Sharing Power for a Shared Vision: Change Agent Leadership at VUSD

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“One of our core beliefs when we started [this transformation] was that the fulcrum of change is at the school level, not at the district level. That’s a fundamental commitment that we made as leaders—that we would be servant leaders and that we would support [principals] even if it meant that they were going to do some really audacious moves because we believe in them. That’s where we coined this concept called “change agent leadership.”

— Matt Doyle, Superintendent, VUSD
At its core, a distributed leadership approach means creating conditions so that all stakeholders are empowered to lead and that those closest to the work—the ones with the greatest stake in the outcomes—make decisions, create conditions for success, and own the aspects of learning transformation that materially affect their work. In an agency-driven culture of innovation and continuous improvement, educators at all levels work toward realizing the shared vision with the trust, agency, and resources they need to lead the change from their context.

If the Personal Learning (PL) star articulates the “what” of Vista Unified School District’s (VUSD’s) shared vision for transforming learning, and a wide and inclusive array of stakeholders answers the question of “who” is engaged in the work, then shared leadership is one of the key answers to the question, “How does district transformation happen?” As a founding district in the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) initiative to reimagine educational change—called Transformation Design—VUSD serves as a leader and model for an approach to K-12 systems change that is inclusive, iterative, and imaginative. One key lever for building an inclusive and innovative culture is distributing leadership across the system, what VUSD calls “change agent leadership.”

Vista Unified’s Personal Learning Path is a student-centered collaborative journey aligned to core curriculum standards. It builds on each student’s strengths, interests, and values. The PL star graphic depicts the key elements of VUSD’s transformation from a traditional one-size-fits-all style of learning to a dynamic, personalized approach that places students in the driver’s seat as stewards of their own learning.

Learn More
Read how VUSD engages students, families, and external partners in A Wide and Inclusive Network: Stakeholder Engagement at VUSD.
In *The School Principal as Change Agent in Education*, a blog post he wrote for NGLC with Gerri Burton, Superintendent Matt Doyle explains, "In a traditional environment, leadership is located at the district office, which takes a centralized, top-down approach. Principals in this top-down environment simply carry out initiatives, programs, or mandates that are handed down. This approach is antithetical to personalized environments that inspire ownership and creativity. In a more innovative environment, change is decentralized."

"True transformation in a school district, the kind that sticks and disrupts standard operating procedures, is fueled by school principals," he asserts. "The school principal sets the conditions within which transformative practice and change happen." In this approach to change, he explains, "the district shifts position to a more general role, setting overarching goals, policies, and simple rules that underscore academic and social-emotional achievement" for learners.

To realize the potential of principals as change agents, VUSD provides them with a combination of professional learning, agency and decision-making authority, and collaborative structures for continuous growth and improvement.

To illustrate, Matt points to the district’s “Principal as Change Agent” seminar as one powerful offering for principals’ professional learning. Primarily a peer-to-peer learning opportunity, the seminar meets twice each month. A moderator sets the agenda for each session and shares reading materials relevant to the discussion topic. Even before COVID, the seminar met virtually by design in order to support engagement and interaction. In keeping with VUSD’s culture of agency, attendance has always been voluntary. According to Matt, “We believed that if we made the sessions compelling then principals would want to participate.”

To support principals to be change agents, Superintendent Matt Doyle compiled this reading list to help build their capacity to reset school culture and transform teaching and learning.

**Change Agent Principal Book List**

- The 4 Disciplines of Execution by McChesney, Covey, and Huling
- Bold Moves for Schools: How We Create Remarkable Learning Environments by Jacobs and Alcock
- Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better by Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu
- Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems by Fullan and Quinn
- Students at the Center: Personalized Learning with Habits of Mind by Kallick and Zmuda
- Learning Personalized: The Evolution of the Contemporary Classroom by Zmuda, Curtis, and Ullman
- The 4 Disciplines of Execution by McChesney, Covey, and Huling
- Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better by Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu
- Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems by Fullan and Quinn
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Principals as Change Agents
In the same way that VUSD’s vision of Personal Learning (PL) empowers individual students to exercise agency over aspects of their learning, VUSD’s approach to district transformation empowers individual school sites to define the desired outcomes and determine the pace and approach to personalizing learning. For example, Matt notes that, although all VUSD schools are now part of the district-wide PL Challenge, participation was voluntary from the start and based on each school site’s readiness to engage.

According to Nicole Allard, executive director of educational excellence and innovation for VUSD, each school that joined the PL Challenge cohort was able to create its own definition of personal learning and choose its own learning engine—the instructional model that would power the personalized student experience, such as design thinking, project-based learning, or interdisciplinary learning. “The district agreed about what personal learning looked like via the PL star,” Nicole explains, “and then district leaders allowed every single school to say, ‘What does PL look like at our school site?’”

By supporting both a community-wide shared vision of PL and school-level autonomy, VUSD leaders like Matt and Nicole model risk-taking and change-positive mindsets. According to Nicole, the district works to build an adult culture that mirrors VUSD’s aspirations for learners. For example, she notes that creativity is among the top 10 essential skills for student success identified by the World Economic Forum, as well as a vital component for imaginative change. To create the conditions for adults to innovate, she says, change agent leadership provides principals with “the box and the freedom”—the structure and the space—for creativity and innovation in meeting the needs of their communities.

Jeremy Walden, the principal of Mission Vista High School (MVHS), concurs. “Dr. Doyle has been a staunch proponent of leveraging principals as the change agents. Every school has its own culture, its own challenges, its own strengths, and, frankly, its own brand,” he says. “Principals make decisions for our school site that are going to best serve our unique communities and best fit within the brand that we have created.”

Learn More
Read about VUSD’s PL Challenge in Reaching for the Personal Learning Star at Vista Unified.”
VUSD’s commitment to placing the locus of control and decision-making closest to those doing the work is particularly evident in the district’s approach to setting and meeting goals. Each year, the district, school sites, and individual educators create Wildly Important Goals (WIGs) as part of a cycle of continuous improvement. VUSD leaders first establish three district WIGs. According to Jeremy, “The district goals are pretty straightforward. There are only three and they’re broad. And then we, as principals, are expected to make sure that the work we do as a school site supports those in some way.”

However, as Matt points out, “The principal is free to work with the staff at the school to tap into continuous improvement inquiry cycles that lead to more relevant and authentic programs and initiatives” for the individual site. In this way, he explains, district leaders “shift to a servant leadership role, one that places priority on encouraging and supporting the principal as an activator of change. The principal’s role is to confidently lead staff in a new direction while leveraging the district administrators to support the strategies that best serve school transformation.” That support comes in the form of professional learning and decision-making authority over numerous aspects of the school, from teaching and learning models to the allocation of a school’s resources of time and money.

To illustrate, Jeremy describes how the district goal to promote equitable outcomes inspired a school-wide WIG around learner feedback at MVHS. To support a shared understanding of the district’s equity goals, he recalls, VUSD leaders offered professional learning to all staff as a kind of “guaranteed curriculum” related to the centrality of equity in the district’s transformation journey. This professional learning provided the necessary foundation for principals to co-create school goals for equity with their staffs. In addition, Jeremy notes that principals check in with district leaders around the school WIGs to ensure alignment and progress toward meeting VUSD’s shared goals.

However, he says, “How we are going to promote and foster equity at Mission Vista High school is on me. Promoting equity might look entirely different at Rancho Buena Vista (High School) or Vista High, but we are entrusted to know our schools and know best how to get there. We have full freedom to do that.”
According to Jeremy, how a school uses the resource of time is “a value statement.” MVHS, for example, supports flexible learner pathways by using a “4 X 4” block schedule. In this system, learners take only four courses per semester, but each class meets for a longer time block and is equivalent to a year-long course. As a result, MVHS students take a total of eight classes each year instead of the traditional seven. Learners therefore have more opportunities to engage deeply with a wide range of core subject offerings and elective courses aligned to their strengths, interests, values, and goals for the future.

“At the site level, MVHS builds the master schedule with student needs in mind but maximized according to our WIGs,” he explains. “I’m given an allocation of FTEs, full-time employees, and I can use them however I see fit. It’s fantastic to know that we are trusted. And not only are we trusted, we’re supported. If we’re running into an issue where we need more sections and can justify it, we’re more likely than not going to have a thought partner to solve a problem and/or get the extra FTEs that we need.”

In addition to making decisions related to the resource of time, Jeremy notes, school leaders have budget flexibility to further their site goals. “Especially with ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds and other state and federal support, and personalized learning grant money, we’re given an allocation, and we’re fully entrusted to spend those dollars to do the work that needs to be done for our students.” Jeremy adds, “Of course, there’s oversight, but there is autonomy and agency to spend those dollars,” such as on extra staffing, materials, furniture, or funding 16 to 21 release periods each year for teacher leaders to “step away from the whirlwind” and work on school initiatives.
Distributing leadership is a district-wide value, and individual school leaders live out those inclusive mindsets by supporting change agent leadership among staff. At MVHS, for example, ownership of the school’s transformation extends well beyond positional leaders like the principal and assistant principal. According to Jeremy, teacher leaders like department chairs and professional learning community (PLC) leads serve as “site-based decision-making committees” made up of “folks with boots on the ground at the site level.”

Although some of these positions—like department chairs—are common at traditional high schools, the role of teacher leaders at MVHS is unusually far-reaching and substantive. According to Nicole, department and PLC leaders work with their groups to co-create their own WIGs aligned with the school goals, set the agenda and success indicators for the work, and create scorecards to track progress. Teachers also design and facilitate professional learning experiences to support department, PLC, and school-level WIGs.

They also engage in collaborative planning, prioritizing, and problem-solving to support achievement of these goals. To illustrate, Jeremy tells the story of My Vision Personalized, a senior capstone course that was piloted four years ago in spite of low enrollment. “The first year we ran a section with 11 students,” he recalls. “That’s something that we would never do under normal circumstances. It was going to mean larger class sizes elsewhere, but it aligned to what we wanted to do. Our teachers in that particular department were on board with it. We knocked it out of the park with the 11, and the next year we more than doubled [the enrollment].”

Similarly, the MVHS site-based leadership committees made the decision to offer release periods to one of their peers—Michelle Daum, the English department chair and an early adopter of PL—to serve as a teacher on special assignment in support of the school’s PL goals. According to Jeremy, Michelle acts as a teacher leader and coach for supporting educators to personalize their content and instruction. “That’s an agreement that we made,” he recalls. “Yes, we’re going to sacrifice these sections in the master schedule and increase class sizes elsewhere because we believe this is powerful work. Those are the types of decisions we make that are aligned with our values and the work we’re trying to do.”

Teacher leaders also model vulnerability and foster a change-positive culture by sharing their own practices and artifacts—even those that are not successful. As Nicole observes, “Teacher leaders do this all the time. Being okay with trying something new, even if it doesn’t work, is important to show teachers who are used to being successful in school.”

Whether or not individual educators choose to take on leadership roles, all exercise autonomy by choosing their own WIGs each year. Carrying on a tradition launched by Nicole when she was the principal of MVHS, Jeremy meets with each teacher at the start of the school year.
“We ask every single faculty member to set a personal WIG for the year,” he explains, “and we talk about their wildly important goal. How does it support the school-wide goals? What do they need for support?”

Support for teachers’ personal WIGs may come in many forms, from a great book to a conference to equipment for the classroom. However, Jeremy identifies time as “the number one resource teachers ask for.” Based on these WIG conversations, he says, “The vast majority of personal learning dollars that are earmarked go to pay teachers for the extra hours they’re going to put in anyway—to write curriculum, to transform their classrooms as they try things that they’re passionate about.” As with the master schedule, Jeremy sees this funding of teachers’ time as a value statement which sends the message, “Hey, we value the work that you’re doing, the strengths that you bring to the table, and we want to support this work.”

Jeremy’s recommendation to school leaders is unequivocal: “Set 15- to 30-minute meetings during the first four weeks of the school year with every teacher on campus. Those individual WIG meetings, hands down, are the most important thing that I do with the staff during the school year to move the work forward. It’s amazing just hearing about what teachers are fired up about doing for kids.”

Speaking as a teacher-leader, Michelle describes how MVHS’s culture of mutual support and shared ownership of the learning transformation creates a bond of trust that can support the school community during challenging times. “There’s something special about this place,” she says. “There’s something about us all trusting each other and wanting to work together. Creating that community as a staff and creating that community with our students. That’s something we’ve grown in, especially through COVID, and it’s really become clear that it’s something we value.”