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BEFORE YOU **SOLVE IT**, YOU HAVE TO **NAME IT**:

Why Superintendents Need to "Get Real" About the Problem

By: Dana Godek, Michael Moore & Kirk Shrum[1]

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INTRODUCTION

BUYING A STANDING DESK BEFORE COUNTING YOUR DAILY STEPS WON'T MAKE YOU HEALTHIER, IT JUST MAKES YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE WORKING ON IT.

The same is true for school systems. Every year around this time, superintendents across the country feel the pressure to solve something: test scores are coming in, budget timelines are tight, and the political winds are shifting. But if you haven't clarified the actual problem, no solution - no matter how polished - will move your system forward.

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The superintendent's job has always been hard, but it has never been this public, politicized, or personal. Today's superintendents must navigate a drastically changed landscape—marked by increased political polarization, community skepticism, and national scrutiny over local school decisions. The role of the superintendent has changed profoundly over the past decade. Particularly since the 2016 election, superintendents have been pulled into national-level disputes over curriculum, diversity, social-emotional learning, public health, and school choice, issues that now dominate local board meetings and social media feeds.

This paper advocates for deep problem diagnosis as a method to equip superintendents, senior leaders, and boards with practical tools and processes to confront today's realities. We argue that superintendents will spend increasing amounts of time looking and engaging outward. Only then will they be ready to turn inward to activate the tools that turn the knowledge they've gained into actionable strategies. This executive leadership will require both windows - outward - and mirrors - inward. By understanding and applying these tools, superintendents can lead their districts with resilience, legitimacy, and political capital

THE IDENTITY CRISIS

THE JOB HAS CHANGED. HAVE WE?

The role of the school superintendent in the United States has evolved into one of the most demanding leadership roles found in any sector. Tasked not only with managing large and complex educational systems, superintendents now also find themselves navigating increasingly polarized political landscapes.

Four decades ago, two historians traced the origins of educational leadership back to the early 19th century, when school leaders were seen as “managers of virtue”.[2] They documented how these roles evolved over time, shifting throughout the 20th century into more bureaucratic and operational forms of management.The release of **A Nation at Risk**,[3] and even more so, the passage of **No Child Left Behind** [4] marked a turning point: “instructional leadership” became the central mission of district and school leaders. This shift was reinforced by new certification requirements, evaluation frameworks, state accountability systems, and billions in philanthropic funding. Today, nearly all superintendents and principals have been trained, and are expected, to lead with an instructional focus.

In the last decade the tides have shifted, leaving many superintendents feeling like they are stranded on a sandbar. Boards and board members are now political actors themselves. Sleepy public comment periods have turned into raucous crowds and early adjournments. Social media posts and comments bring visibility to issues that used to be addressed in the moment but now take days and weeks of clean-up. Success in this climate requires political acumen and the ability to manage competing values while maintaining the system’s focus on student results.

50-70%

OF A SUPERINTENDENT'S TIME IS NOW SPENT NAVIGATING POLITICAL DYNAMICS

In 2022, the Holdsworth Center released a thoughtful and provocative report on the current role of superintendents: ***Beyond Impossible***.[5] The report describes how superintendents must shed familiar practices and mindsets as they take on broader, more externally facing responsibilities. It underscores the tension many leaders feel between the role they were prepared for and the realities they now face.

The report reveals a striking pattern: many superintendents are grappling with identity dissonance. Trained and promoted for their success as instructional leaders, they now find that 50–70% of their time is spent navigating political dynamics leaving them feeling disconnected from classrooms and the core work of teaching and learning. The shift from “I do the work” to “I enable others to do the work” can feel disorienting. This tension is often amplified by board members, cabinet leaders, and principals who continue to expect the superintendent to serve as the system’s lead instructional voice.

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[1] Godek & Moore are strategic advisors to ***District Administration***. Kirk Shrum is Superintendent of Visalia. Unified School District in California. The authors are grateful to superintendents who provided quotes or background information for this report.

[2] Tyack, D., & Hansot, E. (1982). ***Managers of virtue: Public school leadership in America, 1820–1980***. Basic Books.

[3] National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. U.S. Department of Education

[4] U.S. Congress. (2002). No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425

[5] Whorton, L. (2022). Beyond impossible: The superintendency in American public education. The Holdsworth Center.

This Holdsworth Center report offers invaluable insights and is a must-read for superintendents, cabinet members, and board members alike. Yet, since its publication in 2022, seismic shifts continue to proliferate: political, economic, demographic, and the rapid advancement of the **Singularity**.[6]

These shifts demand not only new skills but new orientations. Superintendents must become both mirrors - reflecting on the internal structures, habits, and assumptions of their own systems - and windows - constantly scanning the external landscape for community needs and public narratives. Leaders need the capacity to look inward for coherence and outward for relevance. The most effective superintendents operate in both directions, often in the same week, meeting internal budget deadlines while managing public controversy at a town hall.

The following identity shifts reflect that dual gaze:

FROM 'INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER'	TO ‘COMMUNITY LEADER’
Focuses on student outcomes	Focuses on system health and equity
Leads within schools and classrooms	Leads across organizations and communities
Prioritizes curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Prioritizes trust, legitimacy, and shared purpose
Engages mostly with educators	Engages with broad stakeholder networks
Relies on internal expertise and authority	Builds external coalitions and political capital
Solves immediate instructional problems	Shapes long-term strategy through diagnosis and alignment

[7] Diliberti, M. K., & Schwartz, H. L. (2023). American School District Panel: Spring 2023 survey results. RAND Corporation

[8] Council of the Great City Schools. (2025). Urban district superintendents: Characteristics, tenure, and salaries (Ninth report) Washington, DC: Author

RAND’s 2023 data show superintendents ranking political interference as the most stressful aspect of their role—outranking funding and staffing concerns.[7] Political volatility around curricula, race, health policy, and library content has reframed the superintendent as a frontline civic figure.

Just last month, the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) issued its annual report on the state of the urban superintendency which confirms **Beyond Impossible**’s central findings.[8] CGCS found that, “Over the past two decades…superintendents must now balance fiscal responsibilities, stakeholder expectations, and political scrutiny.” They add, “Superintendents today are caught between governance volatility and community trust,” which leads 88% of urban superintendents to cite polarization as their top stressor.

Holdsworth portrays the superintendent not as a master technician, but as a system-level change agent. The shift from internal instructional expert to externally facing civic CEO is profound. Veteran superintendents interviewed by Holdsworth described feeling “off-mission,” missing the daily connection to school life. Leading effectively in this new context demands intentional identity reconstruction - redefining purpose around system-wide impact rather that day-to-day proximity to students and teachers.

To minimize the impact of community polarization and to build a system-level approach, Visalia Superintendent Kirk Shrum focused the board on creating a shared vision around core beliefs and commitments and then establishing protocols for handling concerns. Through a series of workshops the board also created five-year academic goals to drive system accountability. These efforts created the conditions for a politically diverse board to focus on student learning with increased understanding of their role in the district's success. Within two years the board was recognized as the California Schools Boards Governance Team Of the Year.

REPLACE SPEED WITH CLARITY

Recently, the Conference Board invited 155 superintendents and 89 business executives to identify the cognitive capacities they most valued when hiring executive leaders. The results revealed a telling disconnect: while superintendents ranked problem solving as the number one skill, business leaders ranked problem identification as number one, and placed problem solving all the way down at number eight.

This divergence speaks volumes. In the private sector, identifying the right problem is seen as the highest form of leadership. In education, the pressure to act quickly and visibly often overrides the slower, more reflective work of diagnosing the real issue. In today's climate of uncertainty, including proposals to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, superintendents are being pulled toward fast fixes.

Too often, superintendents are expected to deliver quick solutions to complex challenges without having the time or support to fully define and understand the underlying problems. Running scenarios to identify the highest priority problem is more important than designing solutions..

For example, at Berkeley County School District in South Carolina, leaders chose to begin their fiscal strategy work not with spreadsheets, but with stakeholders. With nearly 40,000 students, nine high schools, Berkeley is the fourth-largest school district in the state. The district has made its values clear: students are more than data points, standardized tests won't be the only measure of success, and innovation—through STEAM, multiage classrooms, and competency-based grading—is a pillar of instructional practice.

Faced with fiscal challenges, the leadership team didn't default to across-the-board cuts or quick wins. Instead, they launched a deliberate process of stakeholder listening, engaging teachers, support staff, and community members across the district to understand where dollars were working—and where they weren't. Through this process, they surfaced deeper patterns: overlapping programs, redundant services, and investments that didn't align with their instructional priorities.

> “In the Berkeley County School District, we believe budgeting is about more than numbers—it’s about priorities, people, and purpose. We knew that if we wanted to create a truly student-centered strategy, we had to start by listening. That meant engaging voices from every corner of our district—Board of Trustees, school leaders, teachers, staff, families, and community members—so our decisions would reflect not just our financial realities, but our shared values. This process, although not a formal one, wasn’t always easy, but it was necessary. And because we took the time to understand the full picture, we’re now better positioned to invest in what matters most: the growth and success of every child we serve.” - Anthony S. Dixon, EdD, Superintendent, Berkeley County School District

What could have been a tense and transactional budget conversation became a strategic and community-backed effort to redesign resource allocation. Because Berkeley led with problem identification, their decisions reflected not just fiscal responsibility, but local values. The result? A smarter, more trusted, and more sustainable path forward.

SOLVE THE CAUSE, NOT THE PROBLEM

The field of improvement science reminds us: solutions should only come after root causes are surfaced and verified. Yet in the fast pace of district leadership, this discipline often gets skipped.

Frameworks such as Carnegie’s Improvement Science model,[9] the Five Whys technique,[10] and Deming’s PDSA cycle,11 all prioritize problem identification as the critical first step, yet they also emphasize the critical process of engagement; paramount for responsive ‘naming’ as a superintendent in 2025 and beyond.

In Learning to Improve,[12] the authors emphasize that “getting better at getting better” requires leaders to treat problems as hypotheses - tentative and testable - not as assumptions. A hypothesis says, “This might be true, and we’ll learn more”; an assumption says, “I know enough to act.” When leaders skip the discipline of accurate, comprehensive problem framing, even the most promising improvement strategies will fail to take hold.

Superintendents can borrow from the field of strategic foresight by applying scenario thinking not just to solution design, but to problem definition. For example, rather than asking, “How might we improve our math scores?” they might ask a broad group of stakeholders, “What are the three most likely causes of underperformance, and what evidence supports each one?” This subtle shift invites deeper, more honest dialogue and often prevents costly misdiagnoses.

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[9] Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (2017). Improvement science in education: A primer. Author
[10] Ohno, T. (1988). Toyota production system: Beyond large-scale production (Y. Bodek, Trans.). Productivity Press.
[11] Deming, W.E. (1986). Out of the crisis. MIT Press.
[12] Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). Learning to improve: How America’s schools can get better at getting better. Harvard Education Press.

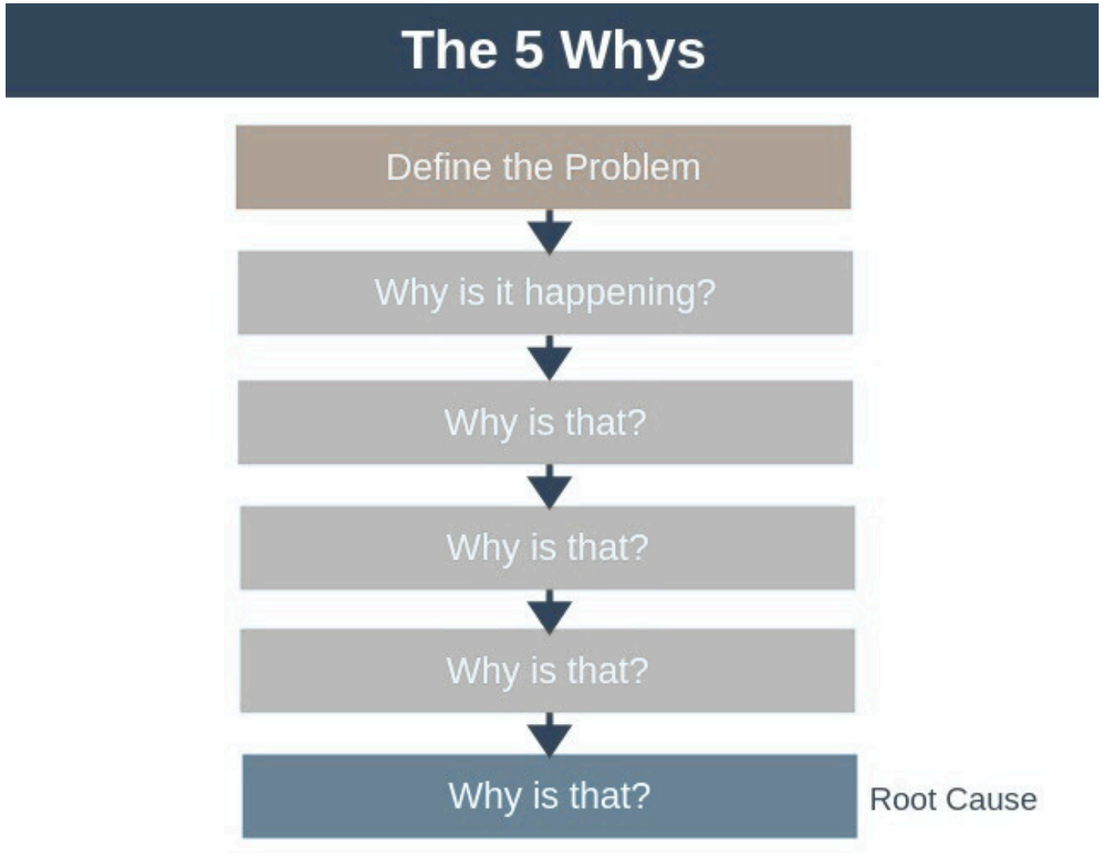
Adaptive leadership frameworks such as ***Leadership on the Line***[13] reinforce this approach: leaders must learn to "get on the balcony" to gain strategic perspective while staying grounded on "the dance floor" through empathy and connection.

TOOLS FOR IDENTIFICATION

Root cause analysis The Five Whys, fishbone diagrams, and empathy interviews are standard analysis tools. Their value lies in engaging multiple perspectives and testing hypotheses. Yet few superintendent preparation programs embed these practices. When adopted in education—as in Fresno Unified School District's continuous improvement model—such tools enable alignment between strategy and root causes.

As Fresno USD tackled its college access challenges, it blended three distinct approaches. First, it used traditional methods, including a data dashboard with 75 indicators to drive focused decision-making. Second, it embraced flexible planning through Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles, allowing for prototype testing and mid-course adjustments. Finally, it adopted a purpose-driven strategy by developing a competency tool that both prepared students for college admissions and generated data to continuously refine the initiative's action steps.

The Five Whys The "Five Whys" technique, developed by Toyota founder Sakichi Toyoda, is a simple yet powerful tool for uncovering root causes. By repeatedly asking "Why?" (five times is typical, but not a rule), leaders dig below surface-level symptoms to understand the deeper issue.



Example: Problem: Students are consistently late to the first period.
1. Why? — Because the buses arrive after the bell.
2. Why? — Because the new bus route was extended.
3. Why?—Because we added students from a distant neighborhood.
4. Why?—Because we consolidated routes to save costs.
5. Why?—Because the transportation budget was cut.

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[13] Heifetz, R.A., & Linsky M. (2002) Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading. Harvard Business Review Press.

Now the real issue isn't "lazy students"—it's a budget decision that impacted operations. Note that using the Five Whys to create a causal chain is sometimes challenging because people brainstorm a set of excuses instead of naming that 'x led to y; y led to z.' The Five Whys creates space to challenge assumptions and leads to more effective solutions.

Eric Ries offers an interesting turn on this protocol. Traditionally, the analysis leads the team to see the final 'why' as the root cause. Ries argues that because each of the 'whys' was originally named as one cause, you should make a "proportional investment" in each of the whys to ensure that you have addressed everything causing the problem.

The Four Frames

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model14 provides a comprehensive lens to understand large scale organizational leadership. The model offers four frames:

1. **Structural Frame** - Focuses on roles, responsibilities, and policies.
2. **Human Resource Frame** - Emphasizes relationships, needs, and skills.
3. **Political Frame** - Centers on power, conflict, and competition.
4. **Symbolic Frame** - Deals with culture, symbols, and meaning.

Effective leaders navigate all four frames, especially the political and symbolic, to identify, understand, and address complex challenges.. We see this in Superintendent Pedro Martinez's work in San Antonio ISD, where attention to the political and symbolic frames led to a clearer vision and a reset public narrative about the school system. Those shifts built a coalition for long-term transformation. For today's superintendent, strategic communication, stakeholder mapping, and narrative leadership are not add-ons—they are survival skills.

While many educational leaders are well-versed in the Structural Frame, which emphasizes goals, data, procedures, and resource alignment, they often underutilize the other three. In today's environment, mastery of all four frames is essential, especially the Political and Symbolic.

Here's how each frame applies to the superintendent role:

Frame	Focus	Superintendent Role
Structural	**Rules, roles, policies, resources alignment**	**Designing clear accountability systems, staffing plans, and instructional initiatives**
Human Resource	**People, relationships, motivation, and capacity building**	**Coaching principals, building team trust, and creting feedback-rich environments**
Political	**Power dynamics, competing interests, coalition building**	**Navigating board relationships, advocacy, negotiation, and community trust-building**
Symbolic	**Culture, meaning, rituals, public narrative**	**Articulating vision, modeling values, telling compelling stories, and shaping school identity**

Most superintendent programs emphasize technical expertise and instructional leadership, rooted in the Structural frame. However, surviving and succeeding in today's polarized, high-stakes climate requires the political instincts of a strategist and the symbolic presence of a civic leader.

When a school board meeting turns into a public reckoning on book bans or DEI policies, the leader who can't move beyond data and policy will falter. Success hinges on the strength of the logic, power of the story, coalition, and the perceived legitimacy of the leader. Here's some practical advice about using the four frames:

- When launching a major initiative, ask: "Which frames am I using? Which am I neglecting?" Write it down.
- In times of conflict, lean into the Political frame: Who holds power? Who needs reassurance? Write it down.
- In times of transition, amplify the Symbolic frame: What stories, ceremonies, or artifacts could align people emotionally? Write it down.

Carnegie's Improvement Science

Improvement Science is a method developed by the Carnegie Foundation to help educators address complex, recurring problems through inquiry and testing. Instead of rushing to fix symptoms, this model encourages leaders to treat problems as hypotheses.

The process includes six core principles:
1. Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.
2. Focus on variation in performance.
3. See the system that produces the current outcomes.
4. Embrace measurement for learning.
5. Anchor practice in disciplined inquiry.
6. Accelerate learning through networked improvement communities.

In practice, this means district leaders study why a challenge exists (e.g., student absenteeism), test small changes (e.g., texting parents reminders), measure the impact, and refine before scaling. It's slow work—but it builds sustainable change.

Carnegie's work is a variation on Deming's Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model:
Plan: Identify a change and predict its impact. Design a test.
Do: Try the change on a small scale.
Study: Measure what happened and compare it to your prediction.
Act: Decide whether to adopt, adapt, or abandon the change.

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholder mapping is a strategic tool that helps superintendents and leadership teams visualize, prioritize, and engage the individuals or groups who influence—or are influenced by—a problem. Used early in the problem identification process, it ensures that decisions are not made in isolation or based solely on internal assumptions.
A well-designed stakeholder map allows leaders to:

- Identify who holds key information, perspectives, or lived experience relevant to the issue
- Understand each stakeholder's level of influence and interest in the problem
- Prioritize engagement methods: inform, consult, involve, or collaborate

For example, when exploring causes of chronic absenteeism, a district might map stakeholders such as students, parents, bus drivers, teachers, school nurses, and community liaisons —each offering unique insights into the root causes. This approach aligns with improvement science's principle of making work user-centered and problem-specific.

A common approach for mapping is to use a 2x2 matrix:

- High Influence / High Interest (e.g., school board members): engage deeply and regularly
- High Influence / Low Interest (e.g., union reps not yet focused on the issue): keep informed
- Low Influence / High Interest (e.g., parents, students): consult actively to surface blind spots
- Low Influence / Low Interest: monitor and engage as needed

In its 'Facilitative Leadership' model, Interaction Associates adds an additional element that we have found useful in our work: "What would a win look like?" For example, a 'win' for parents in the absenteeism scenario above might be as simple as, "The school stops calling me." Collecting and weighting wins can help with the design and testing of prototype solutions.
Reflective practice

One of the first things to go, when time is tight is reflection. It is, of course, absolutely critical to sense-making and the generation of options. Reflection can become habitual, not episodic. To keep your team grounded in disciplined problem identification, ask:

What is the evidence that this is actually a problem?

- What would solving it truly change—systemically?
- Who has already attempted to solve this, and what can we learn from their results?
- How are our current systems, structures, processes, and practice contributing to and sustaining this problem?
- How can we reduce the power of or remove those barriers?

These questions create space for upstream thinking, community voice, and aligned decision-making. Remember that movement without clarity is motion sickness, not momentum.

For cabinet members and senior leaders

- Actively observe and learn about the political environment and share your perspective
- Lengthen your time horizon to connect with the superintendent's vision and strategies, not just current and pressing work
- Focus on your function, without becoming an island (see Lencioni's Team One for a strong approach to this)
- Support and learn from your colleagues

For communities and policy leaders:
Elevate superintendent voice in civic leadership forums - Redesign preparation programs with focus on enterprise leadership - Invest in systems for stakeholder engagement and trust building.

For school boards: -

- Clarify and monitor governance roles to reduce micromanagement
- Whenever possible use a 3-5 year time horizon when discussing annual planning (e.g., budgets, staffing, instructional improvement)
- Support strategic, not just informational, communication efforts
- Provide political cover and public support for adaptive decisions

A CALL TO LEAD DIFFERENTLY

The job has changed. So must the way we lead.

Superintendents are no longer the lone problem solvers at the top of the hierarchy. Today's most effective leaders pause, scan the community context, surface the real challenge and bring others into the process of making sense of it. They understand that the illusion of decisiveness can be more dangerous than temporary uncertainty. And they know that durable progress begins not with a solution, but with a shared understanding of the problem.

These are also good strategies for leaders to apply directly with their boards. How effective leaders are in building a unified governance team will determine the success of district initiatives . A strong school system is directly dependent on this factor.
This is the time to trade speed for clarity, performance for learning, and isolation for coalition. The tools are here: improvement science, scenario planning, stakeholder mapping. But the real work isn't technical—it's adaptive. It requires leaders to shed old identities, confront uncomfortable truths, and step fully into the role of civic strategist and steward.

So here's your charge:

- Understand the problem before addressing it.
- Define leadership through questions,not by just answers.
- Treat resistance as data.
- Build credibility by engaging others in diagnosis.
- And above all, lead in a way that matches the complexity of the role you now hold, not the one you were once trained for.

The standing desk won't make you healthy. And your next initiative won't fix your district unless you've clarified the challenge it's meant to address.
Start there. Stay there. And bring others with you. Because motion without clarity isn't leadership: it's noise. And your communities need more than that. They need you.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

This quick-reference guide summarizes core diagnostic tools introduced in the report, along with practical applications for each in a district context.

Tool	Purpose	Best Used For	District Example
Five Whys	Root cause analysis by asking “Why?” iteratively to drill down into causes	Chronic issues like absenteeism, safety, scheduling	Understand why first-period tardiness persists despite new bell schedules
Carnegie Improvement Science or PDSA Cycle	Continuous improvement via structured testing and feedback	Piloting instructional shifts, engagement strategies	Test new parent communication strategy before district-wide rollout
Stakeholder Mapping	Visualizing who has power, interest, and influence in a given issue	Planning for controversial change or messaging	Map stakeholders before announcing school consolidations
Scenario Planning	Anticipating possible futures to inform flexible, proactive decisions	Budget planning, enrollment trends, political challenges	Prepare multiple fiscal paths based on different state funding forecasts
Time Audit	Analyze how leadership time is allocated to internal vs. external demands	Clarifying misalignment between role and leadership goals	Discover that 70% of the week is spent on operations, not strategic engagement

30-DAY PRACTICE CHALLENGE

Leaders often leave reports like this one inspired, but unsure how to start. This 30-Day Practice Challenge offers low-lift, high-impact actions aligned to the report's core message: diagnose before you solve.

Week 1: Ground Your Time in Strategy

- Conduct a time audit: How much of your week is spent reacting vs. leading?
- Block two hours weekly for reflection, stakeholder engagement, or strategic thought—non-negotiable.

Week 2: Begin with Diagnosis

- Choose a nagging issue (e.g., staff burnout, low math scores). Use the Five Whys with your cabinet.
- Share findings with a trusted peer or mentor. Ask, "Are we solving the right problem?"

Week 3: Expand Who's at the Table

- Map your stakeholders for one key decision.
- Host one listening session with an underrepresented group (e.g., students, support staff, disengaged families).

Week 4: Model the Shift

- At your next leadership meeting, narrate a time when you misdiagnosed the problem—and what you learned.
- Encourage others to bring "problem statements," not "solutions" for early-stage feedback.

After 30 days, reflect:

- What shifted in how I lead?
- What became easier? What was uncomfortable?
- What do I want to continue?