions Must Be Grounded in Evidence and Driven by the Return on Instruction (ROI)**

In the United States alone, schools spend billions of dollars a year on technology purchases. What evidence do we have that our ed-tech expenditures have actually improved teaching and learning? Many school leaders may cringe while reflecting on that question, and that is okay. A major step in intentionally designing schools is to begin to critically analyze technology initiatives and align them to clear results.

For educational technology to be fully embraced as a powerful teaching and learning tool, there must be a focus on substance over assumptions and generalizations. The greatest technology in the world will not garner hypothesized improvement if a concerted effort to change pedagogy isn't the foundation.

The problem isn't the technology itself per se but the lack of high-quality pedagogy, which stems from a lack of high-quality professional learning to support educators with effective implementation. Showing teachers what “high-quality” actually looks like is key.

## Driving Evidence-Based Instructional Leadership

It's easy to simply say how we should improve instructional leadership. However, actually doing the work is no small feat. To leverage a true Return on Instruction, consider the following suggestions:

**Be present in classrooms regularly.** Begin by increasing the number of formal observations conducted each year and commit to a schedule to make it happen.

**Streamline expectations and eliminate ineffective practices.** Begin by establishing a common vision and expectations for all teachers.

**Improve feedback.** Suggestions for improvement should always contain clear, practical examples and strategies that a teacher can begin to implement immediately. Just like with students, timely, relevant feedback is essential.

**Be a scholar.** Being a scholar not only helps a leader improve professional practice but also puts the leader in a position to have higher-quality conversations with teachers and their colleagues about their own improvement.

**Model.** The best school leaders don't ask their teachers to do anything they are not willing to do themselves.

**Teach a class.** This can be accomplished regularly during the year or by coteaching with both struggling and distinguished teachers.

**Grow professionally.** School leaders should attend a variety of conferences or workshops each year that are aligned to a major initiative or focus area in their school or district.

## Designing Learner-Centered Spaces

**Key: Learning Spaces Must Become Learner-Centered**

Most of today's learning spaces were originally designed and built for teacher-centric learning environments, coined by Alfie Kohn in 1999 as the "cells and bells" model. In this analogy, students occupy cells until the bell rings and then move down the hall to another cell to do the same. The process repeats until freedom is granted at a particular time.

This type of design, however, is in direct contrast to what we know about how students learn, how tomorrow's teachers will need to teach, and all that we understand from educational research about the impact of learning space design.

As the learning space has been studied, considerable evidence indicates an explicit relationship between the physical makeup of the environment and educational outcomes. The research of Barrett and Zhang has suggested direct connections between the learning space and sensory stimuli among students. They identify three key design principles:

- 1. Naturalness:** Hardwired into our brains, humans have the basic need for light, air, and safety. In this area, the impact of lighting, sound, temperature, and air quality are prevalent.
- 2. Individualization:** Each of our brains is uniquely organized, and we perceive the world in different ways. Because of this, different people respond to environmental stimuli in various ways. Therefore, the opportunity for some level of choice affects success.
- 3. Appropriate Level of Stimulation:** The learning space can offer the "silent curriculum" that affects student engagement levels. When designing the space, it's important for educators not to overstimulate and thus detract students' ability to focus but to provide enough stimuli to enhance the learning experience.

Today's educational paradigm is no longer one of knowledge transfer but one of knowledge creation and curation. Since the 1960s, constructivism, the idea that people construct their own understanding and knowledge through experience and reflection, has been foundational in many introductory college education courses.

According to Nancy Van Note Chism, learning spaces intentionally designed for a constructivist approach should not be limited to the classroom but instead should spill into corridors, across campus, and throughout the interconnected digital web. These types of spaces include

- small-group meeting spaces,
- spaces for projects,
- spaces for whole-class conversations,
- spaces where technology is easily accessible,
- spaces for display of ideas and working documents, and
- spaces that can easily accommodate movement and noise.

Next generation spaces pull from the current generation's

social development and constructivist philosophies to provide all students with a community that has opportunities to create, invent, and tinker. This allows students to learn in authentic and meaningful ways.

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## Making Professional Learning Personal

**Key: Professional Learning Must Be Relevant, Engaging, Ongoing, and Made Personal**

For decades, conventional wisdom has been that if schools could just get teachers the right type and right amount of support, then excellent teaching and learning in the classroom would be in reach. According to a report by The New Teacher Project (2015), school districts are spending considerable amounts of money on teacher development, but little of it is actually making a long-term difference.

For years, school leaders have pushed teachers to differentiate or personalize instruction in their classrooms, yet they have hypocritically utilized a one-size-fits-all model for professional learning. The term “professional learning” emphasizes a modern approach that is interactive, engaging, and ongoing rather than one-size-fits-all and completed over a fixed time period. At a time when school leaders are expecting teachers to make learning more relevant and personal for kids, they must also model the desired practice.

### Developing a Learning Culture of Ownership and Empowerment

Professional learning in many districts must undergo radical reform, from a model that’s outdated and ineffective to one that’s personal, empowering, and owned by the learner. How can such a culture of ownership and empowerment be created?

**Clearly define and articulate the vision.** Do all stakeholders understand the district’s direction? How should instruction improve with the time that’s invested?

**Model: Practice what you preach.** Learn alongside your staff members and model expectations for them. Utilize time in an efficient and meaningful manner. Invest time in professional learning—not managerial tasks.

**Learning should be anytime, anywhere.** Today’s schools must work to provide a robust, digital curriculum where high-quality content is available around the clock.

**Balance districtwide initiatives with the need for learning that’s personal.** Maintain a laserlike focus on

the vision while meeting the individual needs of staff members through a more personal approach to learning, which happens only by abdicating some control.

**Shift the culture of professional learning.** Professional learning is a personal responsibility. It’s not just a few additional days built into a teacher contract or a handful of after-school workshops.

**Empower staff to design their own learning.** Teachers will see value when they are invested in the design process. Find ways to grow teacher leadership and build capacity in your staff.

**Solicit teacher feedback.** Districts need to seek out teacher feedback to see what’s working, what’s relevant, and what areas still need to grow.

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## Leveraging Technology

**Key: Technology Must Be Leveraged and Used as an Accelerant for Student Learning**

When implemented well, technology can help close achievement gaps and improve learning outcomes, but when paired with 20th-century pedagogy, it can be a substantial waste of money. The proper combination of talented, well-trained teachers and high-octane technology can create authentic and transformed learning experiences for all students.

The ability of technology to support personalized learning is dependent on a robust infrastructure. The National Educational Technology Plan of 2016 outlines four keys for designing a robust infrastructure:

1. **Ubiquitous connectivity:** Persistent access to high-speed internet in and out of school.
2. **Powerful learning devices:** Access to mobile devices that connect learners and educators to the vast resources of the Internet and facilitate communication and collaboration.
3. **High-quality digital learning content:** Digital learning content and tools that can be used to design and deliver engaging and relevant learning experiences.
4. **Responsible Use Policies:** Guidelines to safeguard students and ensure that the infrastructure is used to support learning.

When developing a school district’s infrastructure, or when refreshing existing equipment, school leaders should consid-

er the following:

- What is the vision for learning that technology will be supporting?
- What digital tools will be needed?
- What kind of professional learning will teachers and administrators need?
- How much bandwidth will be needed?
- What will the needs of your in-school network be?
- How many and what type of devices are needed?
- What resources are available to fund the transition?

## Overcoming the Digital Divide: Equity in Access

The notion of a “digital divide,” the term used to describe the gap in access to and use of digital technologies, has been a popular topic of conversation since the turn of the century. Since 2006, metrics indicate that 99 percent of schools have had some sort of Internet connection; however, for many of those districts, the available connectivity has been extremely limited. A report by the State Educational Technology Directors Association and Common Sense Kids Action indicated that in 2016, 41 percent of schools were still underconnected.

Access and connectivity are essential to transform learning and ultimately prepare students for their future. Although great strides have been made to develop the proper infrastructure in our nation’s schools, far too many students lose access to connectivity when they leave school campus.

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## Collaborating and Engaging with the Community

**Key: Community Collaboration and Engagement Must Be Woven into the Fabric of a School’s Culture**

The correlation between family engagement and student achievement has been studied at length, and the evidence is both consistent and positive. Simply put, when schools, families, and the community collaborate to support student success, students achieve at higher levels, drop out less frequently, and think more positively about their school experience. For learning to be transformed, community collaboration and engagement are essential.

Parent communication and collaboration should mirror the type of engagement we want to experience with our own children’s schools. School leaders who intentionally design

their schools establish timely, two-way communication and dialogue; create regular opportunities for families to learn together at home; are responsive to cultural differences; and work diligently to support families living in poverty.

They understand that community collaboration is ongoing and systemic—not a few times per month. They meet families where they are and communicate accordingly; leverage digital tools to communicate in real time while being sensitive to families with limited or no home access; and build trust and relationships to form the foundation of community collaboration.

The Center for American Progress outlines what it takes to develop “community schools” where school and community leaders collaboratively develop a common vision and strategy for success. They outline six key strategies that successful community school initiatives use to build effective partnerships and relationships:

1. Ensure that all partners share a common vision. The entire community and all involved partners should agree on the same goals and expectations.
2. Establish formal relationships and collaborative structures to engage stakeholders, ranging from developing task forces to creating formal agreements.
3. Encourage open dialogue about challenges and solutions. To foster shared ownership, stakeholders must engage honestly and constructively with one another to solve problems and make midcourse corrections.
4. Engage partners in the use of data. Sharing data enables all stakeholders to understand where things stand and hold one another accountable for making measurable progress.
5. Create and empower central office capacity at the district level to sustain community schoolwork.
6. Leverage community resources and braid funding streams. Community schools capitalize on the financial assets of community partners and funding streams to support programs and activities aligned with their common vision.

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## Leading the Charge

**Key: Schools That Transform Learning Are Built to Last, as Financial, Political, and Pedagogical Sustainability Ensure Long-Term Success**

Change isn't easy, and it certainly won't happen quickly. Many of the best examples of sustainable change have resulted from an organic, grassroots approach. The ability to initiate, manage, and create sustainable change relies on a leader's ability—your ability—to understand it as a process as opposed to an event. This type of mindset takes vision, planning, patience, and perseverance. If sustainable change is the goal, then it is important to clarify the what, why, and how—followed by a clear metric of success.

### Built to Last: Ensuring Sustainability

In every district, school leaders must make smart, student-centered decisions to ensure the long-term sustainability of progress. This type of sustainability encompasses three key areas: financial, pedagogical, and political.

**Financial sustainability.** Budgets have remained stagnant for a number of years, so the need for financial sustainability comes as no surprise. Being vigilant about financial sustainability isn't only the responsibility of school business managers and school board members. Financial sustainability is the responsibility of every school leader.

**Pedagogical sustainability.** As school leaders understand, teachers at the classroom level have the greatest impact on achievement. To redesign the learning experience and sustain those practices in the long term, we must invest in the capacity of those who have the greatest effect. Building pedagogical sustainability comes from ongoing, systemic, personal professional learning opportunities and empowering teachers to be leaders.

**Political sustainability.** Political sustainability is grounded in trusting relationships. From the school board and

district superintendent to individual parents and an elementary principal, political sustainability is built one relationship at a time. School leaders must work diligently to build trusting relationships so sustained transformation can occur. To develop political sustainability, school leaders must build capacity and empower people other than themselves. A leader's legacy can be seen in the capacity that remains when they leave.

Collaborative leadership for intentional design involves building a great team, empowering your people to run, arming them with the needed tools, and building positive, trusting, long-lasting relationships with all stakeholders.

Creating the schools that our kids need will not happen by chance. It is our responsibility to make it happen. The schools our kids need are, and always will be, intentionally designed. It is in these schools that learning is transformed. Together, we can do this.



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