



Portrait of a Leader

The knowledge, skills and mindsets educators need to lead systems change through personalized, competency-based learning



Creating sustainable, learner-centered system change requires continuous development of and support for educators.

This Portrait of a Leader captures the knowledge, skills and dispositions educators need to drive innovation and lead education systems change through personalized, competency-based learning. By elevating these attributes, we can support, grow and celebrate the development of education leaders.

For educators. By educators.



KnowledgeWorks convened [Lead for Learners Network Steering Committee](#) members to set priorities for network growth and impact. These educators identified transformational leadership capacity as one of the biggest barriers to sustaining the shift to personalized, competency-based learning, and the Portrait of a Leader project emerged as a priority action step.

Through 280 surveys, 18 focus groups and three design workshops, educators from across the country identified the priority knowledge, skills and dispositions leaders at all levels of the education system need to drive equitable learner-centered systems change through personalized, competency-based learning. The Portrait of a Leader captures this foundational vision for transformational leadership development in innovative, student-centered schools and districts.

Key considerations:

- » **All educators can be leaders that drive transformation.** The Portrait of a Leader is designed to support continuous self-reflection and leadership development for district administrators, principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders and other instructional leaders.
- » **The Portrait of a Leader is intended to be aspirational and achievable.** Developed in partnership with educators, this resource captures big ideas about the attributes educators need to lead systemic change. When reflecting on these attributes, consider how [key drivers of change](#), such as accelerating technologies and civic polarization, might impact education systems and the leadership skills needed to drive change through uncertainty.
- » **Transformational leadership looks different in a personalized, competency-based learning system.** Many effective education leadership development resources exist. This resource focuses on leading change in schools and districts that prioritize learner agency, personalized student growth, mastery of competencies and flexible learning pathways.
- » **Learning communities must work on creating the [conditions for systemic change](#)** to shift to a personalized, competency-based system. Systems change takes time, and collaborative work on conditions such as vision, culture, transparency and agency is paramount to moving beyond pockets of learner-centered innovation.

How to use this resource



Uncover the big ideas captured in the Portrait of a Leader

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Reflect on each attribute and your personal leadership development

PAGES 6-10



Explore example actions across various leadership roles

PAGES 11-12



Learn who contributed to the Portrait of a Leader and access related resources

PAGES 13-14

What is personalized, competency-based learning?

Personalized, competency-based learning centers each student's strengths, needs and interests and provides differentiated ways to demonstrate what they know and know how to do, ensuring each learner graduates ready for what's next.

[Learn more »](#)



Facilitated by KnowledgeWorks, Lead for Learners is a national network of educators dedicated to systems transformation through personalized, competency-based learning.

[Join the community »](#)

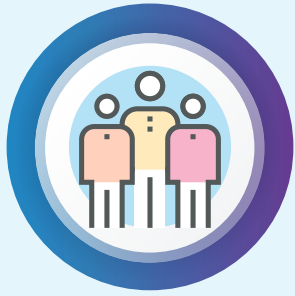


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Above all else, educators leading change must be human-centered and transformational. Without a human-centered focus, all other leadership attributes become disingenuous. Without a transformational approach, all other leadership attributes would be in service of a traditional system.



Acts with compassion

Offers support

Shows empathy

Prioritizes well-being

Reflection Questions

- » What are the collective values and beliefs of your learning community? How do you know? How are these used to nourish a human-centered culture?
 - » What systems are in place to foster voice, choice, transparency and agency for students and educators?
 - » What data do you have to measure trust, inclusivity and belonging? How are you using that data to continuously improve?
-

Human-Centered

Prioritizes people and relationships

Leaders prioritize people within the education system and work diligently to meet their community's diverse emotional, material and educational needs.

Human-centered leaders:

- » Nurture well-being and growth across critical life skills, such as empathy, problem solving, communication and self-awareness, in addition to academic outcomes
- » Understand learner readiness and the socioeconomic and engagement factors that impact the personalized, competency-based learning environment and change efforts more broadly
- » Foster a culture in which everyone feels supported and valued, laying the groundwork for the long-term sustainability of personalized, competency-based learning and driving the transformation of the learning system

Being human-centered is a foundational attribute. Without a human-centered focus, all other leadership attributes become disingenuous.

Example Leadership Actions

- » Use empathetic listening skills with members of the learning community
- » Establish initiatives that foster relationship development among staff and students
- » Create advisory councils to ensure all voices are engaged in decision-making



Focuses on
continuous improvement

Encourages strategic action

Envisions the future

Cultivates growth

Manages change

Reflection Questions

- » How does your use of data and continuous improvement focus on relationships, reflective learning and innovation in pursuit of systemic transformation?
 - » How are you using your shared vision and inclusive decision-making to inform the learning community's goals?
-

Transformational

Drives sustainable, forward-looking change

Leaders are forward-thinking visionaries who approach problem solving with a systems-thinking lens, applying a creative yet pragmatic approach to reimagining education systems. Transformational leaders:

- » Drive continuous improvement intentionally and strategically to ensure innovation and sustainable change
- » Understand the importance of effective change management and model the flexibility needed for lasting outcomes
- » Foster an environment that can evolve with future challenges, ensuring a vision for personalized, competency-based learning is shared and continuously refined with the community

Driving transformational change is foundational. Without a transformational approach, all other leadership attributes would be in service of a traditional system.

Example Leadership Actions

- » Research and pilot learner-centered practices in your classroom or with teachers you support
- » Ensure professional learning is designed with educator voice, personalized based on readiness and aligned to the vision and strategic plan
- » Conduct a district-wide audit that identifies resource gaps to ensure all students have access to student-centered learning



Leads by example

Demonstrates knowledge

Learns from others

Communicates clearly

Models transparency

Reflection Questions

- » How do you model being a lifelong learner and help members of your learning community engage in long-term goals aligned with the shared vision?
 - » How are you establishing or sustaining communication practices that prioritize transparency within your learning community?
-

Authentic

Leads with credibility and vulnerability

Leaders demonstrate authenticity through their transparency, credibility, knowledge and skills. Authentic leaders:

- » Model instructional strategies and practices grounded in a deep understanding of personalized, competency-based learning approaches
- » Earn credibility and trust among peers and colleagues by learning alongside others
- » Use clear, open dialogue to transparently communicate with learning community members, ensuring that everyone remains informed and engaged in the change process and beyond
- » Model effective leadership strategies that reinforce the credibility of their leadership and foster a community-owned, sustainable environment for personalized, competency-based learning

Example Leadership Actions

- » To foster shared accountability, provide consistent and clear updates to families and community members about changes
- » Engage in professional learning and practice personalized, competency-based learning approaches through co-teaching
- » Model continuous learning and self-reflection



**Creates a
collaborative culture**

Supports leadership in others

Nurtures shared decision-making

Fosters agency

Inspires and trusts others

Reflection Questions

- » How are you fostering trust in the collective wisdom of your learning community to sustain a culture of collaboration?
 - » How do you model asking for feedback/ input and making changes in response to that input?
 - » How are you using the time and space that community members have together for shared decision-making and learning?
-

Collaborative

Fosters shared goals and action

Leaders foster strong relationships and create space for shared decision-making across the learning community. Collaborative leaders:

- » Prioritize partnerships and nurture the leadership capacities of others to effectively support distributed leadership and individual agency in development and contributions to the learning community
- » Are deeply inclusive and recognize that educational success is a collective effort built on shared goals and responsibility
- » Ensure the learning system continues to reflect the needs of the community and changes in leadership do not disrupt progress toward the vision

Example Leadership Actions

- » Partner with students to establish a school- or district-level youth advisory group
- » Establish leadership teams that foster teacher leadership and educator agency in high-impact initiatives
- » Facilitate a district-wide task force to co-create a vision for personalized, competency-based learning



Takes action

Challenges the status quo

Disrupts inequitable systems

Shifts power dynamics

Reflection Questions

- » How are you communicating your commitment demonstrating action to create a more equitable learner-centered system?
 - » How are you modeling risk-taking?
 - » How are you empowering learning community members to take risks toward your shared vision?
-

Advocate

Champions equitable structures

Leaders champion systemic change and foster learner-centered environments by engaging in and promoting calculated risk-taking. As advocates, leaders:

- » Take action to dismantle harmful structures by rethinking traditional power dynamics to transform their education environment for the benefit of learners and historically marginalized yet resilient communities
- » Uplift all members of the learning community – especially those from historically marginalized yet resilient groups – to be agents of change and leaders in the education system
- » Evaluate all new policies and practices to ensure alignment to inclusive and equitable learning experiences

Example Leadership Actions

- » Share learner-centered practices with fellow teachers, building leaders and district administrators
- » Propose policy or program changes that dismantle barriers for historically marginalized yet resilient learners
- » Create mentorship programs for underrepresented groups in education leadership

Attributes in Action

Consider the following examples of actions that exemplify the attributes of the Portrait of a Leader in support of learner-centered systems change.

Teacher leader or instructional coach

» Communicate transparently with families and the community about strategic changes by providing regular and clear updates, listening empathetically to concerns and adjusting strategies based on feedback.

Human-Centered | **Authentic** | **Collaborative**

» Advocate for creating a school- or district-wide team of innovative educators to facilitate a mentorship program to guide colleagues through establishing instructional, curricular and assessment models aligned with personalized, competency-based learning principles.

Transformational | **Collaborative** | **Advocate**

» Research and share ideas with fellow educators and school and district leaders about best practices that support personalized, competency-based learning models (e.g., restructuring grading practices, scheduling, professional development). Pilot practices in your classroom or with teachers you support.

Advocate | **Authentic** | **Transformational**

» Partner with students to establish a school or district-level youth advisory group to advocate for and co-create innovative, learner-centered practices and structures at the school and district level.

Human-Centered | **Collaborative** | **Advocate**



School-level leader

- » Drive sustainable change by ensuring school-based professional learning experiences are aligned to the community's shared vision and long-term district goals. Incorporate/model transformational practices, including systems thinking and continuous improvement.

Transformational | **Collaborative** | **Authentic**

- » Launch and sustain initiatives that nurture relationships among staff and students, emphasizing social-emotional growth alongside academic success. This could include facilitating community working groups or building teams of learners and families to identify needs, develop action plans and advocate for policy changes that challenge systemic barriers for historically marginalized yet resilient communities.

Human-Centered | **Advocate** | **Collaborative**

- » Demonstrate commitment to personalized, competency-based learning principles by fully participating in professional learning, regularly modeling strategies and co-teaching.

Authentic | **Transformational** | **Collaborative**

- » Establish opportunities for teacher-leader development, such as mentoring or building leadership teams to foster teacher agency and strengthen leadership capacity for high-impact initiatives.

Collaborative | **Human-Centered** | **Authentic**

District-level leader

- » Facilitate a district-wide task force to co-create a vision for personalized, competency-based learning, ensuring the plan includes measurable goals and strategies for scaling innovations.

Transformational | **Collaborative** | **Authentic**

- » Establish advisory councils consisting of teachers, students and parents to contribute to curriculum revisions or school improvement plans, ensuring all voices are engaged in improvement planning.

Collaborative | **Human-Centered** | **Transformational**

- » Propose and support district-level policy or program changes that dismantle barriers for members of the learning community who are historically marginalized yet resilient, such as creating mentoring programs for underrepresented groups in education leadership and fostering a pipeline of leaders who represent the underserved communities and can drive change in the district.

Advocate | **Human-Centered** | **Transformational**

- » Use data and continuous improvement tools to identify and address resource gaps between schools and redistribute funding or staffing to ensure all students have access to student-centered learning environments.

Transformational | **Advocate** | **Authentic**



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Related Resources

- » [Advocacy as a Practice of Critical Teacher Leadership](#). International Journal of Teacher Leadership. Bradley-Levine, Jill. (2018)
- » [Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Environments](#). KnowledgeWorks and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2020)
- » [Educator Competencies: Assessment Tool for Prioritized Competencies](#). KnowledgeWorks and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2020)
- » [Envisioning Educator Roles for Transformation](#). KnowledgeWorks. (2024)
- » [Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](#). KnowledgeWorks. (2021)
- » [Leadership Competencies for Learner-Centered, Personalized Education](#). JFF and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2017)
- » [Looking Beneath the Surface: The Education Changemaker's Guidebook to Systems Thinking](#). KnowledgeWorks. (2020)

GLOSSARY

Visit our online glossary for common terms and phrases used when talking about personalized, learner-centered environments, including those referenced here.

<https://knowledgeworks.org/glossary>.

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KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 25 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together. [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://www.knowledgeworks.org)