Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students

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Prepared by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement for the Principal Professional Learning Community, as part of the Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative
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For the most part, principals want to know: What does shaping a vision of academic success for all students look like in practice? What do effective principals actually do as they facilitate four key processes for effectively leading vision work with stakeholders? How do they enact the effective practices that guide this important work? In response to feedback from our colleagues and reflection on our original work, *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Roadmap of Key Processes and Effective Practices*, we offer this *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Leader Guide*.

In order to address these important questions, we include four elements:

1) **A Key Process for Shaping a Vision,**
2) **Related Effective Practices,**
3) **A Leader Story,** and
4) **Self-Reflection Questions - for School Leaders and for District Leaders.**

The Self-Reflection Questions for School Leaders are designed to help school leaders reflect on their individual practice against the effective practices outlined and demonstrated through the Leader Story. The Self-Reflection Questions for District Leaders invite district leaders to think about how district resources and support can be leveraged to create the conditions needed for principals to develop the capacity to lead vision work successfully.

We invite you to read and share our Leader Stories and to reflect upon the Self-Reflection Questions in hopes that this guide will further illuminate your path of how to effectively shape a shared vision of academic success for all students. We hope the Leader Guide also encourages you to revisit or read for the first time our Early Win tool, *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Roadmap of Key Processes and Effective Practices*, for further guidance. As you engage your school teams in vision setting and related professional learning, we encourage you to leverage both of these tools.

Both tools were developed as part of The Wallace Foundation Principal Pipeline Initiative in the Principal Professional Learning Community facilitated by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, Inc. (GLISI).

This Early Win tool, or roadmap, was created for principals, by principals. The tool also captured a set of effective practices or step-by-step guidance and examples to guide aspiring principals, novice principals, and any leader new to shaping a vision of academic success for all students. As members of a Principal Professional Learning Community sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, we had an opportunity to share our Early Win tool and to seek feedback from other principal colleagues across six districts engaged in The Wallace Foundation Principal Pipeline Initiative (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Denver Public Schools, Gwinnett County Public Schools, Prince George’s County Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, and Hillsborough County Public Schools). Our colleagues provided valuable input about what else would be helpful for principals, aspiring principals and novice principals who seek guidance in how to shape a shared school vision for high performing students and adults.
Acknowledgments

Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Leader Guide was prepared as a resource for principals, by principals. It is intended to be a guide for school leaders who want to shape a school vision of academic success for all students. This Leader Guide was prepared as part of the Principal Professional Learning Community (PLC), with support from The Wallace Foundation. Our work was facilitated by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). It is the second resource developed and serves to accompany Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Roadmap of Key Processes and Effective Practices. The following principals were members of the PLC, as well as authors of Leader Stories in the sections listed with their names:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, NC
John LeGrand, David W. Butler High School, Casting
Beth Thompson, Whitewater Academy and Middle School Campus, Communicating & Branding

Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO
Jeannie Peppel, John F. Kennedy High, Sustaining
Zachary Rahn, Ashley Elementary, Communicating & Branding

Gwinnett County Public Schools, Suwanee, GA
Susan Bearse, Berkeley Lake Elementary, Implementing
Eddie Maresh, Creekland Middle, Casting

Prince George’s County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, MD
Carla Furlow, Montpelier Elementary, Sustaining
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William Bassell, Academy of American Studies, Communicating & Branding
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Additional individuals who helped to make this Leader Guide possible include the project group facilitator and contributing author, Gale Hulme, CEO/Executive Director, GLISI; the project group reporter and reviewer, Chandra Young Walker, Director, Leadership Development, Gwinnett County Public Schools; the graphic designer, Betsy Charron; and contributing author Mikel Royal, Pipeline Initiative (PPI) Project Director, Denver Public Schools.
Casting the Vision

One of the most important responsibilities of any leader is establishing a vision and inviting others to share in its development.

What are the action steps that a principal can take in order to successfully develop and cast a school vision? Effective practices include:

1. **Soliciting** input from all staff members and district/school stakeholders on the core values to be included in the school vision statement

2. **Collaborating** with the School Leadership Team (SLT) to draft a school vision statement based on input gathered from various stakeholders

3. **Presenting** a draft of the vision statement to all staff in order to allow for revision and discussion

4. **Unveiling** the school vision statement to all stakeholders in order to ensure awareness of the intended direction for the school over the next 3-5 years

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1 In education, the term "stakeholder" typically refers to anyone who is invested in the welfare and success of a school and its students, including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, parents, families, community members, local business leaders, and elected officials such as school board members, city councilors, and state representatives (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).
Congratulations! You’ve just been named the principal of the largest middle school in Gwinnett County. That was the phone message I received shortly after the Board of Education meeting in February of 2011. As I listened on the line, I was filled with both excitement and anxiety. The next morning I would be introduced to the faculty and have a chance to address them. What would I tell them? How would I share my vision for Creekland Middle School?

I would not officially take over until the summer. “Don’t Move the Garbage Cans!” I remember hearing that advice for new principals. While it was partly in jest, the message was clear. Don’t try to do too much your first year and thoughtfully assess what needs to be changed. Over the next couple of months, I began reading the accountability reports and gaining knowledge about the school. I invited teachers to meet with me. I met with both groups and individuals. I sent a survey out to the entire staff. One of the questions asked was, “Does Creekland have a clear, compelling vision?” The answer to this question was troubling. Nobody knew what the vision was or even where to find it. There was a mission statement that was widely published: “Learning for All.” However, not having a clear vision opened the door to do much more than just moving the garbage cans.

Creekland Middle School opened in 1996 to much fanfare and media attention. With over 3,000 students it opened as one of the largest middle schools in the country. Fifteen years later Creekland, much like the rest of the area, had grown more diverse and more economically challenged. The opening of a new school down the road had reduced its number to a more manageable 2,200. While it was still known as a large school, it did not have a clear identity for the type of school it wanted to be.

That summer I met with the School Leadership Team (SLT). This team consisted of teacher leaders representing all areas of the school. It was clear that they were eager to move forward with drafting a new vision for the school. We engaged in a values activity developed by James Kouzes and Barry Pozner developers of The Leadership Challenge. We analyzed the data and looked at where we were as a school. Facing the “brutal facts”

Self-Reflection Questions

**School Leaders**

- Why is it important to solicit input from key stakeholders?
- How does collaboration with the School Leadership Team help advance the school’s vision?
- Once the vision statement is adopted, how will it be unveiled to the entire school community, including parents, students, and the district?
- How will you ensure that you move the vision forward without upsetting respected traditions that have evolved in the school?

**District Leaders**

- How does the district communicate the importance of aligning the school vision to the district vision?
- What role, if any, does the district office expect to have in the creation of a school wide vision?
- How does the district support principal learning in how to effectively shape a shared vision of academic success for all students?
- After the vision is created, how will the district support the implementation of the vision on an ongoing basis?
showed us that Creekland’s performance had slipped and was clearly underperforming. In addition, we looked at sample vision statements from other schools and organizations. The overarching document we considered that summer was the vision statement for Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS). We knew that our vision had to be aligned with the district vision to become a system of world-class schools.

After soliciting input from all and much work, three draft vision statements were created. All three drafts captured the desire to be world class and the need to have our students excel at high levels. These three draft statements were presented to the faculty during preplanning. The faculty provided feedback and, after minor changes, the final vision was created and adopted:

Creekland will be a world-class school with students who achieve excellence in all areas. Staff will be experts in their field who are dedicated to life-long learning and student success; Families will partner with staff to help students achieve their maximum potential; and Students will constantly strive to improve in everything they do.

That vision statement adopted over three years ago has served as a guiding document for Creekland’s direction and focus. Over the past three years, the school has seen significant growth and success. This has been demonstrated on standardized tests, perception surveys, and rankings within the County and State of Georgia. While the garbage cans may not have been moved, the school has made great progress in moving forward.

John LeGrand, Principal, David W. Butler High School
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, NC

“It was the Fall of 2013. The students and staff of Bain Elementary had just completed the enormous undertaking of moving into a new “state of the art” school replacement building just across the parking lot from our former (and much older) facility. The logistics involved with this move had been time consuming, tedious and very important to our continued success in our new setting. However, all of that was now in the rear view mirror and my thoughts began to shift to the future direction of our school.

As I looked at our new future, I felt that it was the ideal time to revisit our school vision to ensure that our priorities as a school were not only stated in an updated school vision statement but, more importantly, identified so that these priorities could be put into action. Having been principal at my school for three previous years, I knew that my knowledge of our students, staff and surrounding community

Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

- In order to solicit feedback on the vision, this principal asked, “What is important to the success of the school?” and “Where would you like to see our school in 3 – 5 years?” What questions might you ask to solicit feedback?
- Why is it important to collaborate with the School Leadership Team? With what other stakeholder groups will it be important to collaborate?
- How will you respond if you experience push back when presenting the vision to staff? How can you honor their input and advance the school’s vision?
- School newsletters, messages, and the website are ways this principal unveiled the vision at his school. What avenues are available to you? Which avenues would be most effective?

District Leaders

- What kind of experiences could district leaders provide to help school leaders learn how to solicit input effectively from all stakeholders?
- How can the district become thought partners and collaborate with schools to develop vision statements that align with the district vision?
- What district resources can be utilized by schools to promote and unveil school visions?
would help me with casting this new school vision. However, my overall knowledge of our school and its stakeholders was not enough – I needed to seek their input. I began meeting with various staff members (teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, cafeteria workers, custodians) and began every conversation with two simple questions, “What is important to the success of our school?” and “Where would you like to see our school in 3-5 years?”. I then talked to students, parents and community members and asked them the same two questions in order to gather further valuable insight.

Following my conversations, I compiled a list of common responses, ideas and characteristics that I discovered during my survey and then presented those findings to our School Leadership Team (SLT). Through a discussion with our SLT team, we were able to collectively write a new school vision statement based on both the SLT’s vision for the school and the responses that I previously collected.

The final step was to present our new vision to our entire staff to ask for any feedback prior to “rolling it out” to our school community. After doing so, I unveiled our new school vision through school newsletters, messages and website:

“We, the Bain Family, consisting of staff, students, parents and the community will establish a safe and supportive learning environment that will maximize the potential of all students. We will provide differentiated learning experiences through authentic, engaging, and challenging instructional practices based on all learning styles. As a family, we will foster success for all students in order to promote college and career readiness, as well as equip students with skills needed for the 21st century.

Having set a new collective direction and set of priorities for our school and students, we are now able to firmly take the steering wheel and drive together towards success. However, we are no longer looking through a rear view mirror as a school. Bain Elementary is now peering clearly through the windshield of progress towards a bright future for each student that we are entrusted to serve.”

John LeGrand
Implementing the Vision

Implementing a school vision is a continuous process that requires the school leader to engage with all stakeholders, determine school needs, and bring the vision to life.

There are three key action steps that a principal can take in order to successfully implement a school vision:

1. **Connecting** with all stakeholders to listen and learn, as well as develop and foster relationships

2. **Assessing** school needs to understand strengths and weaknesses

3. **Embedding** and **living** the school vision statement to ensure the school vision comes to life for all stakeholders
Kelvin Moore, Principal, Ernest Everett Just Middle
Prince George’s County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, MD

I had served for three years as a principal at a Preschool -- 8th grade inner city school where we created, shaped, and embedded a strong vision for students which was centered on excellence. Then, I decided I wanted a new challenge and the opportunity to do this again in a middle school. After applying for just such a position in a school system closer to home, I got the news: “Congratulations! You are now the principal of Ernest Just Middle School.” I drove past the school almost every day until my first official day in July. I began thinking that this is such a beautiful school in a great neighborhood.

When I began, I found that there was some real work ahead. On my first day, I met with key members of the community, parent advisory groups, and staff. All stakeholders had a similar message. The sign outside which stated that the school was a science and math magnet was misleading. I didn’t quite understand what that meant, but I would quickly find out. After a week of being in the building, I learned that there were no clear messages about the school centered on student achievement, no substantive vision for students, and no clear goals set for growth. As well, there were many adult-driven decisions. Key roles and schedules were determined based on relationships and tenure, not skill.

Understanding the culture needed to be changed, I focused intensely on building a culture to support a clearly defined vision. This was not easy. I began my meeting with the same stakeholders with whom I had originally met; we then drafted a shared vision for the school. Our new vision made this promise:

We will create a 21st century student-centered learning environment where high expectations and excellence prepare students for college and careers in the global society.

We made every step we took toward the vision intentional and shared. We held multiple staff meetings, student forums, parent meetings, union meetings, and meetings with central office staff, often with tours of the building, to find out what they wanted for our school. All the stakeholders were actively involved in each step, and the work began with this simply worded vision statement.

I surveyed the staff and learned I would need to move some individuals around, support the growth of others, and help some seek an alternative if they couldn’t embrace this vision. By the end of the first year we had turned over 40% of a 90+ member staff. Moving
forward to year three, we had turned over 82% of our staff, with every member of the leadership team, with the exception of my two assistant principals, being new. We have expanded that team, focused on professional development, created multiple leaders and leadership pathways in the building, empowered the staff, grounded all our decisions in evidence centered on students, provided easy monitoring and feedback tools, and developed a culture of transparency. At every meeting, in every conversation, and in every message from the school, we center on the vision, goals, successes, and challenges. We celebrate our wins, and use data to define our challenges. Central office and district staff are invited to do classroom walkthroughs to understand our needs, learn about our successes, and support us as we develop a plan to move forward. Every stakeholder has a role in the vision, and he or she knows that we expect every goal to be centered on students and supported by data.

We have now become a school where the principal’s voice is not the only voice. Everyone is a leader; everyone owns a piece of the vision. Stakeholders know our value and purpose, and people are eager to work here. The work remains ongoing and shared.

Susan Bearse, Principal, Berkeley Lake Elementary  
Gwinnett County Public Schools, Suwanee, GA

As principal new to the school, I wondered if all programs and processes were aligned with the vision, mission and goals we had established together. There was one way to find out. I set out to connect with all stakeholders and to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. In order to implement a vision of academic success and high standards for all, a principal new to a school must complete a needs assessment of all programs and processes in place to be certain they are aligned with the goals.

As an example, an eClass Technology Strategic Initiative was an expectation in our district to transform teaching and learning. When I arrived as a new principal in 2012, most of the school’s original thirty-year-old infrastructure was in place and needed to be updated to meet the new technology requirements. A technology assessment to determine the needs to improve instruction indicated much work needed to be done to bring equipment, processes and procedures up-to-date and to develop staff skills.

Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

- Why is it important to secure input from all stakeholders?
- What is the process for conducting a comprehensive needs assessment? If misalignment is discovered, how does the new school leader address programs and processes that are not aligned with the goals?
- How does the new school leader generate commitment from teachers, staff, and community members in order to ensure the vision for the school truly comes to life?

District Leaders

- How has our district ensured that new principals have been effectively trained with properly aligning newly created school vision statements with input from various stakeholders associated with the school?
- Are principals ensuring that their school vision statements effectively and specifically address the intended direction of their schools based on its unique needs and characteristics?
In order to transform classrooms to impact instruction, the entire culture of the school needed to shift in its approach to and use of technology. To support the changes needed, the school was rewired for wireless access. Students and teachers were now able to access the county network with non-county personal devices. Transitions from paper documents to electronic record keeping through an automated database for leave, online templates for meeting minutes, and an electronic visitor check-in were implemented. A student Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy was created, equipment was purchased and updated, and electronic check out procedures were designed.

Parents were excited about students learning with the additional technology resources and supported the acquisition of new equipment for the classrooms through donations. The PTA sponsored a fundraiser for an automated phone system to improve communication along with the use of Remind 101 texting, an App for smart phones, and updating webpages for schoolwide information to be more accessible to parents. The community foundation contributed funds to expand the purchase of laptops for all classrooms.

As the eClass initiative was implemented, teachers needed opportunities to increase their computer skills. A team of technology teacher innovators led by the Local School Technology Coordinator was established to assist in modeling effective integrated technology in the classrooms. The purpose was to help teachers understand that technology was not a periodic activity but rather an ongoing instructional tool.

Technology tools, practices and procedures, as well as developing teacher skills, has transformed the teaching with the emphasis on learning moving the school forward in keeping with our shared vision of high expectations and excellence in education. By bringing our vision to life as part of every program and process, we made high expectations and excellence the way we do business:

"Berkeley Lake Elementary School (BLES) is a positive safe, nurturing environment that fosters respect among all students, teachers, parents and community members while forwarding world-class achievement that successfully maximizes each student's individual potential through engaging instruction."*

Susan Bearse

Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

- Have you ensured that the newly created school vision is in alignment with input from various stakeholders associated with your school?
- Does your vision effectively and specifically address the intended direction of your school based on your unique school needs?
- How will you work to embed your school vision into your school culture, practices, and overall decision-making processes at your site?

District Leaders

- How can our district work to ensure that principals are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively embed their school vision into the overall school culture, practices and decision-making processes at their school site?
- In what ways does the district monitor effective implementation of the vision at the local school level?
Communicating and branding strategies include:

1. **Making** a personal promise that clearly communicates the school’s vision for the success of all students

2. **Delivering** experiences that align the talk with the walk

3. **Building** a reputation of academic success for all students

Communicating the school vision at every opportunity to every stakeholder group is an essential leadership responsibility. By making a personal promise and delivering on that promise, a leader *brands* the vision, building a school reputation of academic success for all students.
The first few months at Whitewater Academy involved much listening and learning and very little in the way of change. It wasn’t until the middle of that school year that I began to engage staff members in the process of looking at our beliefs as a school community. Through the School Leadership Team and the faculty, we responded to intentional questions to guide our work in finding common themes in our belief systems to advance our work and student achievement. Due to the deep achievement gaps within our school community, we engaged in delivering upon a vision that involved closing the gaps in student learning. A critical leadership action at this stage was explicitly naming the vision and connecting it or branding it on the data that had been gathered from both quantitative and qualitative data points. Each day the vision was repeated on the announcements. It likewise appeared on all school communications.

Our administrative team was dedicated to consistently bringing light to the actions being taken as a school community and explicitly naming the alignment of those actions to the vision. For example, pictures of students were shared in faculty meeting as their data demonstrated growth in order to connect and communicate the work of the school to what we believe as a school community.

During the first faculty meeting of each month, school leadership shared what the vision indicated we were going to do, what we had done over the last month and what the data indicated and subsequently what we were going to do over the next month. This served to consistently “sell” our vision and likewise make the results of the implementation of the school’s vision transparent to staff.

After three years, the school had been successful in moving a preponderance of students toward grade level proficiency or just below grade level proficiency so it became time to revisit the vision to ensure that it aligned with our actions. The vision this time was instead about creating possibilities toward college and beyond for all students: A school where learning is possible and possibilities are endless. Making a personal promise in the form of this vision statement; delivering on that promise; and building on our reputation continued to strengthen communication.

**Self-Reflection Questions**

**School Leaders**

- What specific strategies does the leader employ to communicate and brand the vision? What other tools and resources could possibly be used?
- How does the school leader scale the vision beyond the walls of his/her building in order to impact a larger student body at all levels?

**District Leaders**

- What strategies does a district employ to support a leader whose vision is centered around closing gaps in student learning?
- How does the district assess the school leader’s effectiveness in communicating and branding the vision?
When I arrived at Academy of American Studies, I discovered that the school, while succeeding admirably, needed to communicate its vision forcefully to the entire school community and to the middle schools in Queens whose students would soon be applying to high school. I relied on my 17 years of experience as a principal in New York City to lead the vision process successfully. The school community examined the vision as it existed, recasting and tweaking it. When we were finished, we arrived at

The Academy of American Studies is a college preparatory high school emphasizing American history, literature and culture through four years of American studies. We strive to build a cooperative community of life-long college and career learners through a spirited partnership among, students, parents, faculty, staff and educational partners.

That was all well and fine; it had been created by dedicated educators, parents, and students, but the question remained as to how it would be communicated across the entire school community and, indeed, the entire borough from which we drew our students.

Competition among high schools is fierce, and the school needed to stand out from among the many fine schools in Queens. So, the school leadership team got together to decide how we would communicate the vision. We brainstormed what we thought the vision meant in practical terms. We then decided on an approach to bring the vision to life in both the school and the community.

We posted the vision in every classroom, and asked every teacher to make references to American history whenever practical. As well, teachers discussed the vision with their classes. This followed teacher leaders discussing the vision with the entire faculty after an introduction by me. We centered everything that we did in the

William Bassell, Principal, Academy of American Studies
New York City Department of Education, New York, NY
school around the vision, referencing it whenever possible and making certain that it was in evidence throughout the school.

We agreed that we would use the vision in all of our publicity documents and in all of our public appearances about the school. Thus, students, teachers, parents, AP’s and the principal would refer to the vision when they spoke at events, including recruitment fairs. On an ongoing basis, I made this my promise to everyone who was listening, and consistently ensured that the school delivered on the promise.

As well, at every opportunity, I reached out to potential partners and contacts, ensuring that the school became involved with them actively and that the vision was a key element in the connection. These connections are carefully nurtured with an eye towards sustaining and enhancing and publicizing the vision.

All in all, our vision has become an integral part of our school’s ongoing culture, and distinguishes us from the myriad of schools in New York City. And, communicating that vision has become a mission for all: the principal, the other staff, the parents and the students. As a result, our partners, our school community, and our public see our vision as a powerfully sustainable element of the school.

**Self-Reflection Questions**

**School Leaders**

- To what extent is the school able to personalize the invitation to community members to be a part of the school and “choose” that school as the option of choice for their child(ren)?
- What are the responsibilities and strategies of the school leader in influencing the broader school community for effectively communicating and branding the vision?
- What support can a school leader seek to guide his/her decision making?

**District Leaders**

- What support and training can a school district provide to a new principal engaging in this communicating and branding process?
- How does the district assess the school leader’s effectiveness in communicating and branding the vision?

Zachary Rahn, Principal, Ashley Elementary  
*Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO*

Ashley Elementary, one of the oldest schools in Denver Public Schools, boasts a rich history treasured by the community. Recently, due to chronic underperformance, the school community was told on a Monday in April 2013, that the school would be shut down at the end of the year. By Friday, after intense community outrage, there was another meeting and community and staff were told that instead of being closed, the school’s administration of nearly 12 years was to be replaced. One year was given to re-envision a school plan to dramatically change outcomes for scholars.

I was hired as the school leader and then made my only two hires of the year: my Assistant Principal and a newly created position in DPS I called the Dean of Culture. With a leadership team in place, we quickly got to work, bringing together a strategic school design committee of teachers, staff and families who worked through the summer creating a new vision and school plan. Simultaneously, we dove deep into the history and context of the school and community to understand our greatest strengths and gaps. Most alarming was the reality that the school was under enrolled and that 33% of neighborhood families were choosing out of Ashley. With the highest non-enroll rate in Denver at the time, it was clear that one of our top priorities would be to radically transform the image of the school, develop a brand and increase marketing and communication with our community in a way that touched the heads and the hearts of the community.
Several things happened over the next few months. We applied for a grant through the State which would give us the financial resources needed to undertake sweeping cultural, marketing and branding changes. Rather than asking for more staff, new curriculum or technology, we used the money to ensure the school looked and felt different to students, teachers and the community. At Ashley, this meant painting the walls, developing a new school logo, creating a new, interactive website, branding the school and then communicating this with all of our stakeholders.

At the foundation, we needed to make our work compelling, different and personal to our customers, our families. As such, we made two promises to our families:

1) **Your scholar will be safe.**
2) **Your scholar will get a great education.**

Our message was short and sweet yet different than the messages they received from most schools. Acting in many respects more like a business, our promises were compelling and the basis of our recruiting.

Over the course of four months, teachers, staff and families went door-to-door in our community, giving out literature about the school, introducing themselves to prospective families and conveying who we are, and the promises we make. By February, we had knocked on every door in the neighborhood, attended multiple recruitment events and established tours at the school.

By April 2014, our community successfully passed a new school plan and applied and received waivers from the State and District. Our school plan, lauded as being rigorous and unique by outside observers, was set to come into being. Now we just needed scholars to fill our seats. By delivering on our promises in a personalized way, we have exceeded projections and now are called home to the most students in the school’s history - 365.

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**Self-Reflection Questions**

**School Leaders**

- To what extent is the school able to personalize the invitation to community members to be a part of the school and “choose” that school as the option of choice for their child(ren)?
- What key actions result in the school being able to deliver on the promises it has made?

**District Leaders**

- What leadership qualities does a district seek when determining the “right fit” for a school where rebranding of the vision is necessary?
- How does the district assess the school leader’s effectiveness in communicating and branding the vision?
Sustaining the Vision

Living the vision every day, celebrating milestones, hiring selectively with the vision in mind and revisiting the vision as needed will ensure the school vision endures over time.

Steps that a principal can take to sustain the school vision for the long haul include:

1. **Embedding** vision in daily culture through the alignment of daily actions and behaviors of school staff

2. **Celebrating** benchmarks that demonstrate early wins and progress in aligning staff actions and behaviors with the vision

3. **Hiring** selectively with the vision at the forefront of hiring decisions

4. **Revisiting** the vision periodically as needed
Five years into my principalship, I felt the staff and I were falling into very comfortable patterns. The reputation of Montpelier Elementary School had always been one of academic excellence and superior teachers. Our school has consistently outperformed both the district and state on assessments, but I could feel our edge slipping. I called the leadership team together to discuss my observations and see if they shared similar feelings. We all agreed that we were becoming complacent and needed a challenge. Deciding on the right challenge was the first step in getting our mojo back.

Over the past two years, our school had transitioned to a Talented and Gifted (TAG) in the Regular Classroom model as opposed to a pull-out program. We worked closely with our TAG central office throughout this transition. Our staff received extensive professional development and mentoring as we embraced this new model. At one of our regular TAG meetings, the supervisor of the department suggested we apply for the EGATE award (excellence in gifted and talented education) from the Maryland State Department of Education. Up until this point, the only 2 schools in the district to achieve this distinction were TAG centers (schools that only serve TAG identified students who gained admission through a lottery process).

The leadership team presented the idea and all the work required to the staff to see if there was interest. We loved the idea of being the first non-TAG center to receive this distinction, and more importantly, to get recognition for what we were already doing on a daily basis.

The process was over 15 months long and required all stakeholders to contribute: instructional, community, students, parents, support, and administration. Over this period I could feel a change. The recommitment to academic excellence was electrifying and the entire school community was reenergized.

When the State department selected us for the award it was the complication of an incredible amount of work but more importantly the shot in the arm we needed to recommit ourselves to our vision and mission. Since receiving EGATE status, we regularly assist other schools in the district working on the process. I was invited to present at the State conference to share our work and am regularly asked to host visitors from throughout the state.

Over time a school can easily slip into a comfortable routine but as a leader it is my job to make sure we are never happy with comfortable and always pushing the vision forward. Can’t wait to see what we come up with next!

Our vision is to provide a challenging and intellectually appropriate learning environment through the use of varying instructional strategies to all learners so they will reach their fullest academic potential as we prepare them to be future leaders.*

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Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

- How often do you and your staff recommit to your schools vision and mission?
- What actions are you taking to ensure long-term sustainability of your schools vision?

District Leaders

- What district resources/support could be made available for supporting long-term sustainability of a schools program?
- How is support differentiated to support a school that is surpassing district and state standards?
Having been closed twice before, the history of our school was riddled with failure. It was not uncommon that a local prostitution ring would use the schoolyard to conduct its business however there was always a sense of hope for change for the better. Using larger than life charisma and tactics, my predecessor spent the better part of a decade bringing stability to the school.

When appointed as principal, I immediately began the work of connecting with constituents to gain a sense of what mattered and to galvanize the masses by creating a new vision for success. It became clear that the school's instructional practices were in need of enhancement and the social-emotional development of students was absent from the culture. When I asked an eighth grader to share her perspective of our school, she answered, “It’s a safe school, but it feels more like a prison. Everyone is told what to do and we just have to follow.”

We immediately began with an intense program of professional development whose chief aim was to develop the skill-set needed to teach from a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) stance. We developed an advisory program for all middle school students and in the next year expanded to the rest of the school. Student leadership was incorporated into the plan and was implemented through the peer mediation program and a mentoring program, targeting at-risk adolescents, both of which were instrumental in reducing the incident rate.

During the same year we introduced the school to the notion of job-embedded professional learning via the inquiry process by developing teacher teams that learned to collect and use performance data to plan interventions and supports for students. We began to tackle the daunting task of enhancing our instruction by learning how to use a tiered approach to differentiating learning activities so that all students could benefit from challenging work. The next year, we began the unprecedented overhaul of our curriculum bringing cohesion and instructional alignment to the entire school.

Since 2008, we have created a new vision for the school that was embraced by the community, and we branded ourselves as the place where “Achieving starts with Believing” in order to confront the culture of inertia. All staff members now actively participate in small learning teams, are implementing a PreK-8 curriculum that builds on the learning of each

Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

- How can you leverage your success to sustain your vision?
- What community resources can you leverage to support your vision? How can you effectively engage community resources & stakeholders to sustain your vision?

District Leaders

- What expectations does the school district have for long-term sustainability of a school's vision?
- What actions are necessary for district leaders to support the sustainability of the school's vision?
Imagine being several years into your tenure as a high school principal. When the budget documents arrived, I realized that the current budget situation required that I reduce the teaching staff by at least twelve of my sixty-four teachers - yes, at least twelve. This came as a surprise since we had just been authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization to offer two International Baccalaureate (IB) Programs; the Middle Years Program (MYP) (grades 9 and 10) and the Diploma Program (grades 11 and 12) and our enrollment had been strong enough to turn students away. We were offering a comprehensive, well-rounded education. I believed that we had the perfect environment for student success….where were the students going, and most importantly WHY?

Over this time, student achievement has gradually increased, our suspension rate has plummeted, and today we have been identified as a host school for a new program aimed at sharing strong practices across our district. Working with other schools, has forced us to evaluate the sustainability of our vision for success. The entire school is currently undergoing a careful analysis of our programs, practices, and behaviors to identify specific examples of alignment with our vision and the gaps that exist. The emerging consensus is that our vision still represents the success we stand for, and in the coming months we are planning adjustments that will tighten alignment and help us sustain the vision.

To begin, I needed assistance with identifying what strengths existed in the school and what was missing. On a Saturday in January, an equal number of teachers, current parents, parents of the feeder middle school and parents of the closest feeder elementary school, students and community members were invited to a “Planning Session”. After some time to enjoy breakfast and small talk, I presented the purpose - to revisit our vision. Each person was assigned to a specific table (evenly distributed to include all groups at each table). The leadership team (principal and assistant principals intentionally were not assigned groups but acted as facilitators). Each person was asked to introduce him or herself and identify his/her “role” in regard to the school. Next, we moved to the norms of the day and described the process and the expected outcomes. Each person completed an Individual Vision Themes worksheet which they shared with their table partners to compile into one chart to be presented to the large group. The tables then shared their combined values and I charted the information shared. At break time, the members were asked to attach colored dots to the charts to help in identification of themes. We then discussed the patterns that emerged and

Jeannie Peppel, Principal, John F. Kennedy High
Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO

grade, and have adopted a school-wide model for differentiating learning activities. Social-emotional development and supports are evident throughout the school via our school-wide SEL curriculum and various programs, and staff members who embody the spirit of our vision are celebrated often as a deliberate strategy to sustain the vision.

Self-Reflection Questions

School Leaders

• What challenges are you facing that might be an indicator that recommitment to your vision might be necessary?
• What key events, initiative or accomplishments might trigger a recommitment to your schools vision?

District Leaders

• How do you assist a veteran principal in revisiting and recasting a vision?
• How do you engage feeder-patterns for a secondary school that ultimately supports long-term achievement of a school vision and enrollment goals?
• How does change brought about by a district impact a schools vision?
Karen French, Principal, Ferrell Girls Preparatory Academy Hillsborough County Public Schools, Tampa, FL

Karen French: Leader Story FINAL
“An all girls public middle school! I bet you deal with nothing but drama all day long.” This is a common first reaction when I tell people that I am principal of an all girls middle school. We are not in the business of focusing on drama at the Girls Preparatory Academy (GPA). We are in the business of developing strong, confident, dynamic, educated young women. That is our school vision. It is our promise to our students, families, and community. We sustain that promise by embedding it into the daily culture.

This work led directly to the reaffirmation of the John F. Kennedy High School mission statement. Our mission is to challenge all students to realize their full intellectual, emotional, and physical potential in an ever-changing global community.

As we moved through the next two years of declining enrollment that led to more loss of teaching staff and resources, we kept the identified priorities and vision at the forefront of all decisions. Due to the reduction of resources, the entire staff had to interview for an opportunity to remain at JFK. The interviews and interview questions were strategically developed to identify the teachers who were clearly committed to the vision, the IB Philosophy and to the work involved. We have since weathered the storm and have increased enrollment, achievement and teaching staff.

We continue to use many of the interview questions to determine if the candidates share our vision and if they have what it takes to be part of the JFK Commander Community. We remind our teaching staff that they have been hand-selected to be a teacher at JFK and have committed to challenging all students to excel in a global community. By doing the hard work of turning our vision into reality, we have sustained the John F. Kennedy High School mission statement and increased student success.

Several strengths/priorities of the school were identified by the stakeholders: the IB Education is a priority; the collaborative nature and desire to bring the best education to the JFK community is alive and well; the knowledge that there are a lot of people that care about Kennedy; the Commander Family is alive and well.

This work led directly to the reaffirmation of the John F. Kennedy High School mission statement. Our mission is to challenge all students to realize their full intellectual, emotional, and physical potential in an ever-changing global community.

Both our school vision and creed are woven into the daily teaching and learning at GPA. It is common practice for teachers to incorporate a question such as, “How does our school vision apply to what you have learned today?” In addition to that, we start our day with the recitation of our school creed. It is a point of pride with our students to know the creed from memory. At every competition, whether academic or athletic, our students begin and end with reciting our school creed. It empowers and gives them purpose.

By incorporating these practices, our school vision and creed have become the language that we speak at GPA.

Celebrating established benchmarks on a routine basis has also helped to sustain our school vision. Students (individual and groups) are publicly recognized during monthly assemblies for academic gains, participating in extracurricular activities, and displaying good citizenship. We also close each day’s
dismissal announcements with “shout outs”. Teachers email both student and staff accomplishments to be acknowledged at the end of each day. Shout outs can range from a student doing well on a specific assessment to acknowledging a random act of kindness. Furthermore, each week I write notes to my faculty to show acknowledgment of their effective teaching practices. This helps to reinforce our school vision with the teachers.

Hiring selectively with the vision at the forefront is crucial for sustaining our school vision. Targeted questions that are in line with our school vision are always incorporated into the interview process. Some examples of those questions are “How do you promote rigorous thinking into your teaching? How would hiring you support our school’s vision? Tell me about the most impactful professional development you have taken within the past year. How did you apply it to your teaching?”. Once a teacher is hired at our school, they participate in a one day training that focuses on the culture and climate of our school. This practice lays the foundation for our school vision.

Periodically revisiting our school vision helps to ensure that we are keeping our promise. Our teaching staff complete a school vision reflection activity (Appendix B) on a quarterly basis. Our vision is also reviewed once a semester by our School Advisory Committee. By implementing these checkpoints we ensure that our vision is aligned with meeting the needs of our school.

The Girls Preparatory Academy continues to thrive through our vision. Sustaining the school vision must be a conscious effort of all the stakeholders. It is the principal’s responsibility to lead that conscious effort.

By employing the key processes for sustaining the vision, principals can effectively lead all stakeholders towards that attainment.

**GPA Vision:** Developing strong, confident, dynamic, educated young women

**GPA School Creed:** We are strong, confident, young women. We believe that we can achieve anything because we are dedicated, committed, and focused. We are exceptional, not because we say it, but because we live it. We each have a voice that empowers, and choose to use it to uplift ourselves and others. We believe in nurturing our minds, bodies, and school spirit. We will not fail in the face of adversity. We are resilient. We are one. We are the Girls Preparatory Academy.
In *How leadership influences student learning (2004)*, a study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, Kenneth Leithwood and colleagues from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto documented three key practices high-quality leaders utilize to advance student learning: 1) Setting Direction, 2) Developing People, and 3) Making the Organization Work. *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Leader Guide* and our original Early Win, *Shaping a Vision for Academic Success for All Students: A Roadmap of Key Processes and Effective Practices*, addressed the first of these key practices: setting direction by shaping a vision of academic success for all students. Doing so effectively will inevitably improve the performance of both students and adults, thus boosting student achievement. Both of our tools are developed for principals, by principals. Our intent was to offer four key processes and a handful of effective practices that serve as guides to aspiring principals, novice principals and even veteran principals who simply want to hone their practice in this essential leader practice: shaping a shared vision that engages all stakeholders in embracing the future story of their school and the academic success of their students.

We wrote our Leader Stories to engage your interest and provide actionable next steps for your practice. Further, we hoped our stories would encourage you to think deeply as school and district leaders about the Self-Reflection Questions we pose. By engaging you as fellow learners and sharing our practices, we aspired to contribute to the ongoing, continuous improvement of principal pipeline work in our schools, our six Principal Pipeline Initiative districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Denver Public Schools, Gwinnett County Public Schools, Hillsborough County Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, and Prince George’s County Public Schools) and in schools across the nation. Both our original work and this *Leader Guide* were facilitated by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, Inc. (GLISI) and evolved from our work as members of the Principal Professional Learning Community, sponsored by The Wallace Foundation.

We also developed this *Leader Guide* as a tribute to school leaders everywhere. Our efforts were designed as a roadmap to guide school leaders in developing their capacity to lead the important work of setting direction by casting, implementing, communicating and branding, and sustaining a shared vision of academic success for all students. Likewise, we intentionally acknowledged the importance of aligning school vision to district vision in order to ensure student achievement. In doing so, we set out to recognize district leaders who support school leaders in their professional growth to improve their individual practice in setting direction for all stakeholders committed to improved student learning.

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The Wallace Five Key Practices of Effective Principals

Over a decade of research on school leadership with more than 70 research reports and other publications has helped The Wallace Foundation figure out what makes an effective principal. In short, their studies show that effective principals perform five practices well to improve learning for all students:

- **Shaping a vision of academic success**;
- **Creating a climate hospitable to education**;
- **Cultivating leadership in others**;
- **Improving instruction**; and
- **Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement**.

It has been a privilege to focus on the first of these five practices. As principals, we collaborated on developing this second publication, *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Leader Guide*, a companion piece to our first publication, *Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students: A Roadmap of Key Processes and Effective Practices*.

Our Support Team

Just as The Wallace Foundation five key practices guide effective principal practice, our Support Team guided us in

- **Shaping the vision for this Leader Guider**;
- **Creating a learning community hospitable to supporting and challenging each other**;
- **Cultivating leadership and courage to de-privatize our practice**;
- **Encouraging us to share our Leader Stories in order to examine our instructional leadership**;
- **Managing our project group, our drafts, the iterative review process, conference calls, face-to-face sessions and design that led to The Leader Guide**.

Each support team member played a different but complementary role (See Acknowledgments). We thank them for their support, encouragement, and sense of humor. See photos down side.