



# LEARNING FOR ALL IS MARYLAND DISTRICT'S PRIORITY

BY PETER CARPENTER

**W**hen we think of professional learning, we usually mean growing educators' knowledge base, abilities, and mindsets for the purpose of benefiting students. But Harford County Public Schools in Maryland has reframed it with a much

broader scope. Professional learning is now called organizational development, reflecting the district's aim for everyone in all positions and levels to learn, grow, strive, and be the best that they can be.

To do this, we create learning opportunities for all staff. It's been a process to reach the point where we are now, and even though we've made

many strides in creating educational spaces for everyone, our work is not done. We are still creating learning opportunities where few existed before. The growth and development of all staff is an ongoing priority.

Our district didn't always take this approach, however. In the past, if someone in a clerical role wanted to

improve their Excel skills, for instance, we might have suggested they learn from a colleague or expand their learning by finding resources on their own. While helpful, it didn't necessarily communicate a supportive system.

Similarly, when we held monthly meetings with system leaders on the instructional and the operations sides, most of that instructionally centered content excluded the needs and priorities of many noninstructional staff.

While our district applauded all professional growth and made efforts to help everyone see their place in supporting instruction, we did not formally support personalized growth for all employees. In 2019, that changed.

### **BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION**

Harford County Public Schools is a midsized district, serving over 39,000 students and employing over 5,500 people. Like many school systems, our district's departments are divided into two main branches: the schools, which is further divided into elementary and secondary compartments, and the central office, which we call central services. Central services is subdivided into instructional leadership and enterprise leadership, otherwise known as operations or noninstructional work. All departments tend to be compartmentalized, each with its own leadership, goals, and purpose. Whether intentional or not, separating departments can denote and promote difference.

Previously, our district's professional learning primarily served educators and the instructional leaders of central services. Harford has had a long tenure of fostering strong learning through a variety of best practices linked to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. Some of these structures included:

- Instructional coaching models;
- Monthly personalized and

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differentiated instructional leadership meetings;

- Informal leadership onboarding processes; and
- Informal leadership overviews.

Our systems were effective, we felt, but as the baby boomer generation and Generation X employees began retiring, finding quality candidates to fill traditionally long-standing leadership roles throughout the organization has become more complex. The district needed to rethink how to attract, retain, and support the career growth of its staff and meet the changing needs of our workforce.

In 2019, while carrying several instructional roles in central services, I also became responsible for leadership development. I welcomed this shift both organizationally and professionally. My doctoral work had focused on leadership and innovation, so I was eager to shape that in my district.

This included creating a pipeline for prospective leaders as well as facilitating our monthly administrative and instructional leadership meetings. With my colleague Jackie Tarbert, the director of organizational development, I was eager to begin creating new structures and experiences for our leadership.

Since all my previous experiences were in the instructional realm, I naturally drew from great instructional leadership practices, but Tarbert challenged me to dig deeper and think bigger. What about *all* leadership?

What about *all* needs? What about ensuring that we not only support but collaborate with *everyone*? I dug into a variety of books on leadership to help spark ideas for our next steps.

Together with Tarbert and my team, we examined the existing organizational structure and realized we could do more to become what Peter Senge (2006) called a learning organization, wherein all departments of the organization should not only value learning but also make space for it. We wanted to develop a culture and means of learning for all.

### **EXAMINING OUR SYSTEM**

When we set out to assess whether learning is a pervasive value in our organization, we asked these questions:

- Are the schools, and those leading and teaching in them, learning?
- Are the central services, and those leading within them, learning?

To begin this shift, we began by imagining what it could be. In their book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2016) illustrate the purpose:

"Imagine so valuing the importance of developing people's capabilities that you design a culture that itself immersively sweeps every member of the organization into an ongoing developmental journey in the course of working every day. Imaging making the organization itself — and not separate, extra benefits — the incubator of capability" (p. 5).

What a challenge to think about creating space for every member of the organization to experience ongoing development. We decided to begin with developing language to articulate it. Guidara (2022) shares the purpose of language as a way to give intention to your institution, communicate your vision with others, and share your culture.



We began with three tasks:

- Develop leadership competencies that grounded the organization with shared understandings;
- Construct a compelling yet simple vision, mission, and values to work toward; and
- Determine our needs as a total organization.

### DEVELOP LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Each aspect of our organization has universal competencies to guide us. Regardless of position, everyone strives to provide quality service through emotionally intelligent behaviors, such as empathetic listening and listening to hear.

In thinking beyond the instructional leadership lens, we realized it was possible to look at

leadership competencies more globally. The competencies were drawn from Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, National Educational Leadership Preparation Program Recognition Standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Association of School Business Officials Professional Standards.

We investigated them from various organizational perspectives and conducted a crosswalk of patterns, which yielded patterns for leadership that were similar across frameworks. From them, we developed the HCPS Core Leadership Competencies (above).

A cross-functional team of senior-level leaders representing both the instructional and enterprise systems developed a framework that delineated standards for any system leader. The

competencies help focus and align the work we do with current leaders and support aspiring leaders. Our goal is to expand the use of these competencies to our hiring practices. Additionally, by breaking down the competencies into smaller skills, we also hope to pave the way for microcredentialing, thus increasing leadership access to specific avenues for personal growth.

### CONSTRUCT VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

Building a core vision, mission, and values that encapsulate the purpose of organizational development for an entire system was somewhat of a challenge. Kouzes and Posner (2017) talk about vision as the "aspiration of what the organization wants to accomplish," and note that it "gives individuals a connected sense of purpose" (p. 98).

## CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL TEAMS

Harford County Public Schools' cross-departmental teams work to determine and support professional learning and growth needs across the whole system.

**Administrator professional development advisory team:** This team includes members from schools, central services, and the enterprise side, facilitated by the supervisor of leadership development. The team's goals are to determine the needs for each level of leadership and project the proposed professional learning impact on each office. Designs for professional learning are brought to the team for feedback as are calendar items.

**Teacher professional development advisory team:** This group of instructional staff from across the system is facilitated by the supervisor of teacher induction and professional development. The team's goal is to determine the instructional needs for each school level and assess the impact of proposed professional learning for teachers. This team also reviews designs for professional learning.

**Clerical professional development advisory team:** Facilitated by the director of organizational development, this team's goal is to determine clerical professional learning needs and impact. New for our district, these offerings have been wildly popular. Typically, we provide virtual choice sessions twice a year.

**Enterprise advisory team:** The director of organizational development facilitates this team, which is a cross-section of enterprise staff. In its beginning stages, we are excited to see where our needs assessments will take this team. We are looking to equip our enterprise leadership with skills that will support succession planning and build leadership capabilities with our current staff.

For us, the vision of the office of organizational development and continuous learning is optimal learning for all. We aim to ensure everyone has access to high-quality professional learning.

Mission, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2017), is a reason for an organization's existence. Our mission is to lead, live, and love learning. Our values are simple: educate, elevate, and evaluate. While these values are cyclical, they are also interchangeable blocks that can be stacked in any way we need.

In all things we touch, we strive to enter the process from one of these values. Sometimes our task is to take an existing structure in the organization, learn about it (educate), consider its effectiveness (evaluate), and then take it to the next level (elevate).

We did this with our monthly meetings for all frontline leaders, including principals, central services staff, and senior staff. We took stock of the past structures (evaluate), studied other effective structures (educate), and then nuanced our existing structure (elevate).

We established monthly meeting greeters to welcome people, but we put a twist on it by inviting greeters outside the office of organizational development. Each month, we recruit two greeters from school and central services leadership. Once these greeters have completed their role, they are asked to find next month's greeters.

These interactions between people from different departments help establish a culture of mutual trust.

This practice has taken on a

life of its own, with greeters adding personalized touches to the assignment. One pair of principal greeters had kindergarten students write and illustrate positive thoughts on paper. At the meeting, they gave each arriving leader one of these handmade positive thoughts, which elevated the experience.

Now these sentiments can be found posted on walls all around our organization. What resulted, as we learned through our monthly evaluation surveys, was a more dynamic and engaging structure that administrators found satisfying and supportive.

In our office, we evaluate everything. To ensure that we regularly work toward optimal learning for all, we regularly ask our stakeholders how we are doing. Most of our surveys rate

overall session satisfaction. Over our two years of data collection, 97% of people in leadership surveyed were satisfied (24%) or highly satisfied (73%) with their experiences.

We ask participants to reflect and share what resonated (educate), the commitments they will make to their learning (elevate), as well as steps for continued growth on our part (evaluate). We always ask how they applied previous event learning to their contexts, which helps us assess whether the learning sticks (educate), while at the same time embedding soft accountability for that learning.

## DETERMINE NEEDS

Determining the learning needs of an organization is complex, layered work. It takes many minds gathering around core initiatives. Part of the role of our office is to determine the felt needs in the system as well as those needs that arise, which may be mission critical.

For example, most of our school and central services clerical staff have to provide flyers or distributed content but may not come to the job with experience creating these. We brought in a resident expert in the design program Canva to provide two levels of professional learning: one basic and the other on the program's artificial intelligence capabilities and translation services for communicating with families. Our clerical staff raved about these sessions in their survey data and requested even more additional professional learning.

We live our core value of "evaluate" in many different spaces, supported by a variety of cross-department teams. Facilitated by members of the office of organizational development and teacher induction and professional development, these

teams give guidance, support, and perspective to this systemwide work.

We list and understand our needs, and our core team facilitators meet biweekly to share what we've learned and build professional learning calendars and experiences for the system. We share these calendars and structures with senior staff and the superintendent, who provide insights into the structures moving forward.

## THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While the district is proud of the growth that we've accomplished in just two years, we know that we have much more growth ahead of us. Some of our next goals include:

### Leadership development:

Future U is our program focusing on preparing aspiring principals and assistant principals. Future U aims to equip our leaders with skills embedded in the HCPS Leadership Competencies. We plan to launch a teacher leader version of Future U in spring 2024 to provide a similar format to build leadership skills such as group facilitation skills, structures for data dialogue, and more. Beyond that, we hope to expand the Future U structure to include any employee who wishes to build their leadership capacity.

**Coaching cohorts:** Over the past two years, the district has partnered with a local institute of higher education to train select administrators and teacher leaders to become certified as International Coaching Federation coaches. At present, over 70 staff members throughout the organization have taken the first three courses in the process. Next, we will formally recognize and identify those coaches as official support for others who may be

new in their roles.

**Executive leadership:** As of yet, we do not formally prepare leaders for potential executive leadership but we have begun to have conversations on how to best prepare those interested in it.

We have made great strides in fulfilling our vision of "optimal learning for all" and agree with Kegan and Lahey, who say that "happiness is a process of human flourishing." Our goal is to ensure that optimal learning is the vehicle through which human flourishing occurs.

When we do so, we know that "a workplace built for flourishing stands shoulder-to-shoulder with a workplace built for well-being" (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). If our employees flourish in their roles, our students and stakeholders cannot help but flourish as well. And that is the goal of education.

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**Peter Carpenter (Peter.Carpenter@hcps.org) is director, organizational development and continuous learning at Harford County Public Schools. ■**