

# The School Leader Paradigm: BECOMING WHILE DOING

by Dr. Todd Bess, Executive Director for the Indiana Association of School Principals



**S**chool leadership matters. Principals matter. As was recognized by the U.S. Senate Education Committee almost fifty years ago, school leadership, specifically principal leadership, is critical to the success of our nation's schools, teachers, and students. Very few professions offer the vast opportunities to

influence the lives of so many and forever leave an impact on those they serve. However, school leadership is complex. School leadership is messy. School leadership is hard. In our opinion, the principalship is arguably the most challenging position in education. But even with its complexity and messiness, it is the “hard” about school leadership that makes it so important. It is the “hard” about school leadership that makes the profession so great.

This is why the Indiana Association of School Principals, along with multiple other states, has formed the School Leader Collaborative and have engaged with each other to develop the School Leader Paradigm. We have re-conceptualized principal leadership into how a Learning Leader must develop their own competencies, and also the work that a principal must do while Leading their Learning Organization. In short, we want our Principals to be a Learning Leader Leading their Learning Organization. Or, even shorter, Becoming While Doing.

## BECOMING WHILE DOING

From our experience and expertise, becoming while doing represents the art of school leadership. Specifically, we argue that principals, or learning leaders, should always be simultaneously improving their own leadership competencies, or becoming, while doing the work of moving their learning organizations forward. Being totally self-aware and constantly reflective of the leadership intelligences (becoming) increases principals' effectiveness to lead culture, systems, and learning (doing). We believe our Paradigm provides the critical elements principals must account for in order to be becoming while doing, which results in positive outcomes for them, their organizations, their teachers, and ultimately their students.

Like great companies that need high-quality executive leaders, great schools need high-quality principal leaders. According to the Wallace Foundation in their 2009 report, *Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes*, Wallace recognized:

*Effective leadership is vital to the success of a school. Research and practice confirm that there is a slim chance of creating and sustaining high-quality learning environments without a skilled and committed leader to help shape teaching and learning.<sup>1</sup>*

Several studies backup Wallace's claim, noting school leadership as sitting second to classroom instruction as a primary driver for student performance, both positive and negative.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the body of research indicates principals have the greatest impact on student achievement in schools with the greatest needs (i.e., high poverty rates, low student attendance,

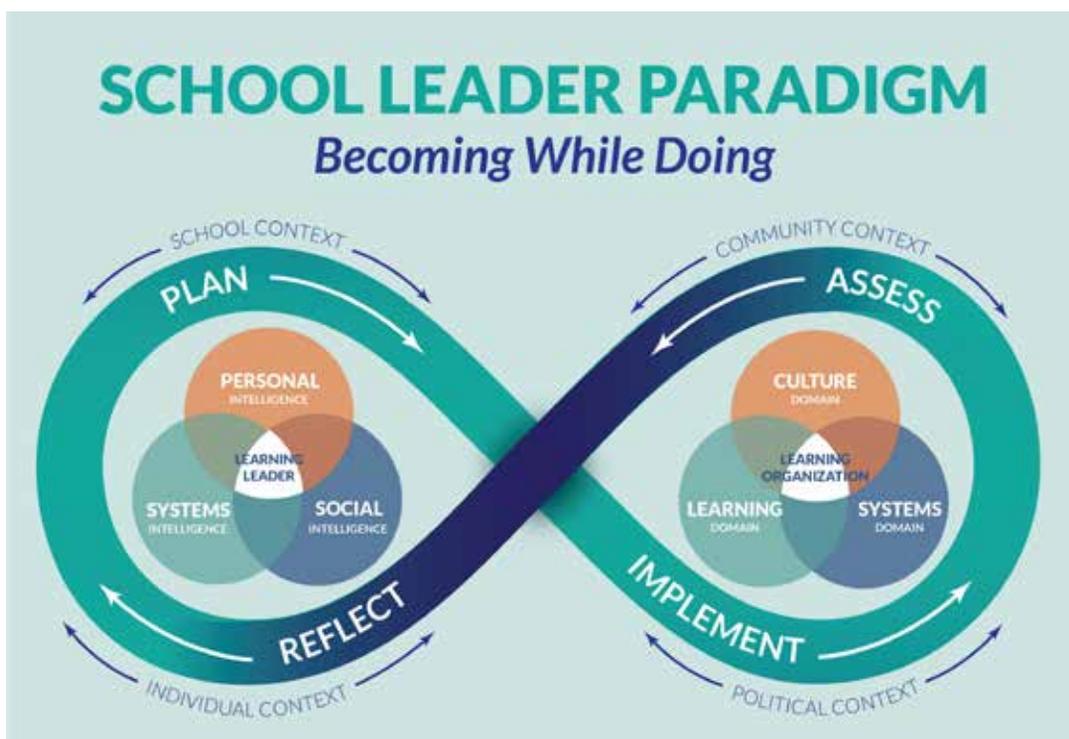


Figure 1

low graduation rates, and high teacher turnover).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, principal leadership is the most important factor for attracting and retaining quality teachers.<sup>4</sup> Research indicates that the main reason teachers choose whether or not to stay in a particular school is the quality of support they receive from their principal.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, effective principals lead effective schools.<sup>6</sup>

## OUR THEORY OF ACTION

In order to battle teacher cynicism, keep student performance on a positive trajectory, and save school districts' needed resources, a two-prong approach of supporting principals must be taken: 1) increase their longevity in the schools they have been hired to lead; and 2) accelerate their effectiveness as school leaders. As outlined previously, the reason for this two-prong approach is fairly clear. Principals must have time to create positive, lasting change in their schools. However, since most principals do not benefit from the typical 5 to 7 years needed to transform their buildings, they must be provided support to get better faster.

Much of what is currently written or discussed about expectations for principals is a desire for them to be instructional leaders. This is a logical thought, but the term instructional leader is usually ill-defined or misunderstood. Too often, when people think instructional leader, a narrow vision of a principal sitting in a

classroom observing teachers comes to mind. No doubt, principals need to spend time with teachers and students in classrooms, but capitalizing on opportunities to positively impact adult and student performance in schools demands much more. Instead of thinking of principals as just instructional leaders, we regard principals as learning leaders leading learning organizations.<sup>7</sup> In order to provide a complete picture of principals as learning leaders leading learning organizations, we developed the School Leader Paradigm (the Paradigm) (Figure 1). The sections that follow break down the parts of the Paradigm and provide an explanation of each.

## THE SCHOOL LEADER PARADIGM

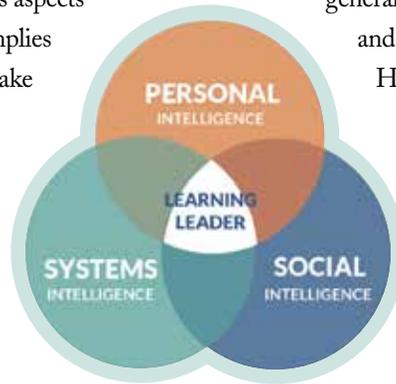
### The Infinity Loop

By shaping the Paradigm with an infinity loop, we suggest that the influence and impact of a school leader is eternal. Principals may come and go, but the influence they have on others while leading their schools reverberates always. Additionally, the infinity loop accounts for the two sides of leadership: 1) the leader; and 2) the organization the leader leads. While the leader and the organization can be described separately, the two are always connected. Lastly, the infinity loop signifies the state of continuous improvement both the learning leader and the learning organization must be engaged in to do what is best for their students.

**Learning Leader (Becoming)**

In order for a principal to become a learning leader, it requires the principal to possess a convergence of personal, social, and systems intelligences, as shown on the left side of the Paradigm. The intelligences are interconnected, do not act in isolation, and take into account the personal, social, and systems aspects of school leadership. Furthermore, intelligence implies how learning and growth, or becoming, need to take place for principals to become better leaders. The concept of “either you have it or you don’t” does not apply here. Improvement is possible even if it requires intentional, incremental growth, as is often the case when creating new habits and skills.<sup>8</sup>

To flesh out the intelligences on the becoming side of the Paradigm, we identified critical competencies and attributes principals must account for when working to grow, or become, as school leaders. The definitions of the intelligences and their corresponding competencies are provided in table 1.



**Learning Organization (Doing)**

A massive paradigm shift as the No Child Left Behind Act was ushered in, and as ESSA was promulgated required that principals move from being managers of schools to leaders of systems required to ensure the success of all students.<sup>9</sup> What was generally acceptable in terms of school culture, systems, and learning outcomes was no longer permissible.

Historically inequitable systems that perpetuated access and opportunity gaps for underserved and underrepresented students required immediate dismantling. Adult-centered systems that contributed to ongoing student failure, chronic absenteeism, high suspension rates, consistently low graduation rates, and institutional racism needed to be addressed in order to meet the requirements of NCLB.<sup>10</sup> This mandated accountability system required new and unprecedented leadership from building principals. They (principals) could no longer just manage, but rather were forced to lead the organization. Principals were charged with eliminating

Figure 2

<p><b>PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE</b></p> <p>The capacity of the principal to reason about personality and to use personality and personal information to enhance one’s thoughts, plans, and life experiences.</p> <p><b>Wellness</b> – Balances quality or state of being healthy in body and mind as a result of deliberate effort;</p> <p><b>Growth Mindset</b> – Embraces challenges; persists despite obstacles; sees effort as a path to mastery; learns from criticism; is inspired by others’ success;</p> <p><b>Self-Management</b> – Monitors and takes responsibility for one’s own behavior and well-being, personally and professionally; and</p> <p><b>Innovation</b> – Introduces new methods, novel ideas, processes or products that are put into operation.</p>	<p><b>SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE</b></p> <p>A principal’s set of interpersonal competencies that inspire others to be effective.</p> <p><b>Service</b> – Assures that other people’s highest priority needs are being served;</p> <p><b>Community Building</b> – Instills a sense of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together;</p> <p><b>Capacity Building</b> – Employs leadership knowledge and skills necessary to enable the school to make better use of its intellectual and social capital, in order to adopt high-leverage strategies of teaching and learning; and</p> <p><b>Influence</b> – Can cause changes without directly forcing them to happen; practices skills of networking, constructive persuasion and negotiation, consultation, and coalition-building.</p>	<p><b>SYSTEMS INTELLIGENCE</b></p> <p>A principal’s understanding of the inner-workings and leadership of complex systems within their learning organization.</p> <p><b>Mission, Vision, and Strategic Planning</b> – Defines the mission as the intent of the school; fosters a vision of what the school will look like at its peak performance; strategically determines the procedural path to intentionally achieve the vision;</p> <p><b>Operations and Management</b> – Utilizes a variety of methods, tools, and principles oriented toward enabling efficient and effective operation and management;</p> <p><b>Teaching and Learning</b> – Develops and supports intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each students’ academic success and well-being; and</p> <p><b>Cultural Responsiveness</b> – Promotes cooperation, collaboration, and connectedness among a community of learners while responding to diversity, need, and capacity.</p>
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Table 1

## CULTURE DOMAIN

The principal's efforts to create, foster, and sustain a student-centered climate and culture where all adults strive to build positive and unconditional relationships with all students, while ensuring equitable access and opportunities to high-quality programs.

**Relationships** – *A focus on learners where relationships elevate experiences and outcomes that ensure optimal learning is achieved by all.*

**Student Centeredness** – *An environment where students' needs drive the strategic alignment of organizational decisions and resources.*

**Wellness** – *An environment in which the well-being (physical, mental, and social-emotional) of everyone in the learning organization is intentionally fostered and nurtured.*

**Equity** – *The behaviors, systems, processes, resources, and environments that ensure each member of the learning organization is provided fair, just, and individualized learning and growth opportunities.*

**Traditions/Celebrations** – *The routines and procedures that elevate organizational culture as well as recognize, celebrate and honor all students, staff, and community for their achievements and service to others.*

**Ethics** – *An environment in which each person exhibits the beliefs and behaviors that uphold the universal core values that promote the learning organization's success.*

**Global Mindedness** – *An environment that is a microcosm of the world that navigates, engages, and reflects the richness and complexity of the global society.*

## LEARNING DOMAIN

The principal's efforts to assess a school's current systems, initiate a cycle of inquiry focused on dismantling historically inequitable systems, and engage stakeholders in a collective effort to establish sustainable student-centered systems.

**Vision/Mission** – *A focus on learners where the vision inspires and sets the direction for the future and drives the mission where actions lead to outcomes.*

**Communication** – *The process used to foster collective understanding and engagement that creates and sustains a positive learning environment.*

**Collaborative Leadership** – *An environment where all members of the learning organization actively assume and support leadership for themselves and others to enhance engagement and performance.*

**Data Literacy** – *A focus on learners where all members of the learning organization understand and actively use various forms of formal and informal data to improve the learning organization.*

**Strategic Management** – *A focus on learners where school leaders align and leverage a holistic system and its processes which drive organizational performance.*

**Safety** – *An environment where the learning organization's physical space and safety procedures are regularly monitored and maintained.*

**Operations** – *A focus on the school operations which utilize and deploy systems that effectively balance operational efficiencies and student needs.*

## SYSTEMS DOMAIN

The principal's efforts to support the development and use of innovative practices that encourage adult and student life-long learning.

**Reflection/Growth** – *A focus on learning where introspection yields actionable feedback and strengthens the growth and productivity of the learning organization.*

**Result-Orientation** – *An environment in which everyone is accountable for the personal and collective growth of all members of the learning organization.*

**Curriculum** – *A focus on learners where content produces a high level of personal and academic achievement.*

**Instruction** – *A focus on learners where teaching methods produce a high level of personal and academic achievement.*

**Assessment** – *A focus on learners where measures produce a high level of personal and academic achievement.*

**Innovation** – *A focus on learning where creativity and risk-taking ignite a passion for learning and challenge the status quo.*

**Human Capital Management** – *A focus on learners where the growth and development of each individual are essential to support learning and the school community.*

Table 2

achievement gaps which required redefining a school's culture, the systems that supported that culture, and how learning was defined for all stakeholders.

By setting culture, developing systems, and fostering the learning of all those they serve, principals create, nurture, and sustain learning organizations.<sup>11</sup> But, what specifically is necessary for principals to do this work? In order to fully capture what principals must do to lead learning organizations, we turned to the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) new publication, *Building Ranks: A Comprehensive Framework*

for Effective School Leaders, for guidance.<sup>12</sup> In *Building Ranks*, NASSP identified two critical leadership domains: culture and learning. Going further, NASSP broke each leadership domain into different dimensions, then further dissected the dimensions into concrete strategies and action steps for school leaders to consider incorporating into their own leadership. The Collaborative then added the third leadership domain of systems to our Paradigm knowing that a specific attention to the day-to-day challenges was essential for a principal to effectively lead the organization. As you can see in Table 2, the Collaborative then

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## LOOKING AHEAD

In order for our nation's schools to meet the needs of all kids, we as the School Leader Collaborative believe every child in every school deserves a high-quality principal. Every child. Right now. To this end, the School Leader Collaborative is committed to using our collective capacity to develop and support all school leaders to help them get better faster and stay in positions longer. We will use the School Leader Paradigm to focus and guide our efforts to create the resources and professional learning supports for individuals whether they be aspiring leaders, first-year launching leaders, growing as building leaders, or reaching the pinnacle of the profession as mastering leaders. Further, we will use the Paradigm to engage school district leaders, preparation programs, policymakers, and the public with a common vision and language about what makes a principal effective and what is necessary to support and sustain our nation's principals. Overall, we will use the Paradigm as a source of hope-filled conviction needed to ensure all of our schools' leaders are learning leaders leading learning organizations.

In order to maximize the use of the Paradigm, recognizing and understanding the interplay between becoming and doing is critical. For principals to be most effective, we believe it is important for them to know which leadership attributes they should consider leveraging to conduct the concrete work their jobs require as described by the dimensions above. Of note, our efforts to align the two sides of the Paradigm brought to light that certain leadership attributes under the Becoming side are necessary to conduct the work of all dimensions. Principals that give attention to Relationships (Culture Domain), Vision-Mission (Systems Domain), and Growth Mindset (Learning Domain) provide themselves a strong opportunity for success as a Learning Leader, and for success as a Learning Organization. 🌟

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**LIKE GREAT COMPANIES THAT NEED HIGH-QUALITY EXECUTIVE LEADERS, GREAT SCHOOLS NEED HIGH-QUALITY PRINCIPAL LEADERS.**

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