

# Action Guide for System Leaders

As we learned in [The Opportunity Makers](#), trajectory-changing schools invest in belonging, consistency, and coherence to create a powerful baseline experience for all young people. This guide helps school system leaders support trajectory-changing learning experiences at scale.

## The Case for System Support

In our research, we found trajectory-changing schools but no trajectory-changing school systems. Too often, the schools achieved outstanding results despite their district and state environments, rather than with their aligned support. School-by-school efforts are not enough; we must create school systems capable of producing trajectory-changing learning experiences at scale. This includes three focus areas:

- **Belonging:** Schools create an emotional climate for learning, activating students' ability to excel.
- **Consistency:** Schools deliver consistently good teaching and grade-level content for all students.
- **Coherence:** Schools build a unified instructional program and set priorities that are clear to all.

Successful systems explicitly prioritize and resource these three focus areas, evaluate the current state, and clear obstacles for schools. Then leaders invest in a few highly focused policies or initiatives to get all schools moving in the same direction.

## Reorient to the Student Experience

The entire school system must anchor decisions in a deep understanding of young people, their families, and their communities. Instead of looking at learning only in eight-month testing increments, we must consider the needs of the whole human who will be in the school system through age 18 and beyond.

District-level planning often starts from assumptions about students and caregivers. Decisions tend to focus on short-term learning gains, anchored in resource constraints or the rollout of individual programs. Instead, every policy and initiative must consider the long-term implications for young people, particularly those furthest from opportunity, and improve their experience across the PK–12 continuum.

## Ask students and caregivers about belonging, consistency, and coherence.

System leaders should work to understand to what extent young people and their caregivers experience belonging, consistency, and coherence at school. We suggest collecting student input with surveys or focus groups. School systems tend to have some survey data on belonging, but less on consistency or coherence. To begin, leaders can draw from the following student survey items:

### Belonging:

- My teachers make me feel like I belong.
- I feel supported by my school.
- People at my school care about me.
- When I feel like giving up, my teachers ask me to keep trying.

### Consistency:

- My teachers expect that I will succeed, even on challenging assignments.
- My teachers take time to make sure I understand what we are learning in class.
- I have to really think about my math assignments, not just use problem-solving tricks.
- My teachers expect me to be able to explain my thinking in writing.

## Coherence:

- I know what I need to do to be successful in my classes.
- My teachers show us how the work we are doing connects to my real life.
- The extra support I get in small groups helps me to be ready for the lessons my teacher teaches to the whole class.

For a more comprehensive assessment, leaders can consider TNTP's [Insight Survey](#), which collects student and caregiver input on the learning environment, as well as teacher and leader perceptions.

## Evaluate the current state of learning.

How effective is the current system at changing the academic trajectories of all students? Leaders should review longitudinal student achievement data to understand who the school system is serving effectively and to pinpoint gaps. It's important to use multiple measures to understand the current and historical nature of academic progress in the system. Sample areas for analysis appear below:

- **In our school system, when a student falls behind, how often do they catch up?** Do students who start out below grade level grow closer to grade level over time?
- **Which students are furthest from opportunity?** This could be demographic groups, groups of students behind grade level, or students who have less access to trajectory-changing schools.
- **Do our schools use trajectory-changing practices?** If you have not already, take TNTP's [Baseline Assessment](#). In your answers, consider the average school in your system.
- **How do our systemwide policies and practices** enhance or detract from belonging, consistency, and coherence?

## Set Clear Goals and Invest Leaders, Teachers, and Students in Them

School systems are often data-rich but lack a small set of clear, actionable goals. They have ambitious visions that capture their long-term aspirations for students and families but not the clarity or specificity to mobilize focused action. Instead, leaders juggle a broad set of metrics and priorities that may conflict or compete for resources. Assessment data is overwhelming at best; at worst it points in totally different directions.

Trajectory-changing schools set a clear definition for academic success, typically anchored in a strong instructional vision and a core assessment or achievement metric for a particular set of students. For example, leaders at Van Buskirk Elementary believe that literacy is the key to unlocking learning in all subjects, so they focus on a singular goal: Every student will read on grade level by middle school.

In a similar spirit, system leaders must articulate clear goals for the student experience systemwide and choose a core set of instructional and student learning metrics to measure progress. At the system level, this might look like an intentional focus on early reading in all elementary schools, with a primary student achievement measure to track year-over-year growth rather than point-in-time proficiency.

## Remove Barriers to a Consistent, Coherent Instructional Approach

At the system level, one of the most powerful things leaders can do is clear obstacles for schools to promote belonging, consistency, and coherence. Issues often stem from a lack of shared vision, shifting priorities, siloed departments, and disjointed educator development efforts. This is not by design. Often, school systems move from one initiative to another, searching for quick wins or ready-made solutions. But this can disrupt educational experiences and unintentionally promote instructional incoherence.

System leaders can begin by analyzing barriers and identifying the existence of the conditions that promote belonging and make coherent, consistent instruction possible.

- **Barriers to belonging** include exclusionary policies in school, like academic tracking, punitive and harmful student disciplinary actions, and policies that discourage teacher retention.
- **Barriers to consistency** often stem from frequent changes to instructional philosophy or materials. This could look like inconsistent use of learning standards or inequitable distribution of curriculum materials or training across schools (e.g., schools or regional leads can choose what materials or training to use without sufficient guardrails).
- **Barriers to coherence** often come from frequent changes to policies or system mandates (e.g., districts use a suite of assessments that all test different things and cause confusion about next steps). It can also be caused by uncoordinated training initiatives from different departments (e.g., the academics team trains teachers on a curriculum while the talent team trains separately on a teaching framework).

**Resource:**

[Conditions for Coherence Self-Assessment](#) (TNTP)

## Invest in a High-Impact Strategy to Catalyze Change

Once barriers are cleared, system leaders should be extremely judicious about adding new initiatives. New efforts must be focused, explicitly prioritized, and thoughtfully sequenced to build on what's come before. Leaders should select a narrow entry point and invest in a single policy or initiative that reinforces the focus area and gets multiple schools moving in the same direction. Example initiatives include:

- **Belonging:** Systems can establish belonging as a system priority and create the conditions for it at the school level. This includes investing in school leader development to help leaders understand the assets of their school and community and take steps to build a belonging-rich environment.
- **Consistency:** Adopt or implement a curriculum with high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) in priority subject areas. This is the most direct way to ensure that all students have access to consistent, grade-level learning opportunities. Leaders must invest in sustained educator training and support to ensure those materials are used well.
- **Coherence:** Audit materials and assessments to ensure they align across all tiers of instruction, rather than being selected in silos (e.g., the teaching and learning team selects Tier 1 curriculum and the special education team selects Tier 3 materials). System leaders must ensure that the core curriculum and supplemental support connect across classes, and that the assessments and data from online software tell the same story about student progress.

## Monitor Progress and Manage Change

It takes time to create meaningful changes in belonging, consistency, and coherence that ultimately raise student achievement. Too often, school systems swing from one initiative to the next, rarely allowing enough time to measure progress. To buck long-term trends, leaders must back any changes up with resources and a commitment to a change management process that lets the improvements take hold.

To evaluate progress, the initial stages of implementation should focus on inputs or leading indicators. For example, in the first year of HQIM implementation, leaders often monitor the percentage of classrooms using the curriculum, based on classroom observations and student work analysis. Over time, systems can monitor metrics on access and outcomes to understand which students have access to trajectory-changing experiences and how they are responding to the changes.

With this focused data and approach, systems can learn and adjust as necessary to improve the student experience. Once they know what's working, they can scale improvements to increase equitable access and opportunity throughout the school system.

## About TNTP

As a leading education nonprofit, TNTP works side by side with educators, system leaders, and communities across 39 states and more than 6,000 districts nationwide to reach ambitious goals for student success. Our vision pushes beyond school walls, catalyzing cross-sector collaboration to create pathways for young people to achieve academic, economic, and social mobility. Read more at [tntp.org/makers-connect](https://tntp.org/makers-connect)

## Terms of Use

These tools and resources are provided for informational or educational use only and are not intended as a service. Unless otherwise indicated, the resources provided on the Educator Toolkit are licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial License](#) and are subject to the copyright rules under that license.

Commercial use of the materials is not allowed without explicit written permission from TNTP, Inc. Unless otherwise noted, any distribution of materials posted on this website must credit TNTP, Inc. as follows:

From the Opportunity Makers Toolkit (2024) by TNTP, Inc., available at <https://tntp.org/toolkit/the-opportunity-makers-toolkit/>

Permission to copy, use, and distribute materials as described above shall not extend to information housed on the Educator Toolkit and credited to other sources, or information on websites to which this site links.