

Leading Innovation:

Pillars of System-wide School Transformation





The Imperative of System-wide School Transformation

Innovation, now more than ever, plays a pivotal role in addressing the concerns of the United States K-12 education system. Effectively redefining the education system requires that the field broaden our collective definition of innovation to encompass all aspects of K-12 learning. Innovation in education moves well beyond new tools or stand-alone solutions; it requires a radical reimagining of the entire educational experience to better meet the needs of all students. Innovation in education must be envisioned as a comprehensive holistic process, one which demands that we explore and implement novel approaches to the teaching and learning process, as well as to leadership, management, and administration.

Today's students deserve more deeply personalized learning environments to support their unique goals and dreams. By leveraging emerging technologies, utilizing artificial intelligence to support differentiated instruction, and adopting flexible, student-centered pedagogies that prioritize critical thinking and creativity over rote memorization, schools and districts can adapt to more effectively meet students where they are and bridge them to where they want to be. In this context, innovation serves as a catalyst for systemic change, enabling us to overcome long-standing gaps in educational equity and to better prepare students for a rapidly evolving and increasingly globalized world.

True system-wide transformation includes reimagining classroom dynamics, fostering collaborative learning environments, and creating curricula that are academically rigorous yet adaptable and relevant to real-world challenges. It also requires the development of new metrics for assessing student progress that move beyond standardized testing to capture a broader range of skills and competencies. By thinking of innovation in these broader terms, we can create a more adaptive and responsive educational system that is capable of evolving with the times and meeting the diverse needs of all students.

The role that leadership plays in driving system-wide transformation cannot be overstated. Effective system-level transformation requires that educators are empowered through high-quality, targeted professional development; it also necessitates that curriculum, instruction, and assessment processes all support the new focus for teaching and learning.

Finally, a true system transformation approach calls for district-wide collaboration that ensures all parts of the system are working together to operationalize the vision. By fostering a culture of innovation, we can drive transformation that addresses current disparities and equips students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the future.

The Role of Coaching and Exemplars

One of the cardinal rules of innovation is “don’t go it alone!” The role of coaching is significant in helping school and district leaders provide the support, guidance, and encouragement necessary to explore and implement new ideas. Effective coaching and mentorship helps leaders develop the skills and mindset required to foster a culture of innovation within their own school contexts. In these models, experienced coaches serve as guides to assist developing leaders in identifying areas of challenge, brainstorming creative solutions, or developing strategic plans for implementation and execution. By providing a space for reflection and planning, coaching can also help educational leaders manage the change process and build buy-in for potential new initiatives from the beginning, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable innovation in the school or district.

Having a trusted mentor in the innovation process is incredibly valuable to emerging leaders. Mentors bring a wealth of experience and knowledge that can raise the baseline for leaders and administrators, helping them avoid common pitfalls and leverage proven strategies. They can provide insights into best practices, share lessons learned from their own experiences, and offer constructive feedback. This kind of professional relationship can accelerate the learning curve for school and district leaders, enabling them to implement and sustain innovative practices with greater confidence and effectiveness. Moreover, coaches and mentors can help leaders connect with and build a supportive network of like-minded professionals, fostering collaboration and the exchange of ideas across schools, districts, and education organizations.

Finally, the power of peer coaching models and cohort-based learning communities can also be highly beneficial. Engaging with peers who are facing similar challenges can allow school leaders to share experiences, engage in collective problem-solving, and support each other's growth. Such exchanges can inspire fresh approaches, allow for diverse viewpoints, and foster a sense of unity—all deeply impactful to maintaining the drive and dedication necessary for continuous innovation.

Overall, coaching, mentoring, and collaborative learning are invaluable components in helping school leaders to bring innovative ideas to life in their own learning communities. As the saying goes, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” By leveraging a support network of your own, school leaders can ensure they themselves are supported every step of the way.





Purpose of the Guidebook

Welcome to this *Michigan Virtual* “Leading Innovation” guidebook on system-wide transformation in K-12 schools and districts. This book is intended to support school, district, and state-level leaders as they undertake the journey towards rethinking the purpose and process of teaching and learning in their own learning context. It is part of a set of guidebooks created by *Michigan Virtual* to support a national-level shift towards learning environments that are more deeply centered on the needs of the learners themselves.

The journey of driving system-wide transformation is both deeply challenging and immensely rewarding. This endeavor demands visionary leadership, strategic planning, and a steadfast commitment to sustainable change, with system-wide transformation serving as the foundation for achieving these goals. An impactful transformation process creates an environment where students, families, and educators are valued and recognized as integral members and active partners in the educational community.

The benefits of this work are profound and far-reaching, positively impacting not only academic achievement but also emotional well-being and overall satisfaction for both educators and learners.

Having a comprehensive framework to effectively guide this transformative process is essential—change doesn't happen in a vacuum. This guidebook is designed to provide a roadmap, a set of clear, actionable strategies for leaders and educators to build and sustain positive school culture. Drawing on insights from experienced educators as well as best practices, practical tools, and real-world examples, this guidebook outlines a structured approach that allows schools to effectively navigate the complexities of organizational cultural change, ensuring that the adjustments and shifts made are both impactful and lasting. Children, families, students, and every adult in the school community stand to gain profoundly and extensively from this focus on improved educational culture.

Challenges and Worthwhile Work

System-wide transformation involves redefining the guiding beliefs and values that shape the functioning of an entire educational system. This transformation encompasses all the attitudes, expected behaviors, and principles that influence how the system operates at every level. Building and sustaining such a transformation requires navigating a complex landscape of entrenched practices, diverse stakeholder interests, and often, the dismantling of outdated organizational structures. It is a challenging task! Human resistance to change, limitations in time and resources, and the need for ongoing reinforcement can make this endeavor seem daunting. However, by fostering a supportive and inclusive approach to system-wide transformation, we can create environments where every learner can thrive—academically, socially, and emotionally.

Benefits to All Stakeholders

From a student perspective, system-wide transformation offers a more supportive, engaging, and personalized learning experience tailored to individual needs and aspirations. It creates an environment where students feel valued, motivated, and empowered to achieve their full potential. Families also benefit from improved communication, transparency, and the collaborative nature of the educational system. Through this transformation, families become active partners in their children's education, gaining access to resources and targeted support that enhance their involvement in the learning process.

System-wide transformation also supports the adults in the educational ecosystem—teachers, educators, and staff who work within it every day. These professionals experience increased professional growth and fulfillment as they engage with new pedagogical approaches, collaborate across disciplines, and adopt a mindset of continuous improvement. A transformed system fosters a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility among all members of the educational community, ultimately benefiting everyone involved.



Context of this Guidebook

District 97, a K-12 school district celebrated nationally for their successful transformation to be more personalized and student-centered. Throughout the guidebook, the authors offer strategies, actions, and lessons learned within three core “pillars” that guided the transformation of Northern Cass schools. These pillars are:

- **Pillar #1: Professional Learning and Development** - Provide ongoing training and support to educators, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to drive system-wide transformation and implement innovative practices effectively.
- **Pillar #2: Curriculum and Assessment** - Ensure that learning tasks and student progress evaluations are aligned with the goals of system-wide transformation, promoting consistency and coherence across the educational system.
- **Pillar #3: District Operations** - Optimize district operations to support and sustain system-wide transformation by streamlining processes, enhancing resource allocation, and fostering collaboration across all levels of the system.

The examples and stories provided in this guidebook are contextualized to the Northern Cass school system to illustrate how the ideas and strategies can be applied in a real-world setting—moving beyond simple theory. This guidebook does not offer one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, it provides frameworks, examples, and recommendations that can be adapted to your unique context and needs.

As you start on this important and challenging work, remember that change in educational systems takes time, dedication, and collaboration. This guidebook is a companion that aims to empower you with the knowledge and strategies needed to create positive and sustainable change for children, families, students, and educators within your community. By leveraging the insights and recommendations provided here, you are contributing to a future where every learner can thrive and succeed.



Overview of System Transformation

The United States K-12 education system stands at a crossroads, with the profound need for transformation evident in both the persistent inequities and uneven outcomes that have remained inherent in the system. Over the past few decades, the landscape of education has evolved dramatically, yet many of our schools still operate under antiquated models that fail to meet the diverse needs of today's students. The traditional methods of teaching, assessment, and administration are increasingly misaligned with the skills and knowledge required in a rapidly changing world. As we confront unprecedented challenges and opportunities brought forth by technological advancements, demographic shifts, and global interconnectedness, the urgency for a holistic and systemic overhaul in our approach to education has never been more apparent.

One of the core issues necessitating transformation is the pervasive inequality that hinders equitable access to quality education. Despite numerous reforms and initiatives, significant disparities persist in educational outcomes among different socio-economic, racial, and geographic groups.

These gaps not only undermine the principles of fairness and justice but also hinder the overall progress of our society. Addressing this requires a systemic approach that goes beyond surface-level adjustments to fundamentally reimagine how resources are allocated, how schools are funded, and how educators are supported and developed. This transformation must ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to the opportunities and support needed to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

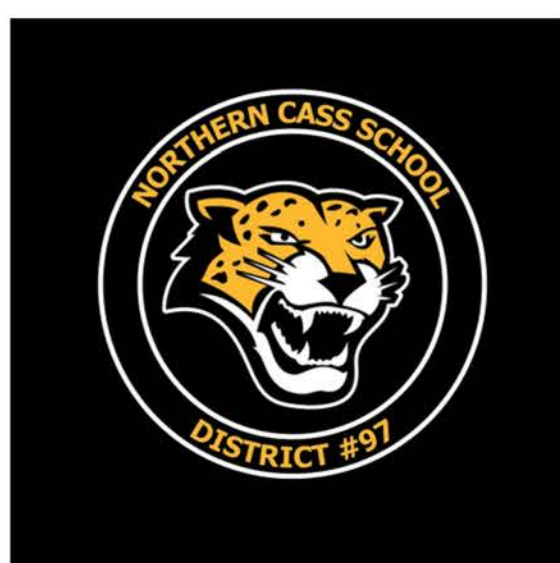
Moreover, the current educational model often emphasizes standardized testing and rote memorization over critical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving skills. This misalignment stifles students' natural curiosity and fails to prepare them for the dynamic demands of the modern workforce and civic life. To cultivate a generation of innovative thinkers and compassionate citizens, we must shift towards a learner-centered approach that values personalized learning, interdisciplinary studies, and real-world application of knowledge. This requires systemic changes in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices, fostering environments where students can explore, experiment, and excel. By embracing these transformative changes, we can create a more responsive, inclusive, and forward-thinking educational system that truly prepares our youth for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

The pressing need for systemic transformation in education is not merely a theoretical discussion—it is a call to action that some districts have already begun to answer. To understand how these transformative ideas can be put into practice, we can look to real-world examples where innovative approaches are making a tangible difference. Northern Cass School District in rural North Dakota stands as a compelling case study of how a traditional educational system can evolve to meet the diverse needs of today's learners. By shifting from conventional teaching methods to a fully Personalized Competency-Based Learning (PCBL) model, Northern Cass addresses many of the challenges highlighted earlier, such as inequity, outdated practices, and misalignment with modern societal demands.

This district's journey exemplifies how embracing a learner-centered approach and fostering a supportive community can lead to profound and sustainable change in educational outcomes.

System Transformation Case Study: Northern Cass School District

Northern Cass School District 97 is a consolidated district serving the communities of Arthur, Argusville, Erie, Gardner, Grandin, and Hunter in rural North Dakota. The district began operations in 1999. The district serves 720 learners in PK-12. Thirty-five percent of learners open-enroll into the district. Northern Cass employs 60 certified and 36 non-certified staff including a Director of Personalized Learning, a Personalized Learning Coach, an Activities Director, Dean of Learners, Director of College, Career, and Life Readiness, Director of Technology, and Literacy Specialist. Northern Cass operates a self-funded preschool program which serves up to 30 learners.



Northern Cass School District is an exemplary location to explore the deep and ongoing work of system-wide transformation. The district takes pride in providing big school opportunities in a small school environment. Over the past 6 years, Northern Cass has been engaged in a transformation from a traditional teaching and learning model to a fully Personalized Competency-Based Learning (PCBL) system. In that time, PCBL has become the foundation for a learning environment which values every learner as an individual while focusing on the whole learner.

Within that system-wide transformation, Northern Cass has also committed to building and sustaining world-class organizational culture. To achieve this, in the spring of 2022, the district engaged in a culture survey, focus groups, and interviews to gather information related to perceptions of culture. From these data, a change to the strategic plan was made to include culture as a

goal which focuses on every educator also feeling valued, heard, and seen.

Northern Cass is a Full Service Community School (FSCS). The North Dakota Full-Service Community Schools model provides support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination, integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for learners and families. A full-time Site Coordinator and Family Case Manager help connect Northern Cass students with needed resources that support student and family wellbeing.

The school district has developed diverse partnerships which support its ability to execute towards its mission and vision. These include partners such as Cass County Career and Technical Education Center, KnowledgeWorks, Transcend Education, Valley City State University, University of Jamestown, the Burgum Foundation, Mastery Transcript Consortium, and the United Way. The district recently received the Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant which focuses on increasing literacy skills across all levels and has led a major state grant initiative on dyslexia awareness. Finally, Northern Cass was a finalist for prestigious Yass Prize in 2022, receiving \$500,000 to advance the work of providing a continuum of services for learners.

Northern Cass School District's profound system-wide transformation from traditional teaching methods to a personalized, competency-based learning (PCBL) model marks a significant departure from conventional, one-size-fits-all educational approaches, embracing a student-centered framework where learning is tailored to each individual's needs, strengths, and pace. By implementing PCBL, Northern Cass prioritizes mastery of competencies over seat time, enabling students to progress based on their demonstrated understanding and skills rather than rigid timelines. This transformation is supported by a robust system of personalized learning plans, continuous assessment, and dynamic instructional strategies, fostering an environment where every student can achieve their full potential and engage deeply with their learning journey.



We believe that every learner can change the world - therefore, we provide a world-class education.

The future is bright for the Northern Cass Public School District where learners thrive because they are truly the number one priority and the school district and community come together in a full system of support as they prepare learners to change the world.



Pillar #1: Professional Learning

An organization that is attempting to transform itself must emphasize professional learning. Professional learning directly impacts the quality of education and the impact of a PCBL model on the teaching and learning experience. Starting with professional learning allows the school district to fully embed their system-wide transformation into foundational classroom practices.

Professional learning in schools is vital for ensuring educators are equipped with the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and strategies needed to provide high-quality education; meet the needs of diverse learners; and adapt to the evolving educational landscape. Northern Cass's approach not only empowers teachers with the latest skills and knowledge but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement, enhances instructional practices, and ensures a unified commitment to the district's educational goals. An early focus on professional learning centers educators as professionals and allows the district to build a strong foundation for system-wide change in the following ways:

- **Enhanced Teaching Practices and Strategies** - Professional learning opportunities enable educators to learn about effective teaching strategies. This enhances their ability to deliver high-quality education and adapt to a highly personalized, competency-based learning model such as the one used at Northern Cass.
- **Improved Student Achievement** - When educators engage in continuous professional learning, they acquire skills and knowledge that can impact learner achievement, facilitating learning opportunities and experiences that allow students to demonstrate and achieve mastery.
- **Adaptation to Changing Educational Landscape** - Education is constantly changing, and a commitment to system-wide transformation only makes this more true as the district embarks upon a journey of continual growth and improvement. Professional learning helps educators continue to innovate without having to leave the classroom.

- **Personal and Professional Growth** - Professional learning opportunities provide educators with an opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. It encourages self-reflection which leads to becoming more effective and engaged as an educator.
- **Collaboration and Networking** - Professional learning often involves collaboration with colleagues in teams or PLCs. This collaboration builds collective efficacy among educators, allowing them to share experiences, knowledge, and best practices.
- **Enhanced Classroom Management** - Professional learning helps teachers develop effective classroom management techniques which ensures learning is relevant, authentic, and meaningful. This creates a positive learning environment and supports the development of strong school culture.
- **Addressing Diverse Student Needs** - Learners come from diverse backgrounds and have varying learning styles, abilities, and needs. Professional learning builds the skills necessary for educators to effectively address these diversities and helps educators identify what supports different students may need to achieve competency on a given standard.
- **Compliance with Educational Standards and Regulations** - Professional learning ensures that educators are informed about and compliant with local, state, and national educational standards and/or regulations. In innovative settings, it is even more important that there is clarity of expectation for all educators and leaders.
- **Teacher Retention and Job Satisfaction** - Providing opportunities for professional growth and development increases job satisfaction among educators. It demonstrates that the organization values and invests time and resources into its educators which can contribute to teacher retention and a positive work environment.

In order to transform a school to a personalized, competency-based learning (PCBL) district, the approach to professional learning must change significantly. In many districts, a whole group model for professional learning is utilized, with every educator being provided the same training at the same pace, and at the same time. In fact, most professional learning models

go against everything districts know and believe about learning! Throughout a transformation, it is necessary to shift to a personalized learning model for professional learning. All professional learning needs to align with the district's instructional framework. Learning must either be modeled using a framework or new learning must link directly to the strategies identified as necessary for the district to meet the goals of its strategic plan.

Professional learning can be seen as something done “to” educators or something done “for” educators. Educators must be empowered to own their learning. A shift from a traditional model of education for students must be accompanied by a shift in professional learning for educators. When you shift the mindset, educators will take an active role in designing learning experiences which can build their skill set and truly impact learner achievement.



5 Key Actions

Build It In

Northern Cass School District has established a robust, ongoing professional development calendar to ensure continuous growth and learning for its educators. This calendar integrates personalized professional learning into a structured agenda that includes regular checkpoints for reflection and goal-setting. A sample agenda based on this model might include components such as:

- Celebrations
- Review of Previous Learning and Commitments
- Introduction of New Learning
- Individual Reflection
- Team Planning
- Whole Group Debrief with New Commitments

By incorporating these elements, Northern Cass creates a system where educators can process their learning, engage in meaningful discussions with peers, and set actionable goals for the coming month. This cyclical approach fosters accountability, as educators are expected to build on their previous goals and share progress at each session. The continuity and structure of this model not only support individual growth but also unify the district's efforts, aligning educators' personal development with broader district objectives and enhancing the overall educational experience.

The expectation is not that educators all progress towards the same goals at the same time, but everyone is responsible for continuing to move forward and to grow as educators towards their individual goals. Throughout Northern Cass School District's professional learning transformation, the district has needed to shift to a personalized learning model. Just like every learner is different, every educator is different—we can't be understanding of learners being at different places in their learning and not be okay with educators being in a similar place. The goal is continuous improvement, not perfection.

Spotlight: “Lounge Charts” for Feedback

As part of a professional learning model, feedback must be solicited from educators. One strategy to gather feedback is the use of “Lounge Charts.” Large pages or chart paper or sticky notes can be posted in your educators’ lounge or in another central location lounge with a series of questions related to professional learning. Sample questions which could be asked are:

1. **What makes a quality learning experience?**
2. **What is the best/worst professional learning experience you have had?**
3. **What would the perfect day of professional learning look like?**

Even with a personalized professional learning model, there is still a need for whole group professional learning. At times, there is a need for a motivational speaker to inspire the team, which is often best held at the start or mid part of the year. However, the district must engage educators in a debrief with the whole group and then support them in setting individual commitments from what they learned in order to make the learning “sticky.” Learning is always the non-negotiable in “professional learning.”

Instructional Rounds

In building a sustainable professional development program, school leaders must establish non-negotiables that drive meaningful growth and learning. One critical non-negotiable at Northern Cass is the systemic implementation of "Instructional Rounds." This practice ensures that educators engage in continuous, collaborative learning through peer observations. Instructional rounds offer a structured approach for educators to collaborate on enhancing instructional practices. This method integrates three key elements of professional development: systematic classroom observation, targeted improvement strategies, and a collaborative network of educators.

The "Down the Hall" model involves brief, focused observations of a colleague’s classroom, lasting less than 20 minutes. Educators provide positive feedback, pose questions, and commit to applying insights gained from these observations. Conversely, the "Teams" model entails teams of five or six educators observing a peer’s full lesson and then debriefing using a structured protocol.

Conducted six times per year, this approach facilitates deeper, team-based reflections and discussions.

Both models emphasize the importance of learning from peers, making it a cornerstone of professional development and fostering a culture of ongoing improvement.

Go Off-Site!

Incorporating off-site learning opportunities into a personalized professional development program is an excellent way to foster growth and innovation among educators. Regular site visits to other districts that have successfully implemented learner-centered models can be a highly effective way to expose educators to new practices and perspectives. These visits should focus on districts that exemplify what is possible with a personalized learning approach, rather than settling for local examples that may not align with the desired transformation.

During these off-site visits, educators should actively seek to validate their current practices by identifying areas where they observe alignment with their own methods. This helps affirm their efforts and builds confidence in their approach. The work is difficult, and it is imperative to celebrate when you see others who are engaging in similar practices!

Additionally, sharing insights from these visits within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is essential for collective growth. Educators should discuss their observations, including questions, “ah-has,” and affirmations as well as key takeaways and areas for improvement. In addition, after reflection and sharing, educators commit to adopting at least one new practice or strategy learned from their site visit. This commitment should be treated as a mini action research project, where teachers gather informal data to assess the effectiveness of the new approach and report out to the group.

It is important for educators who participate in off-site visits to avoid “copy cat” syndrome. Each system has its own unique qualities, and districts often make the mistake of trying to copy-and-paste the best practices they see when observing.

Observing another site provides little perspective on how decisions and mistakes were made during a transformation; therefore, it is important to approach these visits with a focus on adaptation rather than replication, acknowledging that each district's context is unique, and decisions made during transformations are tailored to specific needs and circumstances.

Growing Peer Learning

In the Northern Cass School District, engaging professional learning strategies such as “Speed Dating” have proven effective in fostering peer collaboration and enhancing teaching practices. During these sessions, educators have the opportunity to share and discuss their classroom strategies with colleagues in a dynamic, rotating format. Each educator presents their approach in a 5-minute segment, allowing others to gain insights into various practices within a supportive environment; participants also receive a 1-pager summarizing the shared strategies to take with them. As part of the follow-up, educators are required to commit to sharing their takeaways and implementing new strategies at the next Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting and throughout the month.

Other effective methods for introducing opportunities for peer learning include 1:1 peer observations and feedback cycles. During these peer observations, teachers can use a “glow and grow” approach to celebrate the great work of their colleagues and to identify an area for their own growth based on the practices observed. This can foster a culture of mutual support and continuous improvement. Some schools have also used lesson study groups in which educators collaboratively plan, observe, and analyze lessons to refine instructional strategies and share insights on effective practices. Finally, having an embedded mentorship program that pairs teachers who are experienced in competency-based learning with educators who are newer to the district or this system of learning can help raise the baseline for incoming teaching staff by providing guidance, sharing expertise, and supporting professional growth through regular interactions and feedback.

Micro-credentials to Demonstrate Growth and Learning

Integrating a micro-credentialing program into the professional development model at Northern Cass has added another level of transformation to the teaching and learning process as it mirrors many of the core aspects of the PCBL model that is used to drive student learning. This program is designed to empower educators through a personalized and continuous improvement process. By engaging in the micro-credential program, educators have the opportunity to develop individually while continuing to engage with district-wide professional growth and learning as well. The micro-credentialing process involves implementing evidence-based strategies aimed at enhancing student achievement. Each micro-credential proposal must be pre-approved by a team of educators and includes a detailed plan along with an implementation strategy, reflection, a method for sharing learning, and how impact on student learning and achievement will be assessed.

The micro-credential application is based on a comprehensive rubric, which evaluates the proposal's connection to the Northern Cass Strategic Plan, including the district's professional learning goals, content standards and competencies, the Six Pillars of Personalized Learning, and Principles of Personalized Learning Guidelines. Educators are eligible to pursue up to two micro-credentials per year. The assessment of the micro-credential also follows the 0-4 Marzano proficiency scale that is used to describe student learning. Successful completion of the first micro-credential, with a score of "3" or "4," results in an increase in base pay for the following school year. A second micro-credential, also scoring "3" or "4," earns a stipend upon completion. Micro-credentials scoring "1" or "2" are only eligible for a stipend, but educators can continue to improve their scores. This structured approach not only incentivizes professional development but also aligns educators' growth with the district's strategic goals and the broader mission of transforming teaching and learning at Northern Cass.

Lessons Learned from Northern Cass

- Treat professional learning for teachers with the same approach that you would use to personalize for learners. The only professional learning model that truly works is one which is adaptable to meet the needs of all educators, regardless of their previous experience or starting point, and which allows continual growth and development.
- Even while working to personalize professional learning, there is still value in providing partnership through peer learning and in structuring ways for educators to learn in small affinity groups.
- Professional learning needs to be approached like an action research project, providing educators with the opportunity to try new ideas and concepts in the classroom, to gather evidence on its efficacy, and to report back to their PLC or coach.
- Make it clear that while everyone has individual goals and is at different stages in their own educational journeys as professionals, everyone is expected to continue growing as lifelong learners and professionals.
- Solicit feedback often and solidify educators' collective thinking on professional learning in a public, collaborative way where educators can see the feedback of others.

Reflection Questions for Leaders

1. How can you as a leader ensure that your organization's professional development calendar effectively supports personalized learning for each educator?
2. What strategies can be used to maintain a balance between individual growth and collective district goals?
3. In what ways can your district enhance its reflection and goal-setting processes to foster a culture of continuous improvement among educators at all levels of the organization?
4. How can you effectively utilize peer observations and/or instructional rounds to drive collaborative learning and improve instructional practices?
5. What opportunities are there for visiting other schools and districts that are engaged in transformations to increasingly learner-centered educational models that are similar to the journey your school or district hopes to undertake?

Summary

Northern Cass School District has successfully transitioned to a personalized, competency-based learning model, in part, by emphasizing continuous support and development for educators. Their professional development program is built on a well-structured calendar that integrates personalized learning with regular checkpoints for reflection and goal setting. This approach includes celebrating achievements, debriefing on previous commitments, introducing new learning, and planning collaboratively. By fostering a cycle of ongoing reflection and goal setting, Northern Cass ensures that educators are continuously evolving and aligned with district objectives. This model not only supports individual growth but also fosters a unified sense of purpose within the district.

A critical component of Northern Cass's transformation is the systematic implementation of Instructional Rounds, which emphasize peer observation and collaborative learning. Educators engage in brief, focused observations ("Down the Hall") and full lesson reviews ("Teams"), which are integral to their professional growth. This structured approach encourages educators to provide and receive feedback, reflect on practices, and share insights with their peers. Additionally, off-site learning opportunities are essential for exposing educators to innovative practices and validating their own methods. By incorporating these visits into their professional development, educators can adapt successful strategies to their unique contexts, avoiding the pitfalls of mere replication and instead focusing on thoughtful adaptation.





Pillar #2: Curriculum and Assessment

Curriculum and assessment are fundamental components of an educational system overall, having a tremendous impact on the effectiveness and accountability of a system. In the quest for true system transformation across schools, rethinking curriculum and assessment is paramount to shifting from traditional, one-size-fits-all education to a truly learner-centered approach. These elements must evolve to support a more personalized, student-focused model, moving beyond standardization and routine practices to embrace flexibility, customization, and alignment with learners' individual needs and aspirations.

By reimagining these aspects of education, schools can better meet diverse student needs, foster deeper engagement, and ensure that every learner is prepared for future success in a way that goes beyond mere compliance with established standards. This transformation is essential not just for maintaining educational quality, but for creating an environment where each student's unique path and potential are fully realized. The following demonstrate the centrality of curriculum and assessment and how they are critical to the work of system-wide transformation:

- Standardization and Consistency - Northern Cass has worked to establish a high-quality structured curriculum that ensures that all learners have access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum partnered with a wide variety of projects, portfolios, and pathways for students to demonstrate concept mastery. This ensures learners receive a comparable education regardless of where they start.
- Achievement of Learning Objectives - Curriculum sets clear learning objectives and educational goals for learners by identifying priority standards. It outlines what learners are expected to learn at each level, ensuring outcomes are well-defined and achievable. At Northern Cass, a clearly articulated 0-4 Marzano Levels of Understanding scale is used to identify when a student has demonstrated competency on a specific learning objective.

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- Alignment with Educational Standards - Curriculum is designed to align with established educational standards, guidelines, and benchmarks. This alignment ensures learners are taught the required knowledge and skills to meet academic expectations; at the same time, the flexibility of personalized competency-based learning means that students' pathway through those standards happen on their own individual time table.
- Preparation for being Choice Ready - A well-structured curriculum prepares learners for being choice ready for college, career, or military. It ensures a strong foundation of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and relevant competencies in various subjects or fields.
- Customization and Flexibility - Curriculum can be adapted and customized to meet the needs and diversity of learners, allowing for the inclusion of special programs, extra- and co-curricular activities, and initiatives that cater to individual learning styles and abilities.
- Assessment of Student Learning - Assessment, as an integral part of curriculum, helps measure learner's understanding, progress, and mastery of content. It provides valuable feedback to educators, learners, and families which allows for necessary adjustments to teaching and learning.

- Data-Driven Decision-Making - Assessment data collected through a variety of learning activities informs policy and decision-making. Educational stakeholders use these data to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum, identify areas for improvement, and implement evidence-based strategies to best meet the needs of all learners.
- Accountability and Transparency - Public schools are accountable for the quality of education they provide. Curriculum and assessment play a vital role in assessing school performance, ensuring transparency in the educational process, and demonstrating accountability.
- Resource Allocation and Planning - Curriculum and assessment help schools allocate resources effectively by identifying the specific needs of learners and where additional support, materials, or training may be required.

To support Northern Cass's transition to a personalized, competency-based learning district, significant changes were needed in curriculum and assessment. The focus moved from traditional standardized assessments to providing students with diverse experiences and meaningful curriculum that help them identify and move towards future goals rather than merely meeting standardized benchmarks.



5 Key Actions

Mastery Before Moving On

As Northern Cass School District undertook the comprehensive redesign of its assessment model, significant changes were made to align with its shift toward personalized, competency-based learning. Recognizing the need for a more focused approach, Northern Cass has streamlined its standards by prioritizing those that are essential for student success. This prioritization of “keystone” standards encourages educators to reflect on criteria such as endurance, leverage, and readiness for the next level, allowing the district to reduce the number of standards covered in a single semester class from over 50 to fewer than 15 per course. This shift emphasizes depth over breadth, ensuring that content covered remains meaningful and relevant.

Following the identification of priority standards, Northern Cass developed structured proficiency scales to provide clear and consistent benchmarks for student learning. These Marzano-type scales use levels such as “Score 4 - Extending,” “Score 3 - Proficient,” “Score 2 - Foundational,” and “Score 1 - Emerging.” The proficiency scale begins with the standard set at Score 3 and works backward to define foundational skills and basic learning. Additionally, the district created matrices, or pacing guides, to support progress rather than pace, ensuring students develop necessary skills at their own rate while meeting “soft” deadlines to manage their time effectively. It is important to note that a “Score of 4” must be clearly articulated for maximum efficiency; at Northern Cass, the non-negotiables for “Score 4” opportunities are that every standard has a “Score 4” opportunity at every level and that every playlist is built with every learner having a pathway to a “Score 4.”

The transition to proficiency-based grading across the district presented a major challenge, particularly in eliminating traditional percentage and letter grades. To address concerns from students and families about college admissions and scholarships, Northern Cass proactively engaged with parents

through listening sessions and informational tables at parent-teacher conferences and school events. The district also sought support from universities and legislative bodies to ensure that the new grading model would be recognized and valued beyond high school and would not create a barrier for Northern Cass students during university admissions processes. This comprehensive approach included collaborating with the Department of Public Instruction and Information Technology personnel to integrate the new grading system with existing systems and address any legislative needs. Northern Cass, like several other districts that have undertaken a system transformation to competency-based learning, uses their proficiency scales to generate a GPA that is also reported on transcripts.

To effectively implement proficiency-based grading, Northern Cass emphasized the importance of a structured model and personalized professional learning for educators. Teachers received training on defining and assessing a “Score 4” level of performance and set monthly goals to refine their practices. Feedback from students played an important role in this process, helping educators understand which practices were most effective. This iterative process, including peer-sharing events like Speed Dating, ensured that the new assessment model was continuously improved and aligned with the district's mission of providing personalized, competency-based learning experiences.

Transformation Resets

Many transformations in schools face significant challenges when they are predominantly driven by leadership, particularly when leaders persist despite signs of disengagement from others. Recognizing when a transformation requires a reset is essential for success. Northern Cass School District faced this challenge and effectively addressed it by recalibrating their approach to better meet the needs of their middle school students.

When Northern Cass initiated a reset, they adhered to key guidelines to ensure a more inclusive and effective process.

Instead of leading the effort solely from the top, leaders participated as part of the team but allowed educators to take charge. Educators collaboratively defined what constitutes a great school and engaged in empathic interviews with students, families, and fellow educators to gather insights and identify trends. This approach informed the development of a new system that focused on creating relevant and meaningful learning experiences, particularly for electives.

One of the most notable outcomes of this reset was the establishment of the district's first middle school. The team, empowered with ownership of the project, developed a presentation for the Board of Education that the leader did not see until the actual presentation. This approach demonstrated the leader's trust in the team and reinforced their ownership of the initiative. The Board's approval led to the hiring of two additional positions to support the new middle school.

In this reimagined middle school, the morning schedule allows educators and students greater flexibility, with learners taking ownership of their schedules on select days. This shift fosters student agency, self-reflection, and alignment with the Portrait of a Learner attributes. The afternoon focuses on studio experiences - problem-based units designed to integrate competencies across various disciplines. These studios, which involve students co-designing learning experiences and collaborating with experts, have led to a significant increase in students finding their education relevant and authentic. In the 2022-23 school year, 65% of middle school students reported that the studios were meaningful, a marked improvement from 35% the previous year. This successful transformation highlights the effectiveness of involving educators in leading change and tailoring solutions to the specific needs of students.

Spotlight: Scheduling that Supports the Mission

Scheduling is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of supporting a shift to personalized learning. While it may appear to be a straightforward component of the educational system, its impact on the success of a transformation cannot be underestimated. A well-constructed schedule aligns with the educational goals and supports the transformation process, whereas a poorly designed schedule, implemented prematurely or without stakeholder buy-in, can undermine the entire initiative.

Northern Cass School District demonstrated a thoughtful approach to scheduling by initially focusing on key elements of their personalized learning transformation before altering the schedule. Recognizing that a schedule alone cannot drive change, they prioritized implementing a "What I Need" (WIN) time within their existing framework. WIN time was designed to offer targeted remediation or enrichment based on student needs, providing a practical way to integrate personalized learning into the daily routine. This approach allowed educators and students to experience firsthand how a flexible schedule can enhance proficiency-based learning without disrupting other critical elements of the transformation.

By integrating WIN time into their schedule, Northern Cass created a structured yet adaptable framework that supported their shift to personalized learning. This strategic move helped educators and students understand how scheduling can be leveraged to meet individual needs and drive learning outcomes. It also provided a clear demonstration of how increased flexibility in the master schedule could work, building increased comfort and buy-in for additional changes and innovations to come.

Creating a Portrait of a Learner

For Northern Cass School District, the development of a Portrait of a Learner has been pivotal to their transformation towards personalized learning. This Portrait serves as the district's guiding principle, providing a clear vision of the skills and attributes every student should possess upon graduation. By establishing this "north star," Northern Cass sets clear metrics for success and ensures that all aspects of their educational system align with these goals.

To craft their Portrait of a Learner, Northern Cass engaged a broad range of stakeholders, including families, students, educators, and community members. This collaborative approach began with essential questions:

1. What attributes are necessary for success within the school environment?
2. What attributes are critical for success beyond graduation?
3. How can these be identified and measured?

The resulting attributes, such as accountability, communication, adaptability, learner's mindset, and leadership, represent the skills that are critical for students' future success in college, career, or the military.

Following the identification of these attributes, Northern Cass developed specific competencies that define each attribute. This detailed framework allows the district to focus on how students will demonstrate these skills throughout their education journey. Building on this foundation, Northern Cass began work on creating a competency-based credit system, where students earn credits by mastering competencies, not just by completing course requirements. This system allows students to track their progress in a learning management system, complete a portfolio of their work, and use a mastery or narrative transcript to document their achievements.



By prioritizing the Portrait of a Learner and integrating it into their curriculum and assessment systems, Northern Cass ensures that their transformation supports meaningful learning and prepares students for success in a rapidly changing world. The example below shows the articulation of competencies underneath each attribute of the district’s Portrait of a Learner.

<p>Critical Reading and Interpretation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply strategies to make meaning • Analyze context and purpose • Engage with main ideas and themes • Evaluate craft 	<p>Communication and Expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine purpose and audience • Choose and refine a message • Develop craft • Finalize, practice, and prepare 	<p>Inquiry and Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame a research question • Select and evaluate sources • Collect and organize information • Synthesize and report findings
<p>Data Literacy and Computation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze and interpret data • Model and represent information • Construct explanations 	<p>Reasoning and Argument</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construct a claim • Find and apply evidence • Use logic to build knowledge and understanding 	<p>Problem-Solving and Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define and frame problems • Create a plan/approach • Tinker, experiment, and iterate
	<p>Citizenship and Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify important issues • Engage diverse perspectives • Create and implement an action plan • Work in teams 	<p>Wellness and Integrity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurture my identity • Build affirming life practices • Sustain relationships • Advocate for myself and others

What Guides Learning?

In transforming their educational approach, Northern Cass School District recognized the need to establish clear guiding principles to shape exceptional learning experiences. Central to their new model is the idea that learning should be driven by students' interests and passions rather than traditional metrics such as grade level or social grouping. By grouping learners according to what excites and motivates them, Northern Cass aims to foster a more engaging and relevant educational experience. This approach ensures that students are more invested in their learning and are able to connect with content on a deeper level.

Northern Cass also emphasizes proficiency-based progression, where learners must demonstrate mastery of each standard before advancing to the next level. This is assessed by qualified educators using clearly defined proficiency scales, including advanced “Score 4” opportunities. This ensures that all learners have a solid understanding of the material before moving

forward. Scores are based on multiple pieces of evidence and support the learner's progress through their individual learning profile.

Additionally, the district supports flexible pacing, allowing students to learn at their own speed and take ownership of their learning through active goal-setting and reflection. Students maintain a learning profile that helps them co-create personalized learning experiences and track their progress across competencies and academic content. With multiple opportunities for feedback and a focus on evidence-based assessment, Northern Cass is committed to aligning every learning experience with their Portrait of a Learner, ultimately ensuring that each student develops the skills and attributes necessary for success in their future endeavors.

Reevaluate Grading Practices

Northern Cass School District undertook a comprehensive reevaluation of their grading practices as a fundamental step in their transformation towards a personalized learning model. Recognizing that traditional grading systems can be a significant barrier to meaningful change, the district focused on transitioning to proficiency-based grading. This shift involved several key considerations to ensure that the new grading practices aligned with their educational goals and supported student learning effectively.

One of the foundational steps Northern Cass took was to develop a clear taxonomy that all educators would use to assess student work. This consistency ensured that proficiency-based grading was implemented uniformly across the district. They also established a reporting system capable of reflecting proficiency-based grades rather than traditional letter or percentage grades. To bridge the gap during the transition, Northern Cass created a GPA conversion scale to maintain eligibility for scholarships and other opportunities, providing continuity while the new system was in the process of being fully adopted.

The district emphasized the importance of using multiple pieces of evidence for each standard rather than relying on average scores, which often perpetuate traditional grading practices. They required students to defend their learning with comprehensive evidence, ensuring that assessments were not weighted disproportionately but instead contributed to a holistic view of student proficiency. Additionally, Northern Cass made a clear distinction between academic performance and behavioral aspects by separating academic grades from "Habits of Work," which allowed for a more accurate representation of students' knowledge and skills. This approach helped to reinforce their commitment to meaningful, proficiency-based learning and supported the district's broader goals for personalized education.

Spotlight: Graduation Requirements and Experiences

In the process of transforming their educational system, Northern Cass School District redefined their graduation requirements to ensure they extend beyond traditional measures of credit accrual and course completion. Central to this transformation was the development of a Portrait of a Learner, which outlined the essential attributes students need to succeed beyond high school graduation. With this framework in place, the district was able to design graduation requirements that emphasize meaningful experiences and personal growth.

Northern Cass introduced several innovative requirements to enhance student readiness for post-graduation life. These include paid internships both within and outside of the school environment, which provide practical, real-world experience. Students also engage in multiple job shadowing opportunities to explore various career paths and refine their future aspirations. Additionally, learners are required to complete 25 hours of community service during their high school career, independent of any hours required by school organizations, to foster a strong sense of civic responsibility. A capstone project further allows students to reflect on their journey, linking their personal experiences to the Portrait of a Learner and demonstrating their growth and achievements.

These revised graduation requirements emphasize the importance of experiential learning and personal development. Northern Cass recognizes that implementing such requirements challenges educators to rethink and adapt their practices continually. This approach does not mean discarding previous methods but rather adjusting and evolving them to meet the needs of each cohort of students. By prioritizing meaningful experiences, Northern Cass ensures that their graduation requirements align with their broader goals of preparing students for success in their future endeavors.

Lessons Learned from Northern Cass

- Great leaders listen, solicit feedback, and act as an equal member of a team; they trust the people they have hired as highly qualified experts in their own right.
- Designing quality learning experiences requires deep knowledge of the curriculum and content. A thought partner or guide might be helpful, but there is no shortcut for the experience that facilitators gain by going through the redesign process themselves.
- Empathic interview data can be the most important strategy to know when, where, and how to reset during the transformation process.
- People must know the “why” before change occurs, otherwise they can’t get on board.
- The Portrait of a Learner can become the springboard for the transformation. Make sure it articulates the needs and values of your school and district by engaging with a wide range of stakeholders during the design process.

Reflection Questions for Leaders

1. How can you encourage educators in your school or district to engage in prioritizing standards?
2. Does your school or district have a Portrait of a Learner (also called a Portrait of a Graduate) developed? If so, how can you better align your school or district’s graduation requirements with your vision for student outcomes?
3. What kinds of discussions would be effective in your school or district in helping educators come to consensus around their grading practices as part of your system transformation work?
4. As a leader, what strategies could you use to ensure meaningful, real-world experiences such as internships and job shadowing are a part of your graduation requirements?
5. In what ways can your district or school leverage student reflections and capstone projects to gain insights into the effectiveness of your teaching and learning approach?

Summary

As Northern Cass School District embarked on a transformative journey toward personalized, competency-based learning, they worked to dramatically overhaul both their curriculum and assessment practices. Central to this effort was the shift to proficiency-based grading, which aimed to move away from traditional percentage and letter grades. This transition posed significant challenges, particularly regarding concerns about how the new grading system would affect college admissions and scholarships. Northern Cass proactively addressed these by engaging with parents through informational sessions and collaborating with universities and legislative bodies—ultimately ensuring that the new grading model would be recognized and valued at the post-secondary level. The district worked closely with the external entities at the collegiate and state level to integrate the new grading system with existing infrastructures, establishing a framework where proficiency scales could be used to generate GPAs reported on transcripts.

The district also invested heavily in supporting their educators throughout this transition. Professional development focused on defining and assessing high levels of performance, with teachers setting monthly goals to enhance their practices. Feedback from students played an essential role in refining these practices, and initiatives like peer-sharing events ensured continuous improvement and alignment with the district's mission. This iterative approach to assessment allowed Northern Cass to align their evaluation methods with their personalized, competency-based learning goals, ensuring that every learning experience was tailored to meet the needs of individual students.

In addition to curriculum and assessment changes, Northern Cass redefined their graduation requirements to align with their vision of personalized learning. Moving beyond mere credit accumulation, the district introduced requirements that emphasized real-world experiences and personal growth. These included paid internships, job shadowing opportunities, community service, and a capstone project linked to the district's Portrait of a Learner. This comprehensive approach ensured that students developed not only academic knowledge but also practical skills and attributes essential for success in college,

career, and beyond. By focusing on meaningful experiences and continuous adaptation, Northern Cass effectively supported their students' readiness for future challenges while fostering a learning environment that embraced personalized, competency-based education.



Pillar #3: District Operations

Aligning district operations with the new transformational model is necessary for ensuring that educational reforms are effectively implemented and sustained. Northern Cass School District's approach to this alignment exemplifies how rethinking and recalibrating district operations can drive meaningful change. By integrating their vision for personalized, competency-based learning into every facet of their operations, Northern Cass demonstrates how thoughtful coordination of resources, policies, and practices can support a transformational model that enhances student outcomes.

This section explores the pivotal role that district operations play in adapting to and supporting systemic change, highlighting the essential steps and strategies for aligning daily operations with a district's innovative educational goals. The elements to consider in this pillar are as follows:

- **Community Engagement and Communication** - Driving strong communication and proactive engagement with families, learners, community members, and other key stakeholders is critical to system transformation. Building strong partnerships with the community ensures educational programs align with community needs, goals, and expectations as well as expanding capacity to meet students' needs.
- **Policy Implementation and Compliance** - District operations ensure that local, state, and federal educational policies, laws, and regulations are implemented effectively and consistently across schools within the district. However, policies and processes must be updated to ensure not only compliance, but also alignment with the district's vision for teaching and learning.
- **Resource Allocation and Management** - Resource allocation and management, including funding, personnel, facilities, technology, and instructional materials, must all be examined to ensure they are supporting the larger vision. This includes budgeting, oversight of expenditures, and both short and long-term financial planning for sustainability and growth.

- Staffing and Professional Development - The hiring, evaluation, training, and professional learning of school staff—giving the right people the right tools at the right time—is critical to fully staffing the new learning model and then supporting educators as they develop the skills needed to work within the personalized, competency-system, which is a significantly different style and pedagogy than traditional education.
- Learner Services and Support - District operations manage and coordinate various learner services, including special education, counseling, health services, transportation, and nutrition programs. These services are vital to supporting the whole learner; using a community school model has proven to be very effective at Northern Cass.
- Data Collection and Analysis - Data-driven decision-making helps in identifying trends (positive and negative), addressing disparities, and implementing needed interventions; just as the teachers are asked to engage in an action research model and to provide evidence of efficacy for new strategies, the district should model these practices as well.
- Long-Term Planning and Vision - District operations play a role in developing long-term educational plans, setting goals, and crafting a vision for the future. This strategic planning helps guide the direction of the district and ensures alignment.

Aligning district operations to support a newly emergent learning model is essential for the successful implementation and sustainability of educational reforms. Strategic planning is a key component of this alignment, as it helps in crafting a coherent vision and setting long-term goals that guide the district's direction. Effective district operations provide the necessary structure, policies, and resources to support the new model, ensuring that all aspects of the educational system work in harmony. By focusing on operational coherence, districts can ensure that every part of their organization moves in tandem with their transformative vision, fostering an environment where innovative learning models such as Northern Cass School District's personalized, competency-based learning environment can thrive.

5 Key Actions

Inclusive Strategic Planning

Northern Cass School District's approach to strategic planning in their personalized, competency-based learning system exemplified a comprehensive and adaptable model for educational transformation. Recognizing the importance of hearing from many voices, Northern Cass engaged a diverse array of stakeholders in the planning process, including students, educators, business partners, families, and representatives from universities and the military. This collaborative approach ensured that the strategic plan reflected a broad range of perspectives and needs. Also central to the strategic planning process was the identification of strategic themes and priority areas. Strategic themes served as the guiding principles that infused the plan with overarching vision and coherence, while priority areas focused on specific goals and objectives needed to achieve the district's mission.

Rather than committing to a rigid 5-year plan, Northern Cass has adopted a dynamic approach, revisiting and readopting their strategic plan annually. This flexibility allowed the district to remain responsive to evolving needs and emerging trends, while staying focused on their big picture progress as well. Once the strategic plan was established, a secondary operational plan was developed to enact that strategy; the operational plan detailed annual tasks, assigned responsibilities, and outlined how progress would be reported. This structured yet adaptable planning framework has allowed Northern Cass to effectively implement and sustain their personalized learning model, ensuring both agility in a changing education landscape and continuous alignment with their educational goals.



Spotlight: Developing Shared Language

Developing a shared language is foundational for a district undergoing transformation. Words hold significant power in shaping perceptions and practices, and establishing a unique, common language can help a district clearly define and communicate the changes needed within its system. By focusing on creating a common language, stakeholders can engage in meaningful discussions that promote “future thinking” and reflection on current practices. To engage in developing shared, common language within the school or district, the following prompts could be used:

- What language is already in place? What is the jargon you “hear” daily?
- What is the jargon we use with our stakeholders daily?
- Does the language we commonly use signal the changes that we want to make?
- What is the common language we should commit to using with all?
- Will the change in language lead to a shift in mindset?

Among the resources shared at the end of this section, there is a glossary of shared language that was developed at Northern Cass to help communicate their system transformation. Among the changes made, the district highlighted the shift from education as a passive activity to one that is active and centered on the student as a learner:

- **Learner** - Formerly known as a student. A student was a “receiver” of information; however, a learner is an active participant in their learning.
- **Learner Agency** - A learner’s willingness and capacity to identify and balance when, what, why, and how they will learn.
- **Learner Profile** - Provides information about learners interests, motivations, goals, and aspirations.
- **Learning Center** - This was formerly known as a classroom. A place where learners come together at a learning level.
- **Learning Facilitator** - Purposefully shifts the learning experience from the teacher to the learner. Requires the teacher to cede control to learners.

Learning Level - Learners are placed in the academic level they are currently achieving.

Multi-Tier Systems of Support

Embedding a Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) is fundamental for a district's full transformation at the systems level as it strives to ensure that all learners achieve success across academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains. MTSS-B, a specific component of this framework, prioritizes delivering high-quality instruction alongside tailored social, emotional, and behavioral interventions based on learners' needs, with progress monitored regularly through evidence-based practices. Effective implementation of MTSS relies on the use of standardized and interim assessments to create a growth model that guides resource allocation and supports best practices.

A successful MTSS system should be driven by educators, encompassing regular education, intervention, and special education, providing an opportunity to foster teacher leadership and collaboration. Additionally, districts should actively and intentionally involve learners in the process, as demonstrated by Northern Cass School District's use of students as Luminaries, peer leaders engaged in tutoring, co-teaching, and leading writing workshops. By leveraging the strengths of all stakeholders, including students, MTSS can be more effectively integrated and sustained within the educational system.

Engagement of Learners

Northern Cass School District has made significant strides in engaging learners in the design and transformation of their educational system. The district exemplifies this commitment through several innovative practices. One key strategy is the use of a Learner Advisory Council, which allows students to directly influence the system leader and contribute to decision-making. Empathetic interviews are another excellent strategy to truly find out what learners want and need. Surveys are also an essential part of the process, ensuring that students not only provide feedback but also see how their input leads to tangible changes. For example, after discovering that only 35% of students felt learning was relevant, Northern Cass redefined what relevance meant and redesigned lessons to better engage learners, clearly communicating that these improvements stemmed from student feedback.

Additionally, Northern Cass employs Priority Standards Feedback. After each priority standard concludes, learners are given a survey which focuses on relevance, self-direction, the learning management system, and Portrait of a Learner skills. Educators are then required to discuss the feedback with students and outline the changes that will be implemented, making the Priority Standards surveys a catalyst for continuous improvement.

The district further exemplifies its commitment by including student representatives on key district committees, ensuring that learner perspectives are integrated into high-level decisions. Though not voting members, these student representatives provide invaluable insights from their unique perspective as learners. They also serve as ambassadors during site visits, guiding tours and participating in panel discussions, which fosters transparency and meaningful engagement with visitors.

Lastly, Northern Cass has empowered learners to take part in designing their own learning experiences. In their personalized competency-based learning model, students engage in a studio approach where they design problem-based units that span multiple disciplines and age groups. This model has proven highly effective, with high school students reporting that their learning experiences were 100% relevant. Through these efforts, Northern Cass has demonstrated that involving students in the transformation process not only enhances their engagement but also ensures that the educational system evolves to better meet their needs.



Family Engagement

Northern Cass School District has prioritized family engagement as a critical component of their transformation process, recognizing that meaningful change requires active involvement from families. The district actively involves families by initiating open dialogues to explain the need for transformation and by gathering their insights through targeted questions. For instance, school leaders ask families to reflect on questions such as, "The best learning experience I had was...", "The worst learning experience I had was...", "Learning is relevant when...", and "What are your hopes and dreams for your learner?" This approach helps Northern Cass understand family perspectives and expectations, which in turn informs the design of their engagement strategies.

To foster reciprocal engagement, Northern Cass implemented an innovative practice where educators sent weekly emails outlining the upcoming week's learning objectives. Families were then asked to present a real-life problem related to the week's lessons by Thursday. Students used what they had learned to address these problems, and families provided feedback via a brief survey on how effectively their child applied the new knowledge and what strategies were used. This feedback loop allowed educators to adjust their teaching methods as needed, demonstrating a practical and reciprocal model of family engagement. By defining and actively pursuing such engagement, Northern Cass ensures that family contributions are integral to their ongoing educational transformation.

Sustaining Through Purposeful Staffing

Northern Cass School District has made significant strides in aligning resources through purposeful staffing, recognizing that innovative roles are essential for realizing their vision of transformative education. For instance, the district introduced the position of Director of College, Career, and Life Readiness, a role designed to focus entirely on creating authentic and relevant experiences for students both inside and outside the classroom. This role is pivotal in connecting learners with real-world opportunities, such as partnering with community experts, coordinating paid internships, and guiding capstone projects.

By envisioning and establishing non-traditional positions like this, Northern Cass ensures that their staffing aligns with their mission to provide a holistic, engaging educational experience.

Purposeful staffing at Northern Cass involves a clear articulation of the district's mission, integrating this purpose into hiring practices, and fostering ongoing internal communication. Each new position is crafted to support the district's overarching goals and values. For example, the Director of Personalized Learning is tasked with embedding personalized learning practices into the curriculum and ensuring educator involvement in these processes. Similarly, the Personalized Learning Coach provides real-time support to educators, reinforcing best practices and enhancing skills across the district. The Literacy Specialist focuses on literacy strategies for all learners, with particular attention to secondary education, ensuring that essential skills are developed effectively. In districts successful in their transformation, both district leadership and the school board are committed to creating the appropriate positions and finding the best people to staff them.

Traditional systems hire traditional positions. Systems interested in transformation must assess all current roles and responsibilities and identify where there are gaps. The gaps are where new positions can be incorporated. It will allow an organization to provide ongoing support for the educators and learners who will be responsible for implementing change in their learning center. By creating and filling roles with a strong alignment to their educational objectives, Northern Cass not only supports their current initiatives but also addresses gaps in their system. This strategic approach to staffing is necessary for sustaining transformation and providing continuous support to both educators and learners. In doing so, Northern Cass exemplifies how targeted, innovative staffing can drive meaningful and sustained change in educational practices.

Partnerships

System-wide transformation is an arduous journey, and Northern Cass School District has demonstrated that successful change often hinges on cultivating strategic partnerships. Embracing the complexity of this work, Northern Cass has recognized that no single district has a direct path to transformation. Instead, they have sought out diverse partners who offer unique insights and resources. The key is not to find a district that mirrors Northern Cass exactly but to engage with organizations that share a similar vision and purpose. These partnerships are invaluable, as they provide the support, expertise, and innovative approaches necessary to drive meaningful change.

Northern Cass's approach to partnerships reflects a broad and thoughtful strategy. They understand that the strength of a partnership lies in shared values and goals rather than exact similarities. By collaborating with districts, educational organizations, and universities that align with their overarching mission, Northern Cass has been able to leverage diverse perspectives and experiences to enrich their transformation efforts. This collaborative network not only enhances their capacity for change but also ensures that the transformation is both robust and sustainable. Northern Cass's strategic alliances have been highly instrumental in reimagining and advancing their educational system. Below are highlights of some of these partnerships:

- Lindsey Unified School District (<https://www.lindsay.k12.ca.us/en-US>) in Lindsey, California reinvented itself nearly 15 years ago. This rural, agricultural district focused on creating a proficiency-based system which was responsive to learner needs by creating a model which engaged the community and reimagined the role the district would play. Throughout their system work, they have played a pivotal role in many other districts' transformational journey by hosting site visits which challenge those in attendance to think about what could be for the future and sharing their story and resources widely as part of their Lindsey Leads initiative. LUSD is a model of how we can truly reimagine a system of learning.

- (cont.) Despite all the barriers faced on the way, Lindsey Unified has engaged in a process of continuous improvement which has led to the creation of a learner-centered system. Northern Cass's partnership with LUSD includes strategy sharing, inspiration, and mentorship.
- KnowledgeWorks (<https://knowledgeworks.org/>) is a leader in schools across the country who sparks new thinking about ways to prepare students for an uncertain future. Personalized, competency-based learning is the way forward, not only for students but also for educators.
- The Learner Centered Collaborative (<https://learnercentered.org/our-story/>) partners with educators, schools, districts, and states to design equitable systems that put learners and learning at the center. They envision ecosystems where learners know who they are, thrive in community, and actively engage in the world as their best selves.
- Valley City State University (<https://www.vcsu.edu/>) is a public university in Valley City, North Dakota. VCSU has been rooted in tradition since 1890 and takes pride in supporting learners in finding and pursuing their passions. VCSU has been a partner with districts like Northern Cass to provide a robust early college experience for learners in 10th-12th grades.
- The University of Jamestown's (<https://www.uj.edu/>) unique approach to learning starts with their approach to their students. UJ believes their purpose as a university is to help students grow both within the four walls of a classroom and beyond, with the aim of developing their students into well-rounded professionals and people. The University of Jamestown has provided a Teacher Leadership Academy for local districts which has helped build the capacity of organizations to make systematic shifts at the teacher level.
- Transcend Education (<https://transcendeducation.org/>) is made up of a diverse team of educators, innovators, and changemakers with experience as school and system leaders, working towards a vision where all young people learn in ways that enable them to thrive in and transform the world. The organization is unified in the mission to support school communities to create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments.

- Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) (<https://www.nextgenlearning.org/>) supports the educators who are reimagining public education. NGLC helps them apply knowledge about learning to school design, helps them live next gen learning professionally, and works with them to generate environments in which next gen learning can flourish.

Lessons Learned from Northern Cass

- A strategic plan built around a 5-year time period will cease to exist due to the changing world. Strategic plans should engage in a “3R” (review, rip, and revise) process on a yearly basis and be readopted as such.
- An operational plan brings a strategic plan to life and provides educators with accountability.
- A schedule should be the final part of the transformational shift as it can lead to a successful change.
- Learner and family engagement are necessary for a successful transformation. Redefining engagement is needed in order to make it an asset for a district.
- Partnerships “make the world go round.” Finding the right partners is key! Without them, this work is too challenging to build a sustainable model.

Reflection Questions for Leaders

1. How can you as a district or school leader ensure that resource allocation—across funding, personnel, and technology—is consistently aligned with the district’s vision for educational transformation?
2. How can your team involve families and learners more effectively in the transformation process to ensure their perspectives are integrated into planning and implementation?
3. What strategies can you use to regularly assess and adjust your operational plans to remain responsive to emerging trends and needs within your district?
4. How do you ensure that staffing practices reflect the district’s mission and values, and what new roles might be needed to support these transformative goals?
5. How can you strive to foster a culture of continuous improvement through data collection and analysis to support ongoing refinement of educational practices?

Summary

Realigning district operations with a transformative educational model is critical to ensuring that the new vision for teaching and learning is effectively implemented and sustained. At Northern Cass School District, this alignment is achieved through a comprehensive approach that includes strategic resource allocation, purposeful staffing, and continuous engagement with all stakeholders. The district has demonstrated that resource management—including funding, personnel, and technology—must be meticulously planned and aligned with the overarching goals of the transformation. This involves not only budgeting and financial oversight but also ensuring that every resource is utilized to support the new learning model effectively. Equally important is the alignment of staffing and professional development. By hiring individuals who are not only qualified but also deeply committed to the district's vision, and by providing ongoing professional learning, Northern Cass ensures that its staff is equipped to support and implement the personalized, competency-based learning system.

Furthermore, Northern Cass emphasizes the importance of engaging families and learners in the transformation process, recognizing that their input and involvement are vital for success. This engagement is facilitated through various strategies, including learner advisory councils, regular surveys, and inclusive planning processes. By fostering a collaborative environment where feedback is actively sought and acted upon, the district ensures that its educational practices remain relevant and responsive to the needs of its community. This holistic approach to realigning district operations underscores the need for a dynamic and responsive strategy that integrates every aspect of the educational system into the transformative vision.

Moving Forward

This guidebook on system-wide transformation at Northern Cass illustrates the rigorous yet rewarding journey of overhauling educational practices to better serve learners. Recognizing that transformation is inherently challenging, the guide emphasizes that true change demands unwavering commitment from all stakeholders—leadership, educators, families, and community partners.

Northern Cass exemplifies how a dedicated approach to realigning resources, redefining roles, and fostering inclusive engagement can lead to a learner-centered educational model that prepares students for a dynamic world. By embracing strategic partnerships, developing a shared language, and aligning district operations with their transformative vision, the school district demonstrates that substantial change, while demanding, is not only achievable but essential for creating impactful, learner-centered education. In a time when education is in flux, the guidebook highlights the importance of rewriting the narrative around education, showcasing how districts like Northern Cass are leading the way in shaping a future where learners are empowered to make a difference.

Transformation does not require consensus; it requires commitment. It requires commitment from leadership, certified educators, non-certified educators, learners, families, and businesses. Change can be hard; however, the right change can be fulfilling and lead to the creation of a learner-centered system which in turn creates remarkable human beings.



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The authors of this Guidebook are part of a Michigan Virtual team designed to empower educational leaders in navigating the complexities of educational leadership and drive change.

If you are a PK-12 school leader, ISD/RESA leader, or leader of another educational or non-profit organization, join us in cultivating an authentic organizational culture that thrives on innovation and continuous improvement!

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