



Get Ready

Back-to-School Culture Toolkit for K-12 Leaders

It's back-to-school season and you're visiting classrooms, talking with educators and students. You're convening community and business leaders and sharing your vision for **ensuring all students graduate ready for what's next**. How can you best capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm of back-to-school and **get your community ready** to sustain a learner-centered culture year-round? We created this toolkit to provide district and school leaders with the tools to do just that. In this toolkit, you will find:

More Than a District:
How Conversations
Create Learning
Communities

5 Goals to Set This
Year for a Strong
School Culture

Classroom Practices
to Develop Social-
Emotional Skills

How Aligning Budget
Decisions to Your
Vision Builds Trust
and Greater Fiscal
Responsibility

This toolkit draws on the extensive experiences of current and former principals, superintendents and other district leaders who have supported their learning communities through big transformations. We've relied on the expertise of individuals who have devoted their professional careers to determining not only how to improve outcomes for learners today, but also thinking ahead to what we need to do now for students to thrive in the future.

We hope you'll read and share this toolkit with your colleagues – and share your own expertise with us, too. Engage with KnowledgeWorks online or contact us directly at info@knowledgeworks.org, because we believe our learning communities are only as strong as those we invite into them.



More Than a District: How Conversations Create Learning Communities

There's no better time to open – or re-open – lines of communication within the community than the start of the school year. Whether you are just beginning to think about your district's vision for the future or you're looking to re-engage your learning community, creating opportunities for honest conversations and the potential for alignment are critical to the success of all learners. For true systems change and long-term success, a vision must be created by and lived throughout a community.

Consider ways you can create authentic engagement this school year, especially with families and the broader learning community:

Create More Opportunities to Engage Families



MEET FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE.

Sit down with individual families in their homes, attend non-district events in the community or organize meetings in familiar gathering places, such as churches, town halls, theaters or any other location where people congregate.



OPEN DOORS AND CREATE TRANSPARENCY.

Allow time for parents to visit classrooms to see learning in action. Host informal chats where parents can come discuss and learn about what's happening in their learning community and hear from students and their teachers. Leverage your website, including parent/student portals, and social media platforms to consistently communicate, emphasizing how district activities align to your vision.



SOLICIT AND VALUE THEIR INPUT.

You don't have to take every piece of feedback, but you should create an environment where parents feel heard – especially the parents of traditionally underserved students, such as ELL or other high-needs learners. Ask families for their insight through regular meetings or surveys, and show that you value it by referencing what you heard in future communications and processes.

When Lisa Snyder, former superintendent of Lakeville Area Public Schools in Lakeville, Minnesota, started exploring personalized learning, she came up against a common question from parents: “If I was educated in this way and am now a successful adult, why won’t it also help my child succeed?”

Opening lines of communication with families revealed that many parents were concerned that their children might not find work in the region after school, forcing them to move home or across the country. Snyder and her district used what they learned to dig into economic data and shape their approach to personalizing learning as a means of future workforce readiness. “We asked the right questions and aligned our responses to what parents and communities said they wanted for kids,” said Snyder.

Build Partnerships Outside Your Schools



SCHEDULE FORUMS

Schedule forums with local businesses, colleges/universities and other community leaders. Ask these stakeholders what skills they need from your graduates, and what opportunities they see for more collaboration.



IDENTIFY PARTNERS

Identify potential strategic partners for more in-depth engagement. Invite these organizations to sit down with your teachers to map real-world lessons and career paths to learning targets and curriculum. Uncover potential internship, mentorship and capstone projects to provide deeper learning opportunities outside of school.



CONNECT WITH DISTRICTS

Connect with like-minded districts. Leverage opportunities to learn from each other, pool resources and collaborate.

In Marysville, Ohio, more than 20 community meetings were held that were open to parents, educators, community leaders and stakeholders, where Superintendent Diane Mankins asked two questions: “What are you most proud of in our schools? If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing, what would it be?” The answers to those questions became a vision for the district, and everyone had a hand in creating it. Marysville has gone on to establish partnerships with Columbus State Community College, Honda Manufacturing of Ohio, Union County Chamber of Commerce and the Ohio Hi Point Career Center. Through internships, mentorships and capstone projects that include these partner organizations, Marysville students have the chance to extend their learning beyond school walls.



5 Goals

to Set This Year for a Strong School Culture

There's no better time to start building a strong culture than day one of a new school year. And if you want support for big ideas and transformational school change, you have to provide a forum for open communication. While inviting educators to the table may seem easy, bringing student voice into the conversation from the very beginning is equally important. Asking for their thoughts on ideas and encouraging them to propose ideas of their own creates a sense of ownership over the learning experience that is critical to its success.

As you start the new school year, consider the following key areas to build a strong school culture.

1 CREATE A CULTURE OF TRANSPARENCY.

Implement mechanisms to make sure educators and learners are aware of policies and procedures. Work with teachers to create ways to help students set goals and understand why they're learning what they're learning.

In the Early Childhood Center of Kenowa Hills in Grand Rapids, Michigan, they use data walls to communicate and celebrate learning. When students demonstrate mastery of a learning standard, they post their accomplishment – in the form of a key to “unlock their future” – on the public data wall in the center’s halls. Driven by clear and transparent standards, the data wall invites everyone, including learners, educators and parents, to build their understanding of what students are learning and why.

2 LIVE YOUR VISION TO SUPPORT ALL LEARNERS.

Don't just put your vision in your email signature or on official documents, use it to inform every decision and communicate it clearly to all stakeholders. Empower educators to shape their practices around your vision to better support all learners.

"Keeping your vision alive and making sure everyone understands how the work you're doing fits in the vision is the primary role of the superintendent," insists Bill Zima, superintendent of RSU2 in Maine. "Whenever I meet with parents. Whenever I meet with stakeholders. When I meet with teachers. When I send out messages. Everything I do I tie back to our vision."

3 EMPOWER STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AS LEADERS AND DECISION MAKERS.

Encourage cross-collaboration between subject areas to achieve learning targets. Empower teachers to co-develop classroom standard operating procedures with learners. Create opportunities for students and teachers to provide feedback, and use that feedback when implementing new processes.

Erin Morrison, a third grade teacher at Navin Elementary School in Marysville, Ohio, feels empowered to better serve her students by the district's recent move to personalized learning through competency-based education. She has the freedom to work with learners to uncover how they learn best, and provides them a variety of opportunities for demonstrating mastery of different learning targets.

"The thing I like best about teaching at Navin is the flexibility that we have here," Morrison said. "I can take my students lead and do whatever I feel is best for them."

Learners at Navin also determine standard operating procedures as a class, rather than a teacher simply sharing out classroom rules. Their sense of ownership leads to greater investment and a sense of responsibility to their peers, and to themselves.

4 OPERATE WITH A GROWTH MINDSET – FOR EVERYONE.

Provide educators time to collaborate with peers, time to examine student data to know where their learners are and permission to take risks without fear of failure. Empower students to demonstrate mastery in a variety of different ways, and extend their learning into the community.

In the Menomonee Falls School District in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, educators played a critical role in shaping the district's implementation of personalized learning. Corey Golla, the district's director of curriculum and learning, explained that "while we came to the table with a clear framework, we did not accelerate the change process

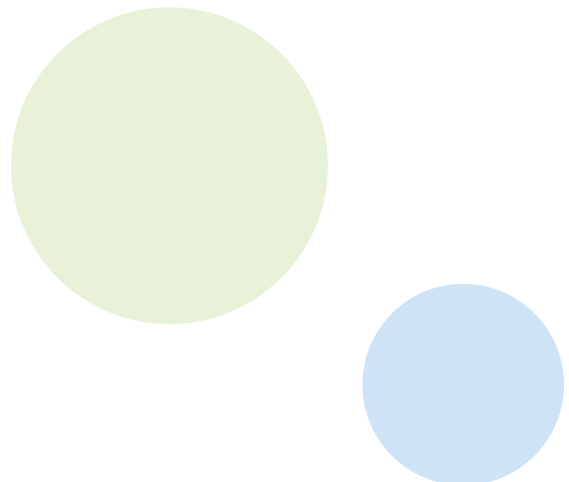
until we conveyed our trust in teachers to make this model work for their unique set of students in their unique learning environments. Teachers worked hard to adapt the framework to their needs and our staff also came to understand the importance of failing forward: our greatest learning likely came as a result of our biggest challenges.”

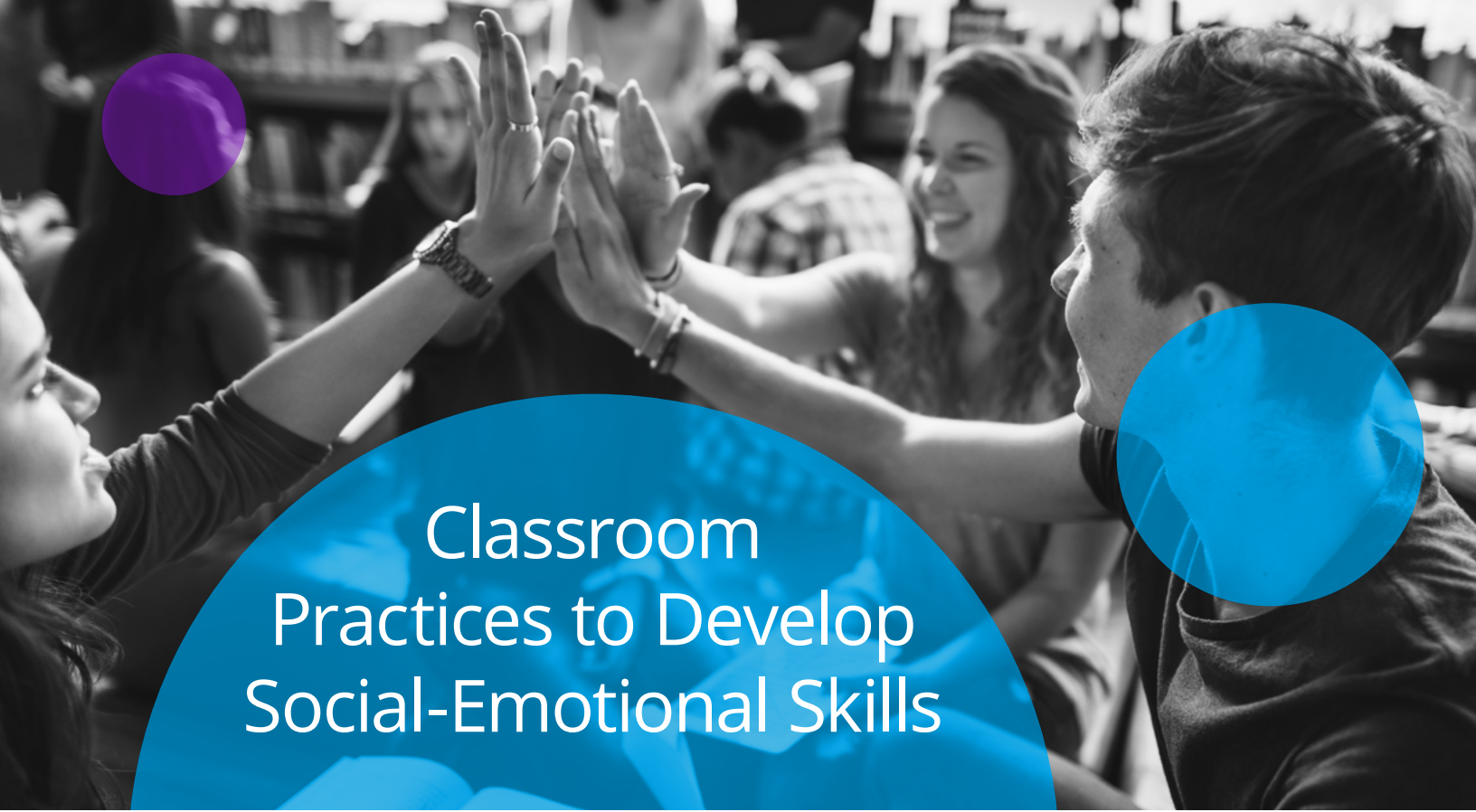
5

CELEBRATE GROWTH.

Do you have processes and procedures in place to effectively communicate and celebrate achievements through the learning community?

In Wake County Public Schools in Cary, North Carolina, teachers and district leaders actively share what’s working for them on Twitter, regularly celebrating professional development and student achievements in fewer than 140 characters. In addition to raising awareness and support of their district’s goals, their activity online is creating a strong community of practice across their schools.





Classroom Practices to Develop Social-Emotional Skills

Work will look drastically different in the future, so when we think about how to ensure learners are ready for college, career and life, we have to think beyond what we currently believe about readiness. When you greet your new kindergarteners or welcome learners back for a new school year, remember that it's about more than academics. Our uncertainty about what future careers will look like requires a greater focus on what makes learners uniquely human.

Use the questions in this section to reflect on the practices you observe throughout your learning community - and those you hope to see adopted to better support social-emotional development.

What to Look for in Classrooms

- 1 SUPPORT SELF-DISCOVERY AND EXPERIENCES THAT INSPIRE LEARNING.**
Who determines classroom rules and consequences, and where are they displayed? Are learners engaged in real-world problem solving? Do they collaborate with peers?

As learners move through your system, ask them what issues they would like to address instead of what career they want to pursue. This is one way of helping them set enduring, long term-aspirations that will weather the changing nature of work and link their academic goal-setting to their social-emotional development. In this case, their academic goal-setting is closely linked to their social-emotional development.

Learners like Ikonkar Kaur Khalsa of Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) in Lindsay, California, who frequently travels to lead workshops on teaching tolerance and embracing diversity, is cultivating a greater sense of her own impact on the world and her responsibilities as a global citizen. “I have the opportunity to take my learning into my own hands. I’m meeting new people and seeing new cultures, so that when I get to college I won’t have culture shock,” Khalsa said.

2 HELP LEARNERS EMBRACE AMBIGUITY AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH FAILURE.

Do educators foster a growth mindset? Do students have multiple opportunities and ways of showing they’ve mastered content? Do teachers feel comfortable trying new things?

Future work environments won’t have a syllabus, and tasks will likely be vague or approachable through a variety of different ways. Learners will need to have experience with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk, and the ability to recognize that failure is just part of the process. They won’t get it right the first time – and learning to balance confidence and humility will be essential for navigating an uncertain work environment in the future.

At Independent School District #92 in Farmington, Minnesota, teachers are using a design-thinking process to understand that taking risks, making mistakes and failing forward is all a part of growing and learning. They are building out standards-based learning experiences where students are problem-finding and problem-solving – which includes opportunities for students to make mistakes so they can figure out how to fix them.

3 ENCOURAGE PARTNERSHIP WITH TECHNOLOGY.

How is technology used in the classroom?

Educational technologies need to be designed, integrated and applied in the classroom in ways that support and augment the strengths of learners, facilitating deeper thinking and problem-exploring. It’s not just about creating a PowerPoint, but providing learners the opportunity to apply their technical skills and creativity to create something meaningful. Future readiness will require not only strong partnerships with people, but also with machines.

Learners at LUSD, for example, have the opportunity to design video games and record and mix music to demonstrate mastery over math, science and engineering learning targets. The potential for cross-curriculum alignment – such as writing and researching to meet standards in English and history classes – is on the horizon.

Ideas to Reflect on Throughout the Year

1

BUILD STUDENT AGENCY.

How could I engage my teachers in developing new strategies to help students develop the skills they will need?

Promoting a continuous improvement process that provides students opportunities to self-assess, take ownership and better understand themselves as learners is a critical foundation for social-emotional readiness.

Educators at Hall-Dale High School in central Maine have begun to investigate ways to help students identify their learning assets, their strengths and work preferences and areas where they could improve through personal learner profiles. Tools like personal learner profiles help develop expert learners by providing students with the tools and guidance they need to understand themselves and own their learning.

2

CONSIDER HOW THE NECESSARY SKILLS FOR READINESS PLAY OUT IN DAILY TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

Are there ways to incorporate social-emotional intelligence in existing teacher training programs?

When educators see how a social-emotional framework can support their learners across the spectrum, they will want to begin doing this work.

At Navin Elementary and Marysville Early College High School in Marysville, Ohio, they are devoting professional development sessions to developing rubrics for educators to use to identify social-emotional learning across grade levels. At Navin Elementary, in particular, they've identified how their habits of mind – innovate, collaborate and inspire – can be demonstrated even by their youngest students. Rather than lifting up and sharing photographs of historical heroes like Albert Einstein as an inspiration, they encourage learners to see how they are demonstrating the very same skills and put their pictures in the hallways.



These ideas were adapted from the research in **"The Future of Learning: Redefining Readiness from the Inside Out."** Download for a deeper look at the specific skills learners will need to be successful in the workforce of the future - and what you can do to begin cultivating those skills today.

[DOWNLOAD](#)



How **ALIGNING BUDGET** Decisions to Your Vision **BUILDS TRUST** and Greater Fiscal Responsibility

New clothes, new pencils, new textbooks – back to school is an investment for everyone inside your district and throughout your community. You’ve already decided how you’ll be spending your money this year, but very soon you’ll be thinking about how to improve for next year, how to spend more efficiently and for greater impact. Imagine if every line item in your district’s budget were as directly aligned to your strategic vision and the success of your learners as their hearts and heads are on the first day of school?

Here are four essential things to consider when beginning – and communicating – the budget process.

- 1 COMMUNITY ALIGNMENT = DOLLARS BETTER SPENT.**
When you’ve gone through a visioning process with your community, it’s easier to see how most everyone wants the same things for learners, and to align your work toward meeting those ends. The same goes for budgeting. If everyone, for example, agrees on what they need to do to secure the best possible outcomes for learners, there may be dollars available in state or federal funding sources that could supplement district budgets. Federal title funding is flexible and could be leveraged to make your community’s vision a reality, and similar funding streams in municipal budgets could be aligned to school budgets for greater impact. But you don’t know what you don’t know, so opening those lines of communication early is essential.

- 2 BE EXPLICIT ABOUT HOW EVERY FINANCIAL DECISION ALIGNS TO YOUR VISION.**
You should be able to identify with every approval, whether it's for a new technology, a field trip or an afterschool initiative, how it aligns to what your learning community has identified that they believe and desire for students. It can be as simple as changing your process for budget approvals to not only get the appropriate signatures and school board approvals, but identifying clearly how your spending connects to your district-wide vision.
- 3 USE YOUR BUDGET AS A TOOL TO COMMUNICATE YOUR VISION.**
If your community has agreed on what they want to see for all learners, your budget is the perfect opportunity communicate how each expenditure above and beyond operating expenses aligns to one, or more, of your guiding principles. Make it clear that any line items that are not approved mean something that the community has agreed that they want won't happen.
- 4 RECOGNIZE THE VALUE IN YOUR PRINCIPALS AND EDUCATORS AS FIRST-LINE COMMUNICATORS.**
How you communicate your vision and spending internally matters as much as how you do so externally. Parents and community members have the most interactions with teachers and principals, so they trust them the most. When parents and local leaders can hear from their daughter's third-grade teacher or their son's high school principal how district spending is aligned to what they want for learners – because your office has been conscientious about communicating internally – you are reinforcing trust and community will.

KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With nearly 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what's next.

Ready to personalize learning in your district? We can help.
Learn more at knowledgeworks.org/schools/CBE.

