

# TWO ANCHORS

that **make** or **break** school change efforts

*Why defining school identity and a vision for student readiness come first*

Policy pressures, demographic shifts, and other influences have led to a crisis of identity in American public schools.<sup>1</sup> Many school communities lack consensus on the specific knowledge and skills all students should get from their education. Students struggle to succeed and don't graduate well prepared to contribute.

**Schools  
CAN work  
for EVERY  
student**

Many change efforts start with a focus on organizational structures or learning approaches. This is skipping steps. Too often, this approach results in situations where students and families do not see themselves in their school or instructional content. Attempts at system-level improvements are incoherent, sporadic, and unsustainable. Efforts and investments fall short. Students fall through the cracks.

Schools that have a **SHARED VISION FOR STUDENT READINESS** and a clear, shared **SCHOOL IDENTITY** are positioned to succeed.

These **TWO ANCHORS** provide support for what's needed to improve student outcomes.

## Hurdles to school change

- Low expectations
- Fatigue and teacher isolation
- Rigid or unrealistic initiatives
- Standardized testing diverts from real improvement.
- Fragmented efforts leave out some students or departments.

<sup>1</sup> Neumerski and Cohen, 2019

# ANCHOR ONE

## Shared vision for readiness

*Define and communicate the holistic set of skills that ALL students need for success after high school.*

### SHARED VISION FOR READINESS APPLIES TO THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

- Created in inclusive partnership with students, teachers, caregivers, and the larger community
- Includes transformative concepts that promote educational equity
- Shows the path for moving forward
- Gets communicated internally and externally

Addressing structures that advantage some and disadvantage others requires schools to first include and empower all stakeholders.

### SHARED VISION FOR READINESS SEES THE LEARNER AS A WHOLE PERSON

- Considers the value of college, career, and life readiness
- Emphasizes interpersonal, intrapersonal, and metacognitive skills
- Values social-emotional skills and well-being
- Supports mental and physical health
- Incorporates postsecondary transitional skills
- Includes proficiency in numeracy and literacy

### SHARED VISION FOR READINESS CONNECTS TO INSTRUCTIONAL CORE

- Goes beyond just stating desired student outcomes and provides clarity about the role of teachers and content in achieving success
- Gives direction on building the corresponding structures and conditions to foster professional development and collaboration
- Results in a more coherent organization that eliminates the silos and multiple identities typically found in large public schools

When your vision is connected to the instructional core (students, teachers, content), students understand how school connects to their future plans.

# ANCHOR TWO

## School identity

*Create an explicit statement of what your school stands for and where it intends to go. Visibly express the shared values, beliefs, and ways of making sense of the world that are central, distinctive, and enduring to your school.*

### ROOTED IN ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY RESEARCH

- Foundational for sustaining a strong school culture and climate
- Defines the attributes that students and educators are expected to exemplify
- Helps schools through large-scale change efforts with cohesion and shared purpose
- Leads to behavioral change and shifts in deep-seated assumptions

### ALIGNS SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY IDENTITIES

- Expands narrow definitions of values related to teaching, learning, and achievement
- Accounts for the assets, strengths, and gifts of diverse students and the surrounding community
- Opens the door to culturally inclusive learning approaches
- Reflects the student body accurately

*“In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles and positions.”*

– Margaret J. Wheatley

### REQUIRES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Involves families and external stakeholders in the decision-making process, creating connections
- Is meaningful: goes beyond surface attempts
- Assigns identity custodians, tasked with saying, showing, or staging
- Charges them with correcting situations where identity misalignment is occurring
- Is reinforced through repeated communication to dissolve multiple identities operating within public schools and the broader community

# THE ANCHORS IN ACTION

## ONGOING AND MEANINGFUL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Outreach ensures that dominant perspectives do not overpower the input and voice of historically marginalized groups of people.
- Privilege and power dynamics are identified and managed.
- Input is an authentic process not a symbolic exercise.

## APPROACHES TO LEARNING ALIGNED TO A SHARED VISION FOR READINESS

- Universal approaches that align with a holistic vision for readiness are foundational for 21st-century readiness.
- Classrooms that recognize and develop a broad set of skills allow for strength-based approaches.
- Strategic and intensive supports aligned with academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development ensure all students can be served well.

## COHERENT ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

- Structures, practices, and policies that reflect the identity of the school reinforce and sustain the values and beliefs.
- Coherence between organizational structures and approaches to learning is made possible and is anchored to both shared identity and a vision for readiness.
- Leadership decisions can be made with the community in mind and on behalf of all students.

*"We are making decisions that impact and change a student's life forever and if you don't have something that you can adhere to as a school, then what are you basing those decisions on?"*

– Dr. Courtney Robinson,  
Ocean View High School Principal



## A shared vision for readiness and school identity bring about improved decision-making.

- It becomes an explicit part of the hundreds of decisions made by administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders every week.
- It answers the questions, *Is this who we are? Does this align with what we are trying to achieve for all students?*
- It guides school leaders toward internal coherence—a powerful approach for promoting organizational learning and school improvement.
- It's the foundation for systems and supports that ensure all students graduate ready for college, career, and life.



# inflexion

*decisions that drive student readiness*

To download our full report ***Two Anchors that Make or Break School Change Efforts*** and to learn more about an evidence-based approach to improving student success, visit [bit.ly/twoanchors](https://bit.ly/twoanchors)

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evidence-based approach  
to improving student success,  
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# THE ANCHORS

## A School's Identity and its Vision for Readiness

### ABSTRACT

In this brief, we describe the theoretical rationale and educational research that supports the importance of identity and a shared vision for readiness to guide school change efforts. To do so, we introduce the concept of organizational identity and how it is applicable to the public school setting. We argue school leaders must authentically engage the communities they serve to ensure they know who they are and where they want to go. With a solid sense of identity, school leaders can begin creating a shared vision for readiness that represents their community and speaks to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes stakeholders envision most important for students' success after high school. This brief also describes how the connection between a school's identity and its vision for readiness serve as the anchors from which school leaders make decisions that lead to coherent organizational structures and aligned learning approaches. When such systems exist, schools are well positioned to understand the holistic needs of students and provide the necessary support for achieving educational equity across a range of student outcomes.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do public schools, especially large comprehensive high schools, achieve and sustain equity-focused school change that improves outcomes for all students? This question has gone unanswered and continues to perplex educators, researchers, and policymakers alike. Perform a search for resources and information about school change, improvement, or turnaround and you will find a staggering number of books, articles, and reports. Among the theories and practices that have emerged in the school improvement space, few—if any—are strategies that prove to work universally and in any context. Additionally, there have been countless grant-funded projects, district initiatives, and other reforms that have come and gone, with very few showing effectiveness or duplicability to stand the test of time. Although there are no concrete answers on what strategies and approaches work to efficiently and sustainably improve school systems, promising practices have been found. For instance, researchers and practitioners have been able to isolate and identify, at least in part, some of the critical components that must be in place for educational leaders to effectively position their school systems to improve (Fullan, 2016).

Based on the work of organizational scholar Peter Senge and his associates (2012) and their assessment of the most influential factors within successful organizations, we know that a critical component of school change is having, or creating, an explicit vision for what a school wants to achieve for its students. Taking Senge’s findings a step further, we have learned—through our direct work with school systems of all shapes and sizes—that a school seeking to achieve and sustain positive and equity-grounded change must adopt a clear, coherent, and holistic vision. This holistic vision must include clarity regarding the factors needed for success after high school—we have coined this tangible item as a school’s **vision for readiness**. Through our extensive research and history of examining what it means for a young person to become prepared for everything that life brings post-high school—or what we call “life ready”—it takes more than just attaining academic knowledge and skills. Knowledge, such as content learned in language arts or science courses, is important; nurturing strong dispositions and attitudes for learning are just as critical—and in many cases even more critical to the preparedness of young people being **life ready**. Our work with more than 100 schools has shown that school systems that value the strengths and assets of all students have adopted and implemented a vision for readiness that prioritizes a holistic and inclusive set of outcomes.

Although a shared vision for readiness is a clear prerequisite to the school change process, our experiences in the field have shown that there are two anchor points that must be established to correctly align and guide school change efforts. In addition to a shared vision for readiness, the school needs a clear **identity**. In its simplest form, a school’s identity is what it “stands for” and helps determine “where it intends to go” (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). When examined through this perspective, a school’s vision for readiness can become the most visible, tangible, and useful expression of its identity. Therefore, a school’s identity, or what it stands for, includes the shared values, beliefs, and mental models (i.e., ways of seeing, understanding, and making sense of the world) that are central, distinctive, and enduring to the school (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). Similarly, a school’s shared vision for readiness, which should be rooted in identity, describes where it intends to go. When this foundational work is done effectively, the development and expression of shared values, beliefs, and mental models can help bridge the gap that so often exists between a school and the community it serves (Yosso, 2005).

In this brief, we describe the rationale and evidence that supports our approach to successful school change that promotes student readiness: the Inflexion Approach. Foundational to our understanding is the concept of organizational identity, which we connect to public schools throughout. Although school identity is relatively new to education research, the concept of organizational identity has a rich history and is well researched in the fields of management and organizational studies. Through our understanding of the literature, our field-level expertise, and our experiences of working alongside schools to implement structural changes, we have created a promising approach that supports sustainable school change at the systemic level to achieve readiness for every student.

## SCHOOL IDENTITY

A commonly accepted definition of identity are those attributes of an organization that are central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Unfortunately, based on our field-based experiences in and around high schools, the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of a school are rarely made explicit nor shared across stakeholders. This is partly because the key attributes of identity are based on individuals' *values, beliefs, and mental models*, which are "abstract, complex, and/or highly subjective" (Bartel et al., 2016, p. 482). For example, many school's claim to value creativity, but how creativity is defined, what creativity looks like inside and outside the classroom, and how parents and teachers can support students in being creative is often left up to the imagination.

Taken together, shared values, beliefs, and mental models make up the foundation of a school's identity. It is important to note, however, that factors outside of shared values, beliefs, and mental models can exert significant influence on a school's identity, especially if not addressed. At the local level, the "traditions" and "histories" that alumni, staff, and other community members carry with them can have a profound and enduring influence on a school's identity. For example, as the demographic makeup of a school changes across time, what is valued by the broader community may change in ways that challenge the enduring attributes that are held closely by alumni and long-serving staff.

Emerging research also suggests public school leaders are facing near-constant threats to their school's identity (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019). Threats to identity can be internal events (e.g., scandals, changes in leadership), external events (e.g., new state policies, negative media coverage), or ongoing changes to the overall environment (e.g., economic recessions, changing school demographics). Those events and changes cause all or some stakeholders to question the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of their school's identity (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). For example, the standards and accountability movement, now well into its fourth decade, has put immense pressure on schools to improve student academic outcomes, generally, and close opportunity gaps between low- and high-performing students on traditional academic metrics. When the response (whether required by law or not) to these pressures and sanctions is to redesign school systems, it can fundamentally alter the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of a school's identity.

Unfortunately, organizations, including schools, "often fail to respond adequately to identity threats" (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016, p. 252). One reason for failing to respond adequately, if at

all, is because not all stakeholders may view an event or an ongoing environmental change as threatening to their school's identity. Schools also fail to respond to potential threats because they do not have a solid sense of who they are or what they want to achieve for all students. In other words, schools often lack a shared identity. And if they do have a solid identity built on shared values, beliefs, and mental models, that identity is often exists beneath the surface and is not made explicit to all stakeholders.

## THE NEED TO DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE A SHARED IDENTITY

In our field-based work, we have observed that public schools encounter many factors that influence its identity, including a lack of shared values, beliefs, and mental models; internal and external forces (e.g., policy pressures and demographic changes); and the existence of multiple identities (Pratt, 2016). Schools, alongside the communities that they serve, can counter these factors by developing a shared identity that creates connections between different internal and external stakeholders. However, for these actions to be effective, schools must ensure that whatever shared identity is created truly represents its students and the communities they come from.

**The misalignment of school and community identity.** In general, we have argued that a school generally does have an identity that is seen, heard, and/or felt by the community it serves. In schools that serve communities of Color, there is often a misalignment of identity between the school and community served (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1990). The U.S. public school system has been built on narrow definitions of values related to teaching, learning, and achievement that represent Eurocentric values and perspectives. That antiquated foundation and the persistent structural racism and inequities experienced by many communities of Color often result in a school identity that fails to account for myriad assets, strengths, and gifts of its diverse students and surrounding community. In many circumstances, the consequences of misaligned school identities have been severe. In a wide-ranging literature review on "How People Learn," the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine asserted, "A significant factor in school failure may be a mismatch between the socialization practices a student experiences at home and what and how they are taught in school" (2018, p. 72).

**Using stakeholder engagement to improve identity alignment.** Through our work and experience with schools, we have found that stakeholder engagement is perhaps the most effective way of bringing a school's identity into alignment with the identity of the community it serves. There are several ways schools can facilitate stakeholder engagement, such as simply providing families with ongoing communication about school activities, encouraging volunteering and collaboration with community organizations, and involving families in the decision-making process (see Epstein et al., 2019). To be clear, these and other types of stakeholder engagements can all help bridge the gap between families and educators to promote greater alignment between school and community identities. In this brief, we focus on involving stakeholders in the decision-making processes as a way to generate tangible statements of identity, such as a shared vision for readiness. Schools take a significant step toward creating culturally responsive learning

approaches when they embrace and leverage the assets of their communities to create a shared vision for readiness (Sanders & Galindo, 2014). Below we describe stakeholder engagement processes meant to generate a shared vision for readiness that is anchored in the key attributes of a school's identity.

## SHARED VISION FOR READINESS

Based on our work with over 100 schools in the past 5 years, we find that a shared vision for readiness is the most useful, tangible, and authentic statement of a school's identity. These statements of identity can also include a description of shared values and beliefs or a postsecondary readiness definition. Although all statements of identity are worthwhile topics, we focus exclusively on a shared vision for readiness, which can be an invaluable tool for guiding schools through large-scale change efforts with cohesion and shared purpose. A common finding across organizational theory (e.g., Senge et al., 2012) and educational research (e.g., Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008) is that developing a shared vision is a prerequisite for continuous improvement.

There is no one right way to develop a shared vision for readiness that is grounded in a school's identity. That said, there are several essential processes that school leaders can institute to ensure visions are representative of its identity. Below we discuss how a school's vision for readiness should be

- representative of all stakeholder groups;
- connected to the instructional core;
- inclusive of transformative concepts that promote educational equity;
- consider the value of college, career, and life readiness; and
- communicated widely both internally and externally.

We end by briefly discussing how setting the two anchors for school change—a school's identity and its vision for readiness—can guide school leader decision-making.

**Ensuring representativeness and minimizing power differentials.** In terms of both input and participation, schools must work to secure a representative group of participants. In particular, research shows certain groups of individuals are less likely to participate in stakeholder engagement (e.g., single parents, stakeholders with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; Epstein et al., 2019). Simply sending out invitations to provide input or participate in a school-based event is not enough (Epstein et al., 2019). If schools take an equitable approach, they make intentional efforts and investments to reach those stakeholders they know are less likely to engage with school staff. Schools must also put in place systems explicitly designed to ensure that dominant perspectives do not overpower the input and voice of historically marginalized groups of people (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013). When privilege and power dynamics are not identified and managed, soliciting input can turn into a symbolic exercise rather than an authentic process that leads to a shared vision for readiness representative of the school and its community.

Unfortunately, as many educators know, shared visions are not always developed in partnership with students, parents, and other members of the community. Surface level stakeholder engagement diminishes the power of shared visions for generating a mutual understanding of purpose and commitment from parents, students, and the broader community (Senge et al., 2012). When district

and school leaders fail to meaningfully engage a representative group of stakeholders, they often revert back to the default option and create the vision by themselves or with a small group of leaders that may or may not include teachers. This does not mean school leaders should take a completely hands-off approach. Rather, it is the job of school leaders to translate the information provided by stakeholders into a vision for readiness that is not so broad that it is meaningless, but also not too detailed that it is unmemorable. School leaders are also best positioned to understand how to connect their vision to the school's instructional core.

**Connecting visions to the instructional core.** As Senge and colleagues (2012) found, shared visions should be grounded in the current reality, clearly articulate future aspirations, and provide a path for moving forward. One way to do this is to connect the vision to the instructional core. In their book on creating the conditions necessary for continuous school improvement, Forman, Stosich, and Bocala (2018) argue connecting a vision to the instructional core (i.e., students, teachers, content) marks the beginning of the improvement cycle. The authors maintain that to be effective, visions must go beyond articulating desired student outcomes to also provide clarity about the role of teachers and content in achieving success. To realize their vision, school leaders must also build corresponding “structures and conditions to foster professional development and collaboration” (p. 62). The result of connecting a vision to the instructional core and making corresponding organizational structural changes is a more coherent organization that slowly eliminates the compartmentalization and multiple identities that are typically found in large public schools.

**Including transformative concepts to promote educational equity.** School leaders also should work to translate information from stakeholders into transformative concepts for improving educational equity. Kose (2011) used interviews with 15 principals identified by their colleagues as leading for equity to determine the practices that enable the development of transformative school visions. Transformative leadership entails helping stakeholders understand and ultimately address issues related to equity, social justice, diversity, and oppression. Kose found these exemplary principals included explicit discussions around transformative concepts and sought the inclusion of traditionally marginalized stakeholders during the vision development process. The content of the vision statements and the focus on transformative concepts, in particular, depended on the existing context, including the history of the school, the power dynamics between different stakeholders, and the level of support or resistance among stakeholders. Regardless of the content, vision statements became an important vehicle for facilitating transformative leadership.

**Considering the value of college, career, and life readiness.** Given the heavy emphasis on traditional metrics in measuring student achievement to evaluate school quality and college admissions processes, it comes as no surprise that schools focus so intently on improving standardized test score performance. This inequitable focus on traditional academic metrics has created a false sense of readiness and has also highlighted why balancing college, career, and life readiness becomes so important in vision for readiness statements. Speaking to a holistic set of knowledge and skills is likely to be more representative of a school's identity and sends a signal to stakeholders that the school values the whole child versus exclusively valuing traditional academic content and performance outcomes. Further combating this content-driven idea of readiness and success, a steady stream of research during the past decade has shown that students need much more than proficiency in numeracy and literacy to be successful after high school (Conley, 2014; Farrington et al., 2012; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; National Research Council, 2012). This research shows students' interpersonal,

intrapersonal, and metacognitive skills; social-emotional well-being; mental and physical health; and general postsecondary transitional skills are just as, if not more, important to their success after high school as academic content knowledge.

**Communicating a school's vision to reinforce its identity.** Once a school adopts a formal vision for readiness, an important next step is to “communicate this change to stakeholders” (Bhatt, Van Riel, & Baumann, 2016, p. 444). This is especially important given the high likelihood of multiple identities operating within public schools and the historical disconnect between schools and communities. To help communicate an organization's identity, Schinoff, Rogers, and Corley (2016) argue for *identity custodians*. Identity custodians are individuals who convey messages related to an organization's identity using three primary methods: *saying, showing, or staging*.

Perhaps the most common way of communicating a school's identity is by *saying*, which includes individual conversations, mass emails, and other forms of direct communication with internal and external stakeholders. A school might initially roll out its vision for readiness using a mass email to students, parents, and staff. Ideally, this email would also illustrate how the vision for readiness connects to the school's shared values, beliefs, and mental models, helping demonstrate where the school is intending to go aligns with what the community wants for all students. *Showing* ranges from formal and informal mentoring, the characteristics of the physical space a school resides in, images that appear on walls, and other similarly themed artifacts. A school might highlight individuals or groups that exemplify its shared values and beliefs. Finally, *staging* occurs when students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders are provided with opportunities to enact or experience the school's identity, either during one-time events or through rituals and routines. As we describe in the longer version of this brief, parent learning walks are one way to build stronger connections between the school the community it serves.

Though informal identity custodians may exist in schools, our experience tells us that schools must be explicit about assigning specific individuals the responsibility for saying, showing, or staging as well as identifying situations where clear identity misalignment is occurring. When saying, showing, or staging, identity custodians are most likely to build coherence across a school when they convey messages with high clarity and intentionality. Perhaps even more important, identity custodians should tie their messages, examples, and activities explicitly to the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that define the school's identity as a way to build awareness and understanding.

## SETTING THE ANCHORS FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

In the first steps of school change, school leaders have the immense responsibility of shepherding stakeholders through a process that unearths the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that are used to create a shared vision for readiness. Furthermore, this complex process must result in an outcome that speaks to the core of the school's identity and acts as a bridge that closes the gap between the school and the community it serves. Following the initial steps, the alignment of the school's organizational structure and its learning approaches to its identity and vision for readiness should follow. This is not a small nor easy task because vision without execution is just a hallucination. School leaders make hundreds of decisions during the course of any given week related to any number of issues; how these decisions align or do not align to the school's

identity and its vision for readiness should be an explicit part of every decision. When decisions are informed by a vision for readiness, the school leadership works toward internal coherence—a powerful approach for promoting organizational learning and facilitating school improvement (Forman et al., 2018).

In sum, there is an immense need for schools to authentically engage their communities to develop shared values, beliefs, and mental models that become the core components of a shared identity. Bridging the gap between schools and the communities they serve is essential for organizing schools to improve in a continuous and equitable manner. Creating a shared vision for readiness that is informed by a representative school identity signifies a critical step in the improvement process. Importantly, this step cannot be ignored. School change too often centers on changing the organizational structures or learning approaches in a school. Both are necessary, and both are insufficient on their own. And if those changes to structures and the learning approach continue to lead to a situation where students and families do not see themselves in their school, these efforts and investments will continue to fall short. That is, identity and vision work are essential for setting the stage for effective structural and learning approach work. A school's identity and its vision for readiness become the anchors from which all decisions related to structures and learning approaches are made. Based on what we have found in our work with schools, when these anchors do not exist, schools will continue to suffer from incoherent, sporadic, and unsustainable attempts at system-level improvement.

# *A school's identity is what it "stands for and where it intends to go."*

– Adapted from Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton (2000, p. 13) work on organizational identity

## INTRODUCTION

How do public schools, especially large comprehensive high schools, achieve and sustain school change grounded in educational equity? This question has perplexed educators, researchers, and policymakers alike since at least 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (American Institutes for Research, 2011; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). A staggering number of books have been written on the subject. Several programs promise to have the answer, if only implemented with strict fidelity. And countless grant-funded projects, district initiatives, and other reforms have come and gone, with very few showing effectiveness or sticking around. Yet, we have learned a little bit about what does work—including some of the critical components that must be in place for educational leaders to effectively position their school systems to improve (Fullan, 2016).

We have learned that school change is a process that, when done right, incrementally improves schools in ways that address and dismantle inequitable structures and practices (Welborn, 2019). This is especially true when those structures and practices are equitable and aligned in ways that support students by tapping into the strengths and assets they bring to their school (Gooden & Davis, 2016). We have also learned, based on the work of Senge and colleagues (2012), that a critical component of school change is an explicit vision for what a school wants to achieve for its students. Taking it a step further, we argue that a school seeking to achieve and sustain positive and equity-focused change must adopt a clear, coherent, and holistic vision that speaks to the range of factors needed for success after high school—what we refer to as a school's **vision for readiness**. As an organization, we acknowledge that academic knowledge and skills are important, but not sufficient, for the holistic level of readiness that generates success in a post-secondary school life. It is equally important, and arguably more important, to nurturing strong dispositions and attitudes for learning. A clear, coherent, and holistic vision for readiness, then, needs to be a thorough consideration of the learner as a whole person.

One would be hard pressed to find literature that disagrees with the notion of schools needing a clear and coherent vision for readiness, especially when pursuing large-scale school change. Yet, the literature around school change has identified a significant obstacle that has been referred to as a lack of "consensus of outcomes" (Cohen, Spillane, and Peurach, 2017). Put plainly, this lack of consensus is the absence of a shared vision for readiness. The difficulty in creating and effectively using a vision for readiness comes in part from the historical tendency of school system leaders to "differentiate programs and outcomes" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 207). School leaders commonly delegate the responsibility of prioritizing specific student outcomes to individual content-specific teachers and their classrooms (Peurach, Yurkofsky, & Sutherland, 2019). The standards and



accountability movement altered the common practice of isolation and differentiation by requiring schools to pursue common sets of outcomes for all students. Requiring common outcomes has resulted in some positive changes, such as raising awareness of educational inequities and holding schools accountable to serving all students; this strategy has also created unintended consequences such as requiring schools to pursue a narrow set of traditional achievement outcomes that excludes the assets and skillsets of many historically marginalized groups of people (Yosso, 2005).

Exploring the unintended consequences a bit more, standards and definitions of achievement are primarily aligned to numeracy and literacy proficiency. This limited lens of measurement and

alignment has resulted in the neglect of other important knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes associated with student readiness and success (see Side Bar). We refer to the collection of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes as a holistic set of outcomes, which span multiple domains, including but not limited to students' social-emotional well-being (e.g., Jones & Kahn, 2017); their interpersonal, intrapersonal, and metacognitive skills (e.g., National Research Council, 2012); and their readiness to tackle the transition to college, career, and life in general (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). Schools that value the diversity of strengths and assets that all students have will adopt and pursue a vision for readiness composed of a holistic set of outcomes.

Although a shared vision for readiness is a clear prerequisite to the school change process, we argue it is just one of the anchors that should guide such efforts. The other anchor is a school's **identity**. In its simplest form, a school's identity is what it "stands for and where it intends to go" (emphasis added; Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). In this sense, a school's vision for readiness can become the most visible, tangible, and useful expression of its identity. A school's identity, or what it stands for, includes the shared values, beliefs, and mental models (i.e., ways of seeing, understanding, and making sense of the world) that are central, distinctive, and enduring to the school (Albert & Whetten 1985). A school's shared vision for readiness, which ideally is derived from its identity, signifies where it intends to go. As we describe at length in this practitioner brief, authentic and ongoing stakeholder engagement is essential for schools to both know who they are collectively and where they intend to go. When done effectively, the development and expression of shared values, beliefs, and mental models can help bridge the gap that so often exists between a school and the community it serves (Yosso, 2005).

## KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, DISPOSITIONS, AND ATTITUDES

A holistic vision for readiness defines the knowledge, skills, disposition, and attitudes a school community aims to instill in all students. Importantly, a holistic vision must go beyond just knowledge or skills. Brighthouse, Ladd, and Loeb (2018) use the term "educational goods" to describe the holistic set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that provide students with the "capacity to function in the labor market, to be a good democratic citizen, to develop healthy personal relationships, and to treat others with respect in dignity"—in addition to performing well academically (p. 2).

Below we use Brighthouse et al.'s work to provide simple definitions of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes. We then use the example of a group of students being tasked with creating a word problem for solving an algebraic equation to bring these constructs to life.

- Knowledge refers to an understanding of facts, procedures, and other information.
- Skill refers to the ability to complete a task.
- Disposition refers to the ability to act upon one's knowledge and skills.
- Attitude refers to the conscious ways of thinking and feeling about people and things.

Now, consider a class of 9th grade students that is tasked by their teacher to work in groups to create a word problem for solving an algebraic equation. This word problem, the teacher explains, should be designed to be accessible for students whose first

language is not English. In this school, the majority of students whose first language is not English are recent immigrants from Vietnam. This school also has explicit shared values that include creativity, collaboration, curiosity, empathy, equity, and cultural relevancy.

As a prerequisite for completing this task, students need to be knowledgeable about what solving equations algebraically entails and have the skill to actually solve different types of equations. In terms of dispositions, it is equally important students have the confidence to creatively apply their knowledge and skill to the task at hand and the curiosity to learn about Vietnamese culture by collaborating with their newly arrived classmates on the task itself. Students whose first language is English also must exercise skills in empathy to understand how difficult it can be to understand an algebra word problem when you are learning a new language. Finally, students must have a positive attitude toward equity and cultural relevancy with an understanding that people learn best when they are provided with the support they need and the content they are exposed to resonates with their cultural and personal backgrounds.

When a teacher helps make explicit connections to shared values for students, an algebra word problem can go far beyond simply practicing knowledge and skills and can be transformed into an opportunity to reinforce a school's identity, strengthen its culture, and enhance educational equity for students traditionally marginalized in public schools.

Further, these inclusive developments and processes can produce the information needed to develop a shared vision for readiness.

This brief describes the theoretical and practical rationale behind the Inflexion Approach. We introduce the concept of organizational identity and its connection to public schools, including how education policy pressures, rapid demographic changes, and other external environmental influences have led to a crisis of identity in public schools (Neumerski and Cohen, 2019). Although school identity is relatively new to education research, the concept of organizational identity has a rich history in the management literature and in organizational studies. We go on to describe how it is essential for school leaders to engage their community to truly know who they are and whom they serve. Without this solid sense of school identity, educational leaders are unlikely to develop a shared vision for readiness that represents the broader school community. We then describe how the connection between a school's identity and its vision for readiness serve as the anchors from which school leaders make decisions that lead to coherent organizational structures and aligned learning approaches. When such systems exist, school personnel are well positioned to understand the needs of individual students and provide the necessary support for achieving educational equity across a range of student outcomes.

## ORGANIZATIONAL AND SCHOOL IDENTITY

The concept of organizational identity was first introduced by scholars in the 1980s (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Since then, organizational identity has been the subject of numerous studies in nearly all corners of social science, including anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and economics (Akerlof & Kranton, 2005; Pratt, Schultz, Ashforth, & Ravasi, 2016). It was not until 2019, however, that organizational identity made its way into conversations about schools (see Educational Policy, Issue 6). Instead, the concept has been lumped in with the neighboring concepts of culture, climate, and image or brand. Because of this, we start by defining these concepts and show how a school's identity is distinct from, yet very much related to its culture, climate, and external image/brand.

## Defining Identity and Related Concepts

As Neumerski and Cohen (2019) argue, “[o]rganizational identity is not the most tidy concept in social research” (p. 910). The same could be said of culture and climate (Houte, 2005). Adding to the complexity of these organization-specific concepts is the fact there is little consensus on a definition for identity, culture, climate, and image/brand. In order to frame these concepts, we draw on organizational theory (Demers, 2007; Ravasi, 2016), education research (Houte, 2005; Spillane, Seelig, Blaushild, Cohen, & Peurach, 2019), and insights from our own national and international field-based experiences to provide brief definitions of each concept as they apply to public schools.

- Culture:** A school’s culture is shaped and reinforced by the prevailing norms, behaviors, attitudes, structures, and practices that are commonplace, whether they are explicitly stated or more implicit in nature.
- Climate:** A school’s climate includes its culture, but also extends to its overall environmental quality, including but not limited to its physical surroundings and the general atmosphere resulting from the school’s location, setting, and condition.
- Image/Brand:** A school’s image could also be referred to its reputation, which is shaped by external perceptions of the school and from efforts of those within the school to shape those perceptions with rhetorical devices, such as branding and other statements of identity.
- Identity:** A school’s identity includes the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that are central, distinctive, and enduring. Said differently, a school’s identity refers to “those attributes that members feel are fundamental to (central) and uniquely descriptive of (distinctive) the organization and that persist within the organization over time (enduring)” (Spillane, et. al., 2019, p. 852).

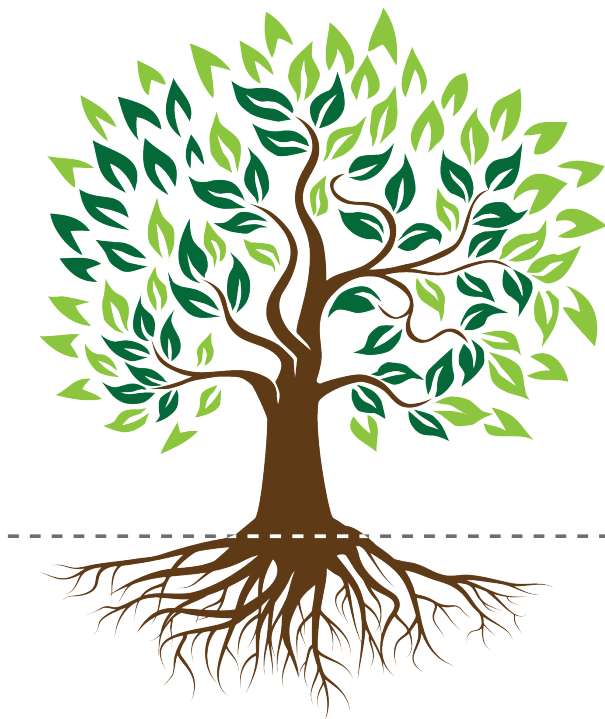
To illustrate the role of school identity and its relation to culture, climate, and image/brand, we use the image and concept of an oak tree. The oak tree’s root system is below the surface but the importance of the root system is constant and omnipresent in the life and vitality of the tree. The tree’s root system provides stability to its structure and nourishes the tree with water and nutrients across the seasons. Unless we have developed an explicit awareness of a tree’s root system, we may ignore its existence. The same tension exists for a school’s identity and culture—though both may provide vital sustenance, both have limited visibility in the day-to-day lives of students and educators.

The trunk represents the through line from the school’s identity to the shared vision for readiness that drives a tendency toward development and vitality. The branches of the tree represent the natural outgrowth of structures that promote stability, balance, and productivity, serving as the physical limbs from which the leaves, flowers, and nuts may grow. The leafing and budding represents the dynamic engagement of teaching and learning that all parts of a school are meant to support. Like the process of photosynthesis, the resulting student success and contributions feed into and strengthen the structures of the school and reinforce a school’s identity and vision for readiness.

The surrounding ecosystem, including the air quality, nearby buildings, other trees and plants, together with people, animals, and insects, all influence the tree's overall health and prospects for growth. Similarly, a school's climate, which is influenced by its immediate physical surroundings, the condition of the school building itself, and other environmental influences all impact the quality of teaching and learning going on each day. Finally, the appearance of the oak tree from the distance—its image—provides one with a decent understanding of its overall health and viability.

Ultimately, the root system, largely invisible to the naked eye, is vital to the growth of our oak tree. Similarly, a school's identity, often implicit below the surface of a school's daily function, dictates the vitality and success of student learning. Though a tree is biased toward upward and outward growth, the tree is also in constant response to its environment. During a drought, the roots may not be able to gather enough water to supply the leaves with sufficient hydration, which could result in a year of stunted growth. Similarly, a school's identity must buffer the vitality of the school and its shared aspirations toward student success in face of a changing climate of new policies and expectations.

What separates identity from culture in this metaphor is that once the importance of the root system is known, action can be taken to ensure it becomes healthy. Once we recognize the presence of its massive root system keeping the tree upright and stable, even in the worst conditions, we can see that root system expressed in the balance and girth of the trunk, the network of branches, and a full body of leaves. In a similar frame, once we make it explicit and known, we see a school's identity in its culture, structures, the learning experiences in the classroom, and the resulting success of students. If we haven't brought the root system to light, it won't be front and center in our consciousness when we consider the health of an oak tree. The work to make a school's identity explicit, felt, and understood is an important early step in the work toward school change.



ABOVE THE LINE

BELOW THE LINE

We present these definitions and the oak tree metaphor to ensure our readers understand the differences and similarities between identity, culture, climate, and image/brand. As the metaphor illustrates, each of these concepts are important in their own right, but we have chosen to focus on identity for three main reasons. First, as demonstrated above, identity must be considered separately because it centers on specific attributes that students, educators, and other stakeholders can specifically name, define, and, most importantly, exemplify in their daily actions and behavior. In understanding this entire concept, it is critical to differentiate identity from image/brand. As Spillane et al. (2019) note,

An organization's identity differs from an organization's image, which refers to how organizational members believe others view the organization. It also differs from organizational brand, or the image of the organization that managers present to stakeholders and the public writ large (p. 852).

Ideally, though, a school's image and brand should be an authentic expression of its identity. As Bartel, Baldi, and Dukerich (2016) argue,

stakeholders' decision to pursue a relationship with an organization often begins with their initial impressions of the organizational identity. Organizations, therefore, need to translate their internally held organizational identity into an intended organizational image that external stakeholders will likely find attractive (p. 486).

When looking at how these concepts transfer to public education, we have found that image and brand should be an ideal expression of identity and can often be the deciding factor in parents' choice regarding the school to which they will send their child. Linked back to the Oak Tree metaphor, the appearance of a tree from a distance, its image, provides one with a decent understanding of its overall health and viability.

Second, identity can also serve as the impetus for a strong school culture and climate by defining the attributes that students and educators are expected to exemplify. Crucially, the key attributes of a school's identity can easily be named and defined (and changed if necessary; Kreiner & Murphy, 2016). Since these identity attributes can be named and defined, engaging in identity work can result in tangible products, or statements of identity (e.g., explicit value and belief statement, vision for readiness). The statements alone are only claims of identity when they are not followed up with and supported by intentional structures that uphold their value. As Deming (2007) states, "a change in artifacts, even values and beliefs, is seen as superficial cultural change" (p. 81). New statements or words on a wall are meaningless unless put into action.

Changing culture requires the "modification of deep taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings," which often exist beneath the surface in schools (Deming, 2007, p. 83; Wheatley, 2001). When the key attributes of a school's identity are built upon a shared set of values, beliefs, and mental models that stakeholders consistently embody in their daily work and interactions, it can create clear expectations for what norms, behaviors, attitudes, and practices are deemed acceptable. As clear expectations lead to behavioral change across time, it becomes possible to shift the deep seated assumptions and ways of seeing the world that significantly influence culture and climate. When an oak tree appears unhealthy up close, its trunk may appear damaged and some of its branches may be barren. The culprit is not always obvious or able to be seen at the surface level. For example, the oak tree could have an unhealthy root system that may not be able

to gather enough water to supply the leaves with sufficient hydration, which could result in a year of stunted growth. Or, perhaps the air quality surrounding the tree is poor.

As we prove here and throughout subsequent briefs, the types of behavioral change that schools change requires can be triggered when statements of identity, such as a shared vision for readiness, are explicitly used to guide everyday school leadership decision-making. School leaders can help bring a school's identity alive by aligning organizational structures and learning approaches to a shared vision for readiness, which again, should be an authentic expression of its identity. When a school's identity is used consistently by school leaders to address issues of organizational structure and learning approaches it can serve as a natural leverage point for changing culture and climate. If a school's identity is not addressed, we argue it can contribute to poor culture and climate.

Identity work is especially important in public schools. The identity of public schools is all too often defined externally by the metrics used to hold them accountable, resulting in a crude dichotomy of "good" or "bad" schools. Often tied to these metrics, several websites, such as GreatSchools.com and Realtor.com, post school ratings using crude 0-10 scales. The identity of public schools is also often defined by simplistic and superficial measures like location (e.g., an "inner-city" or "suburban" or "rural" school). Identity work can help public schools seize control of the public narrative by defining who they are and where they want to go for themselves. Below we explore how shared values, beliefs, and mental models make up the foundation of a school's identity and also how other factors can influence and threaten a school's identity.

## Diving Deeper into School Identity

A commonly accepted definition of identity are those attributes of an organization that are central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Unfortunately--based on our school-level expertise in and around high schools--the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of a school are rarely made explicit nor shared across stakeholders. This is partly because the key attributes of identity are based on individuals' values, beliefs, and mental models, which are "abstract, complex, and/or highly subjective" (Bartel et al., 2016, p. 482). For example, many school's claim to value creativity, but how creativity is defined, what creativity looks like inside and outside the classroom, and how parents and teachers can support students in being creative is often left up to the imagination.

**Values, beliefs, and mental models.** Because of the subjectivity inherent to these constructs, it is not surprising that Margaret Wheatley (2001) argues schools "do not arise from a core of shared beliefs about the purpose of public education." (p. XX). The result is a situation where stakeholders "co-inhabit the same organizational and community space without weaving together mutually sustaining relationships" (Wheatley, 2001, Para. 14–15). Wheatley (2001) also found, instead, that stakeholders in these circumstances develop self-protecting behaviors and use their political position to get what they want. Schools will only change in systemic and sustainable ways when stakeholders work in concert with school leaders to surface shared values and beliefs (Wheatley, 2001). Only then is it possible to develop "a coherent image of the organizational identity—the goals, values, and interests that define the organization and enable members to act with order and purpose" (Bartel et al., 2016, p. 484).

Shared values and beliefs vary widely among stakeholders and across communities. Common examples of shared values we see in our work with schools include but are not limited to creativity, critical thinking, curiosity, empathy, empowerment, engagement, equity, growth mindset, inquiry, innovation, motivation, and resiliency. Common beliefs include but are not limited to believing all students can learn and be successful, all students have unique assets and strengths, and that when schools partner with and listen to the communities they serve, they can dismantle inequitable structures and improve outcomes for historically marginalized groups of students. Additionally, values and beliefs are heavily influenced by the way people see, understand, and make sense of the world (Senge et al., 2012).

Peter Senge and his colleagues (2012) argue that mental models—“the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world”—significantly influence individuals’ values and beliefs as well as their attitudes and behaviors (p. 99). We argue that mental models are surfaced frequently, but rarely with explicit awareness from school leaders and teachers, making changing attitudes and behaviors difficult. For example, when a school leadership team focuses most of its time identifying poor performers on tests, that suggests a certain mental model or common mindset about what is most important and how to support the improvement of those students through basic numeracy and literacy skills. A more holistic mental model about how to support students is evidenced, for instance, when a school leadership team or school faculty places the name of every student on the wall and identifies any student that no one on the faculty knows or has a relationship with, and makes it a point to spend time with that student so that students feel included and as if they have a community who cares and supports them. The different mental models about supporting students can be seen in these two contrasting examples as starting with a judgment about student’s basic academic skills as measured by tests or by starting with adult-student relationships and ensuring every student is known by name, face, and need. Revealing the different mental models held by stakeholders represents a significant step toward developing a shared vision for readiness that can guide the collective work of students, parents, teachers, and school leaders.



**Other factors that can influence a school’s identity.** Taken together, shared values, beliefs, and mental models make up the foundation of a school’s identity. It is important to note, however, that factors outside of shared values, beliefs, and mental models can exert significant

influence on a school's identity, especially if not addressed. Gioia and Hamilton (2016) describe the three main theoretical lenses used to frame these influences, including the **social actor**, **social construction**, and **institutional** perspectives. In the social actor and social construction perspectives, organizational identity is generated collectively by the members of the organization itself—the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that are central, distinctive, and enduring. At the local level, the “traditions” and “histories” that alumni, staff, and other community members carry with them can have a profound, enduring influence on a school's identity. For example, as the demographic makeup of a school changes across time, what is valued by the broader community may change in ways that challenge the enduring attributes that are held closely by alumni and long-serving staff.

In the **institutional perspective**, “organizational identity is still internally determined,” “but because organizations are embedded in broader social contexts, identity is highly influenced by strong external forces” (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016, p. 26). Public schools are fundamentally situated in the broader social context in which they reside, making them highly susceptible to external forces. Our research and findings show that a critical responsibility of school leaders is to address how these external forces influence a school's identity and the image seen by external stakeholders. When these forces and perceptions are not addressed or directly challenged they can threaten a school's identity and have a negative influence on culture and climate. Ultimately, school leaders are responsible for understanding, calling out, and framing a response to the various forces that are threatening the shared identity of the school.

**Potential threats to a school's identity.** Threats to identity can be internal events (e.g., scandals, changes in leadership), external events (e.g., new state policies, negative media coverage), or ongoing changes to the overall environment (e.g., economic recessions, changing school demographics). Those events and changes cause all or some stakeholders to question the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of their school's identity (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). Emerging educational research suggests public schools are facing many of the external and ongoing environmental threats described above (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019). For example, the standards and accountability movement, now well into its fourth decade, has put immense pressure on schools to improve student academic outcomes, generally, and close opportunity gaps between low and high-performing students on traditional academic metrics. Along with these pressures, the consequences of school failure have continued to intensify. School systems that are persistently failing to serve their students, based primarily on traditional academic outcomes, are often subject to state sanctions—including possible state takeover, conversion to a charter school, or outright closure. The stigma of being labeled as “failing” or “underperforming” can also result in the loss of students who transfer to neighboring public, charter, and private schools. While school closures pose an immediate risk to school-based personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers, maintenance staff) and their careers, school closures can also have lasting impacts on the students and communities they were built to serve (Deeds & Pattilo, 2015). When the response (whether required by law or not) to these pressures and sanctions is to redesign school systems, it can fundamentally alter the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of a school's identity. Even if sanctions are not that intense, the constant threat posed by label of failing or underperforming and accompanying negative publicity will stymie the development of a positive shared identity for a school.

Ongoing societal, economic, and political changes are also significantly altering the demographic makeup of schools and the needs of individual students (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019). Income



inequality continues to rise across the United States, leading to increased income segregation in public schools with some schools serving more and more students from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). The arrival of immigrants and refugees from Central America and elsewhere in the world has increased the number of students who need English language instructional support while also increasing diversity in U.S. schools. Access to adequate health care and other social services is also declining, putting enormous pressure on schools to provide wraparound support for students. Simply put, public school educators are needing to serve more culturally and racially diverse students while at the same time being asked to provide students with much more than simple academic instruction (Pew Research Center, 2007). These changes exert pressure on schools to adapt their beliefs and mental models.

Educational researchers Christine Neumerski and David Cohen (2019) capture the culminating effect of these external and ongoing environmental threats in their article on what is at the “heart of the matter,” the concept of school identity (p. 882). Neumerski and Cohen found something unexpected in their large-scale study on how environmental influences, which include the pressures and changes mentioned above, influence the organizational structures and learning approaches employed by different types of school systems. The authors hypothesized these environmental influences would have an effect on decisions surrounding school structures and instruction, but not in how educators would frame the situation before them:

What we did not expect was that they would describe another critical element to their work in systems: They perceived the identity of their school systems as changing. Leaders across systems asked, “Who are we? What does it mean for us to be a school system?” For some leaders, this question had a sense of urgency, suggesting a crisis of identity. For others, this question was embedded in a desire to redesign their school system (p. 883).

Unfortunately, organizations, including schools, “often fail to respond adequately to identity threats” (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016, p. 252). One reason for failing to respond adequately, if at all, is because not all stakeholders may view an event or an ongoing environmental change as threatening to their school’s identity. Indeed, opinions differ, often fiercely, on whether issues such as accountability and school choice are beneficial or detrimental education policies. However, we argue that schools often fail to respond to potential threats because they do not have a solid sense of who they are or what they want to achieve for all students. In other words, schools often lack a shared identity. And if they do have a solid identity built on shared values, beliefs, and mental models, that identity is often not made explicit to all stakeholders.

#### Our Mission and Vision

We are a student-centered learning community where staff members work cooperatively to assure the success of every student. We exist to provide a safe and orderly educational environment that fosters student achievement in academic skills and growth in social and emotional maturity. We emphasize high expectations and academic success while meeting the unique needs of all students by ensuring students’ achievement of both district content standards and of extra value standards unique to the theme areas of our school.

## The Need to Develop and Communicate a Shared Identity

While the idea that members share a single unified identity is common, empirical research has demonstrated that such a uniformly agreed-on perception is rare. Instead, members hold different, albeit related and overlapping, perceptions of their organization's identity (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016, p. 240).

Schools are likely to have multiple identities, which could be oppositional, complementary, or just different (Pratt, 2016). Multiple identities will likely emerge in large organizations, such as large comprehensive high schools, where teachers are generally responsible for only one content area and are often siloed within a lone academic department (e.g., math, science, special education). Across time, these academic departments naturally develop unique identities with different shared values and beliefs around teaching and learning. Often, academic departments also have different ideas, or mental models, about what knowledge, skills, and support students need to be successful after high school. We also find that there is very little communication or collaboration across departments.

School leaders have four main options for addressing problematic issues that can arise from multiple identities: compartmentalizing different academic departments, removing individuals who do not represent the school's overarching identity, aggregating multiple identities under one unifying umbrella, or integrating multiple identities to create a new identity (Pratt, 2016). Organizational theory, and the realities of public education suggest that integrating multiple identities is the preferred approach for schools because resources are scarce, and, when closely examined, the existing identities within schools are often more complementary than oppositional. The most rational and efficient option for school leaders with multiple identities under one school roof is to engage in a process that brings together a representative group of stakeholders to generate a shared identity that creates explicit linkages among different individuals, groups, and departments. As we describe in the following section, stakeholder engagement of this variety can also help bridge the gap that frequently exists between a school and the community it serves.

In our work, we have observed that public schools encounter many factors that influence its identity, including a lack of shared values, beliefs, and mental models; internal and external forces (e.g., policy pressures and demographic changes); and the existence of multiple identities. Schools, alongside the communities that they serve, can counter these factors by developing a shared identity that creates connections between different internal and external stakeholders. However, for these actions to be effective, schools must ensure that whatever shared identity is created truly represents its students and the communities they come from.

## The Misalignment of School and Community Identity

In general, we find that schools usually have an identity that is seen, heard, and/or felt by the community it serves. In schools that serve communities of Color, there is often a misalignment of identity between the school and community being served (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1990). The U.S. public school system has been built on narrow definitions of values related to teaching, learning, and achievement that represent Eurocentric values and perspectives. That antiquated foundation and the persistent structural racism and inequities

experienced by many communities of Color often result in a school identity that fails to account for a myriad of assets, strengths, and gifts of its diverse students and surrounding community. In other words, most schools are built on system values and structures that are not designed to incorporate or celebrate the unique characteristics and capital of non-White and/or non-middle and upper class community members (Gillborn, 2005; 2014). As schools follow the national demographic shifts, becoming less middle class and White, the misalignment between school and community identity is becoming more pronounced.

In many circumstances, the consequences of misaligned school identities have been severe. In a wide-ranging literature review on “How People Learn,” the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine asserted, “A significant factor in school failure may be a mismatch between the socialization practices a student experiences at home and what and how they are taught in school” (2018, p. 72). For example, imagine a school where White-Eurocentric cultural norms dominate teaching and learning practices, but the student body is primarily made up of students of Color. When the non-White cultural norms are ignored, opportunities for misalignment will exist and become exacerbated at multiple levels of the student experience. Teachers may be unaware of the degree of relevance of the examples they use on tests, the type of languages students use in and out of class, or the various “funds” of knowledge and intuitions that students of Color carry from their home, family, traditions, cultural practices, and neighborhoods (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). One example comes from the different ways stories are told, such as topic-associative style, common in African-American communities, where segments of the story are connected by the narrator’s own internal point of view, as compared to the more linear style of story-telling common in schools where segments of the story follow a sequential order tied to an overall theme or topic (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 2005).

For example, story-telling is a language skill. Topic-associative oral styles have been observed among African American children (Michaels, 1981a,b; 1986). In contrast, white children use a more linear narrative style that more closely approximates the linear expository style of writing and speaking that schools teach (see Gee, 1989; Taylor and Lee, 1987; Cazden et al., 1985; Lee and Slaughter-Defoe, 1995). Judgments may be made by white and black teachers as they listen to these two language styles: white teachers find the topic-associative stories hard to follow and are much more likely to infer that the narrator is a low-achieving student; black teachers are more likely to positively evaluate the topic-associative style (Cazden, 1988:17)” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018, p. 73).

When this misalignment is not identified, any disengagement or underperformance from students of Color is often misdiagnosed as resistance or a lack of motivation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). In the worst circumstances, teachers make false determinations about students’ intelligence and academic potential rather than seeing the cause of the problem as a lack of alignment between how they are teaching and how students were raised to learn or how learning takes place throughout their community. In some cases, disengagement may be a proactive and protective measure to avoid environments that make a student feel devalued and identity threatened (Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018).

This idea that school systems are failing to embrace the assets of their communities has been well vetted in research (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Yosso’s work (2005) raises awareness of how frequently schools ask young people, especially Black and Brown students, to check their

individual identities at the school door. Given how much those identities encompass students' many strengths and abilities, this persistent issue handicaps students of Color, compromising their confidence and engagement in school. It is critical to point out the racism and discrimination that has historically served as a hindrance to an authentic sense of self for diverse students. The typical infrastructure that defines primary and secondary education in the United States has evolved very little over the past 150 years and most public schools are still organized in a way that impedes students' individual identities, especially for students of Color (Love, 2004). In recent years, across the United States, racism and discrimination are on the rise, and schools are not immune to these trends (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). To counter these trends and develop school identities that authentically reflect their communities, education leaders must continuously engage stakeholders— including students, families, and educators.

## Using Stakeholder Engagement to Improve Identity Alignment

We argue stakeholder engagement is perhaps the most effective way of bringing a school's identity into alignment with the identity of the community it serves. Stakeholder engagement also has benefits that go far beyond identity alignment. In general, effective partnerships between schools, families and communities are positively associated with students' academic and behavioral outcomes across numerous studies (see Sheldon, 2019). Engaging families and community members is also a critical component in the school change formula (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010) and is a common characteristic of high-performing schools, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the student body or the neighborhood in which the school resides (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

There are several ways schools can facilitate stakeholder engagement, such as simply providing families with ongoing communication about school activities, encouraging volunteering and collaboration with community organizations, and involving families in the decision-making process (see Epstein et al., 2019). To be clear, these and other types of stakeholder engagements can all help bridge the gap between families and educators to promote greater alignment between school and community identities. This brief focuses on involving stakeholders in the

decision-making processes as a way to generate tangible statements of identity, such as a shared vision for readiness. Schools take a significant step toward creating culturally responsive learning approaches when they embrace and leverage the assets of their communities to create a shared vision for readiness (Sanders & Galindo, 2014). Below we describe stakeholder engagement processes meant to generate a shared vision for readiness that is anchored in the key attributes of a school's identity.



## SHARED VISION FOR READINESS

We have found that a shared vision for readiness is the most useful, tangible, and authentic statement of a school's identity. Watkiss and Ann Glynn (2016) note the importance of products, like shared statements of aims and goals, to provide meaning to an organization's identity.

Organizational products, as a public form of organizational artifact, provide a key link between the internal and external stakeholders regarding an organization's identity. As such, artifacts act as a cognitive anchor in giving meaning to the organization's identity in different and unique ways" (emphasis added; p. 320-321).

These statements of identity can also include a description of shared values and beliefs or a postsecondary readiness definition. Although all statements of identity are worthwhile topics, we focus exclusively on a shared vision for readiness, which can be an invaluable tool for guiding schools through large-scale change efforts with cohesion and shared purpose.



As a reminder of the importance of a shared vision for readiness, we point readers to the second half of Albert et al.'s (2000) simple definition of identity, what a school "stands for and where it intends to go" (emphasis added; p. 13). A school's identity and its vision for readiness should be intrinsically linked. We stress, should be, because we also know that a common obstacle to achieving and sustaining school change is what Cohen et al. (2017) refer to as lack of "consensus on outcomes," the specific knowledge and skills schools want all students to graduate with (p. 204). We surmise that one underlying barrier to a shared sense of identity, specific to large high schools, is the fact that each department may have its own distinct vision for student readiness. When a clear, concise, and compelling vision for readiness is created and shared across a school it

can be used by administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders to constantly ask questions such as, Is this who we are? Does this align with what we are trying to achieve for all students? Below we begin by presenting research supporting the importance of shared visions. We then discuss how a school's vision for readiness should be

- representative of all stakeholder groups;
- connected to the instructional core;
- inclusive of transformative concepts that promote educational equity;
- consider the value of college, career, and life readiness; and
- communicated widely both internally and externally.

We end by briefly discussing how setting the two anchors for school change—a school's identity and its vision for readiness—can guide school leader decision-making. Using a school's identity and its vision for readiness to inform alignment of organizational structures and learning approaches are the topics of subsequent briefs in this series. In short, once these two anchors are set, schools can develop long-term, incremental plans for school change with a specific focus on improving equity by dismantling inequitable structures and employing universal learning approaches that tap the unique assets and strengths of all students.

## What the Evidence Says about Shared Visions

A common finding across organizational theory (e.g., Senge et al., 2012) and educational research (e.g., Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008) is that developing a shared vision is a prerequisite for continuous improvement. For example, in a synthesis of the evidence, Leithwood et al. (2008) put forth seven strong claims about successful school leadership. The authors claim that “building vision and setting directions” is one of four types of practices common to successful school leaders (p. 29). The authors argue effective vision building can motivate stakeholders, clarify roles and goals, and guide strategic planning. Similarly, developing a shared vision for readiness is critically important for addressing and combating the potential threats to identity referenced earlier in this brief. Cohen et al. (2017) take up this issue when they highlight a key dilemma facing public schools—how to develop coherent systems when faced with an educational policy arena defined by standards, accountability, and market-based policies (e.g., school choice, charter schools). The authors stress schools need to reach a consensus (i.e., a shared vision) among stakeholders on the outcomes they will pursue as a system to effectively channel these pressures.

There is an important distinction between a general “shared vision”, the type of vision educators are accustomed to, and a “shared vision for readiness.” The former tends to include generic statements such as “Our Vision is to Graduate Students Ready for the 21st Century” or “Our Vision is to Inspire Lifelong Learners.” A shared vision for readiness, on the other hand, should include specific, yet simple language that describes the knowledge and skills the school and its community aims to equip students with so they are ready to be successful when they graduate high school. Our research and experience also suggest that visions for readiness be tethered to the reality of teaching and learning in the classroom, promote educational equity, and balance college and career readiness. Ultimately, we find most visions contain these characteristics when school leaders take care to meaningfully engage a representative group of stakeholders to develop a vision.

## Processes for Developing and Communicating a Shared Vision for Readiness

There is no one right way to develop a shared vision for readiness that is grounded in a school's identity. That said, there are several essential processes that school leaders can institute to ensure visions are representative of its identity. First and foremost, stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members must be invited to both provide input and participate in the process of generating a shared vision. A common problem is that too often students and parents are invited to provide input via a survey or listening session, which

limits authentic involvement and a sense of ownership in the process. By involvement, we mean stakeholders are part of an active co-creation process with school staff that results in information used to generate a shared vision for readiness.

These types of co-creation processes can be structured in numerous ways. What is key is that the goal of the process (e.g., generating a shared vision for readiness) is clear, that participants understand the current school and community context, and that other key considerations related to preparing students for life after high school, are central to the process. From there, unearthing the participants' values, beliefs, and mental models is critical to identifying commonalities and shared understandings. Finally, having participants envision a future for their students and school is crucial for developing a shared mental model of readiness. These ingredients can then be used to create a draft vision statement.

Ideally, many stakeholders, who all hold different views of the world, contribute to the information used to create a draft vision statement. Because not everyone's views will be represented in the draft vision statement, it becomes necessary to solicit feedback on whether the draft is acceptable and responsive to different groups of individuals. Since it is not always feasible to reconvene a large group of stakeholders, one approach is to identify leaders of different groups of individuals that can serve in a smaller group

who vet the draft vision statement and provide recommendations for potential revisions. This method also ensures school leaders are held accountable for developing a draft vision statement that speaks to as many voices as feasible and appropriate.

**Ensuring representativeness and minimizing power differentials.** In terms of both input and participation, schools must work to secure a representative group of participants. In



Our district is **ROOTED IN COMMUNITY** and committed to giving our students experiences that enable them to **GROW STRONG** and become confident, lifelong learners, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for their future.

**OUR PROMISE**

We will provide our students with opportunities to care for themselves, others and the world around them; to learn through hands-on exploration how to find solutions and persist through challenges; and to develop the critical skills and creativity required for success in an evolving world.



To ensure students are equipped to be lifelong learners our community commits to:

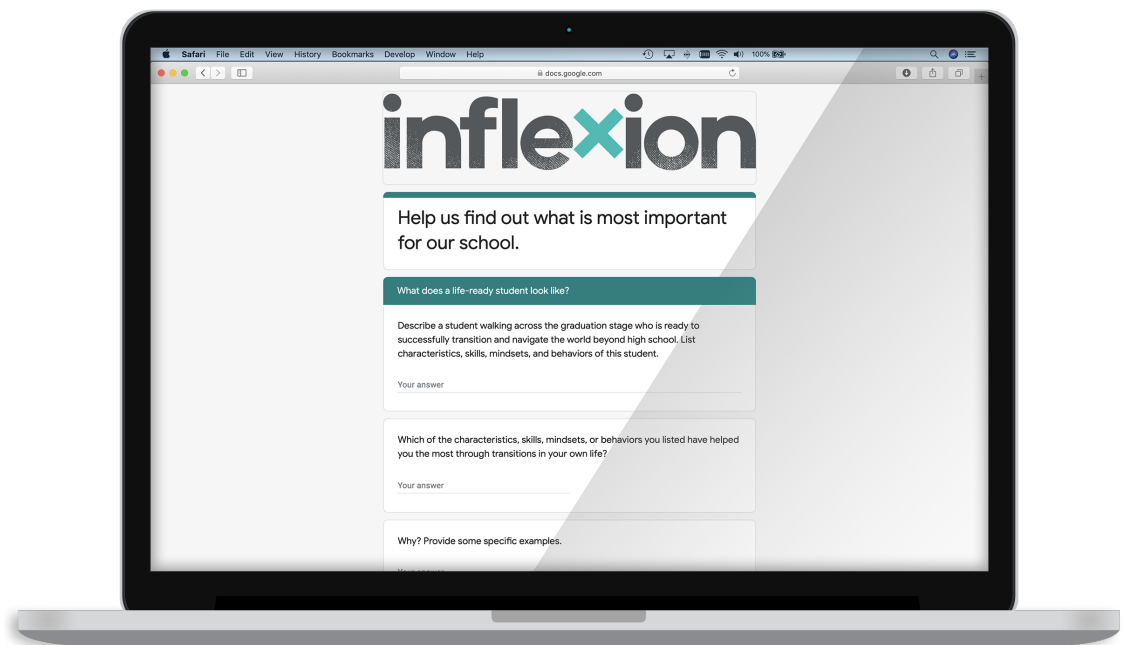
- WE CARE DEEPLY**  
Encouraging and Supporting Each Other
- WE STAND STRONG**  
Exploring Solutions and Overcoming Obstacles
- WE ADAPT AND GROW**  
Learning and Working Hard for our Future

particular, research shows certain groups of individuals are less likely to participate in stakeholder engagement. Epstein et al. (2019) summarize this research below.

“Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from school, fathers, parents with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and those without easy access to new technologies are less involved at the school building, on average, unless the school organizes opportunities for families to become involved at various times and in various places to support the school and their students. These parents may be as involved as other parents with their children at home” (p. 15).

Simply sending out invitations to provide input or participate in a school-based event is not enough (Epstein et al., 2019). If schools take an equitable approach, they make intentional efforts and investments to reach those stakeholders they know are less likely to engage with school staff. As Kose (2011) notes, exemplary principals who incorporate explicit discussions around transformative concepts into a school’s vision explicitly sought the inclusion of traditionally marginalized stakeholders during the vision development process.

There are several ways to solicit input and encourage involvement. A structured survey is one method for gathering input from many individuals and groups of people. However, we find in our work that response rates for stakeholder-specific surveys are generally far lower than schools want or expect. Interviews, focus groups, and structured meetings are additional methods for gathering information from stakeholders. However, when seeking authentic stakeholder engagement, simply providing access to involvement alone is not sufficient to ensure a collective shared vision for readiness is created (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). A representative group of stakeholders must be involved in the process of generating a shared vision for readiness, and as we asserted above, schools must put in place systems explicitly designed to ensure that dominant perspectives do not overpower the input and voice of historically marginalized groups of people (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013).







When privilege and power dynamics are not identified and managed, soliciting input can turn into a symbolic exercise rather than an authentic process that leads to a shared vision for readiness representative of the school and its community. Unfortunately, as many educators know, shared visions are not always developed in partnership with students, parents, and other members of the community. When input from these stakeholders is solicited, it is sometimes done with a compliance mindset, and rarely represents the participants assessed. For example, California's Local Control Funding Formula requires all districts to engage stakeholders on an annual basis to develop goals and associated strategies that are documented in Local Control Accountability Plans. A study that included multi-year case studies of districts, a survey of California district superintendents, and public opinion polls found the "majority of districts demonstrated shallow forms of engagement". Additionally, research has shown that districts and schools often experience "widespread struggles to attract participation, particularly among traditionally underserved stakeholders" (Marsh et al., 2018, pp. 2-3).

Surface level stakeholder engagement diminishes the power of shared visions for generating a mutual understanding of purpose and commitment from parents, students, and the broader community (Senge et al., 2012). When district and school leaders fail to meaningfully engage a representative group of stakeholders, they often revert back to the default option and create the vision by themselves or with a small group of leaders that may or may not include teachers. Senge et al. illustrates the problematic nature of this behavior.

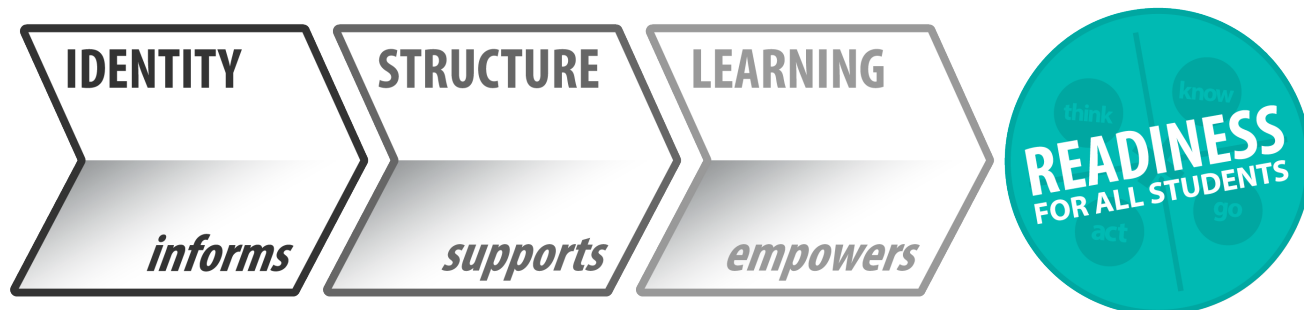
One might assume that "vision" is solely the top leader's job. In schools, the "vision" task generally falls to the superintendent, the principal, and the school board. Within a classroom, it may fall to a teacher. But visions based on authority are not sustainable. They may succeed in carrying a school or school system through a crisis... But when the crisis is over, people will fall apart, back to their fractionalized and desperate hopes and dreams (p. 87).

This does not mean school leaders should take a completely hands-off approach. Rather, it is the job of school leaders to translate the information provided by stakeholders into a vision for readiness that is not so broad that it is meaningless, but also not too detailed that it is unmemorable. School leaders are also best positioned to understand how to connect their vision to the school's instructional core.

**Connecting visions to the instructional core.** As Senge et al. (2012) states, shared visions should be based in the current reality, clearly articulate future aspirations, and provide a path for moving forward. One way to do this is to connect the vision to the instructional core. In their book on creating the conditions necessary for continuous school improvement, Forman, Stosich, and Bocala (2018) argue connecting a vision to the instructional core (i.e., students, teachers, content)

marks the beginning of the improvement cycle. The authors maintain that to be effective, visions must go beyond articulating desired student outcomes to also provide clarity about the role of teachers and content in achieving success. To realize their vision, school leaders must also build corresponding “structures and conditions to foster professional development and collaboration” (p. 62). The result of connecting a vision to the instructional core and making corresponding organizational structural changes is a more coherent organization that slowly eliminates the compartmentalization and multiple identities that are typically found in large public schools. The Inflexion Approach, illustrated below, centers around these ideas and relationships.

## THE **inflexion** APPROACH



**Including transformative concepts to promote educational equity.** School leaders also should work to translate information from stakeholders into transformative concepts for improving educational equity. Kose (2011) used interviews with 15 principals--identified by their colleagues as leading for equity--to determine the practices that enable the development of transformative school visions. Transformative leadership entails helping stakeholders understand and ultimately address issues related to equity, social justice, diversity, and oppression. Kose found these exemplary principals incorporated explicit discussions around transformative concepts and sought the inclusion of traditionally marginalized stakeholders during the vision development process. The content of the vision statements and the focus on transformative concepts, in particular, depended on the existing context, including the history of the school, the power dynamics between different stakeholders, and the level of support or resistance among stakeholders. Regardless of the content, vision statements became an important vehicle for facilitating transformative leadership.

**Considering the value college, career, and life readiness.** Given the heavy emphasis on traditional metrics in measuring student achievement to evaluate school quality and college admissions processes, it comes as no surprise that schools focus so intently on improving standardized test score performance. This inequitable focus on traditional academic metrics has created a false sense of readiness and has also highlighted why balancing college, career, and life readiness becomes so important in vision for readiness statements. Speaking to a holistic set of knowledge and skills is likely to be more representative of a school's identity and sends a signal to stakeholders that the school values the whole child versus exclusively valuing traditional academic content and performance outcomes. Further combating this content-driven idea of readiness and success, a steady stream of research during the past decade has shown that students need much more than proficiency in numeracy and literacy to be successful after high school (Conley, 2014; Farrington et al., 2012; Jones & Kahn, 2017; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and

Medicine, 2018; National Research Council, 2012). This research shows students' interpersonal, intrapersonal, and metacognitive skills; social-emotional well-being; mental and physical health; and general postsecondary transitional skills are just as, if not more, important to their success after high school as academic content knowledge.

One model for categorizing the different knowledge and skills that stakeholders value is the **Four Keys to College and Career Readiness**. David Conley, Inflexion's (formerly the Educational Policy Improvement Center) founder and former CEO, developed the **Four Keys** framework based on research exploring the types of knowledge and skills students need to be successful in postsecondary education. **Key cognitive strategies** refer to the "ways of thinking that are necessary for postsecondary-level work," with a strong focus on research-related skills (p. 55). **Key content knowledge** are the core concepts and big ideas that define subject areas as well as the technical knowledge and skills needed for specific career pathways. **Key learning skills and techniques** include two categories: student ownership of learning (e.g., goal-setting, self-awareness, persistence) and learning techniques (e.g., time management and strategic reading). Finally, **key transition knowledge and skills** includes "information that is not equally accessible to all students," especially for "families and communities historically underrepresented in higher education" (p. 56). Key transition knowledge and skills include, but are not limited to, college admission requirements, financial aid policies, career pathway information, and postsecondary institutional norms and expectations. The Four Keys is a framework that can be used to help ensure a balanced approach to college, career, and life readiness—i.e., how students think, know, act, and go.

**Communicating a school's vision to reinforce its identity.** Once "organizations began changing their organizational identity claims, the next step is to communicate this change to stakeholders" (Bhatt, Van Riel, & Baumann, 2016, p. 444). In other words, once a school adopts a formal vision for readiness, a critical next step is to begin communicating that vision in a way that reinforces the school's identity. This is especially important given the high likelihood of multiple identities operating within public schools and the historical disconnect between schools and communities.

To help communicate an organization's identity, Schinoff, Rogers, and Corley (2016) argue for **identity custodians**. Identity custodians are individuals who convey messages related to an organization's identity using three primary methods: **saying, showing, or staging**. Perhaps the most common way of communicating a school's identity is by **saying**, which includes individual conversations, mass emails, and other forms of direct communication with internal and external stakeholders. A school might initially roll out its vision for readiness using a mass email to students, parents, and staff. Ideally, this email would also illustrate how the vision for readiness connects to the school's shared values, beliefs, and mental models, helping demonstrate where the school is intending to go aligns with what the community wants for all students.

**Showing** ranges from formal and informal mentoring, the characteristics of the physical space a school resides in, images that appear on walls, and other similarly themed artifacts. A school might highlight individuals or groups that exemplify the shared values and beliefs. For example, Ocean View High School, located in Huntington Beach, California, needed a way to show school staff how the school's multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and First Best Instruction (FBI) looked like on the ground. The solution was something called Monday Morning Wins, a weekly newsletter that focuses on examples of how both MTSS and FBI positively influence students with explicit links to the school's shared values.

## MONDAY MORNING WINS

3/13/17

- Check out our Business Academy on their trip to USC (sorry Bruin fans)...what a great way to connect our students to College and life after OV. Opportunity and Access; College and Career; and I would add Learning and Instruction for this win.

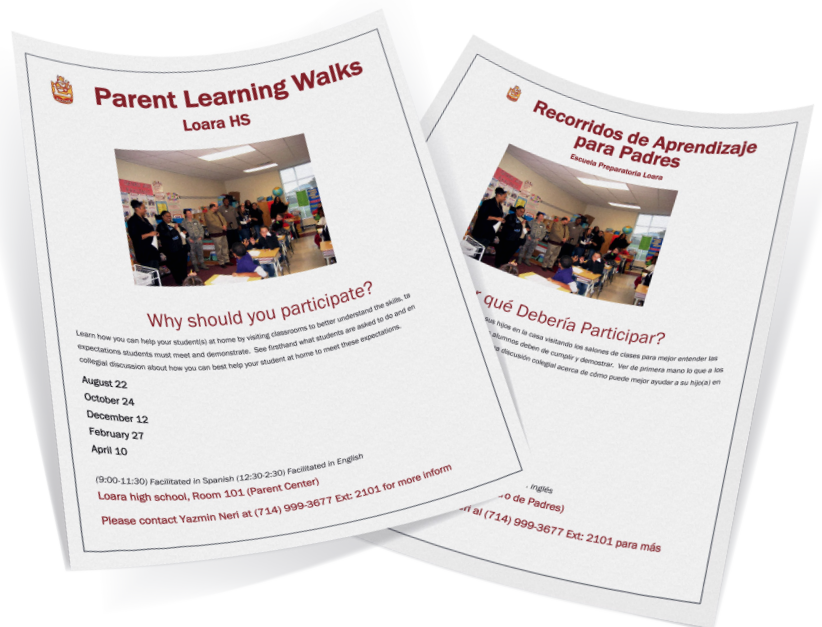


- APES was at it again...another successful trip to Big Bear (this win is for MTSS too-talk about engaging students!) Opportunity and Access, Learning and Instruction. This trip was a great way to have students apply what they have been learning to situations outside of the classroom!

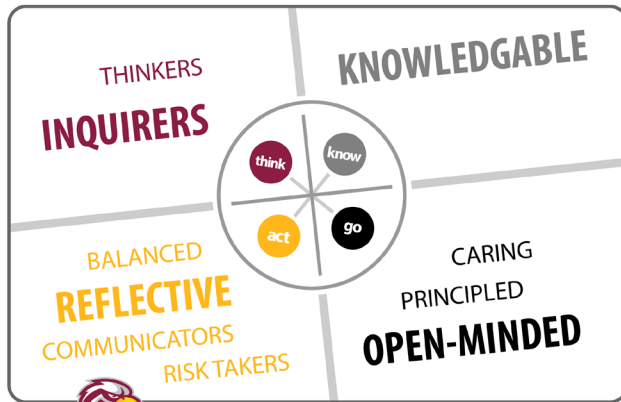


Finally, **staging** occurs when students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders are provided with opportunities to enact or experience the school's identity, either during one-time events or through rituals and routines. One example from the Anaheim Union High School District includes a routine referred to as Parent Learning Walks. In these small groups of parents, led by a staff member, parents and/or caregivers conduct a series of classroom visits to see how well the observed teaching and learning align to the district's vision for readiness; in this example, the district vision is supposed to align to the 5Cs (i.e., collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, character). Beyond providing parents with an opportunity to experience first-hand what the district's vision for readiness feels like in the classroom, AUHSD explicitly designs parent learning walks as a way to build stronger connections between the school and the community it serves.

Though informal identity custodians may exist in schools, we have found that schools must be explicit about assigning specific individuals the responsibility for saying, showing, or staging--as well as identifying situations where clear identity misalignment is occurring. When identity custodians are saying, showing, or staging, they are most likely to build coherence across a school when they convey messages with high clarity and intentionality. Perhaps even more important, identity custodians should tie their messages, examples, and activities explicitly to the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that define the school's identity as a way to build awareness and understanding.



## Ocean View High School Student Outcome Profile and Expectations



Ocean View believes knowledge is power; therefore, the mission is to engage students in the finest possible education, preparing them for successful lives. The student profile above reflects specific learner outcomes and expectations that we strive to develop in all students. While we strive to develop each of the outcomes listed, we have committed as a community to intentionally share the responsibility of developing students who are knowledgeable, inquirers, communicators, and open-minded. The following articulates each area:

**INQUIRERS** have the skills necessary to **conduct inquiry** and research and are able to **show independence** in learning. Students develop a **natural curiosity** that fosters an enjoyment and love of learning that can be sustained through life.

**KNOWLEDGABLE** students develop discipline specific knowledge as well as a **shared set of literacy skills** focused on reading and writing. Knowledgeable students explore concepts, ideas, and issues that have local and global significance. In doing so, students **acquire in-depth knowledge** and understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines.

**REFLECTIVE** students give **thoughtful consideration** to their own learning and experiences. They are able to **assess and understand** their strengths and limitations in order to support their **learning and personal development**.

**OPEN MINDED** students are those who develop a clear sense of their own **personal identity** (culture, history) and are open to the perspectives, values, and traditions of other individuals and communities. Open minded learners seek and evaluate a range of perspectives and are **willing to grow** from a variety of experiences.

## SETTING THE ANCHORS FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

School leaders have the immense responsibility for shepherding stakeholders through a process that unearths the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that are used to create a shared vision for readiness. Furthermore, this shared vision for readiness must speak to the core of the school's identity and serve as a bridge that closes the gap between the school and the community it serves. This is just the first step in pursuing school change. The next steps are aligning the school's organizational structure and its learning approaches to its identity and vision for readiness. This is not a small nor easy task but we have found that **vision without execution is nothing more than a hallucination**. Unfortunately, we find that many schools do create a vision for readiness in collaboration with stakeholders, but the final draft of the vision becomes the end of the process.

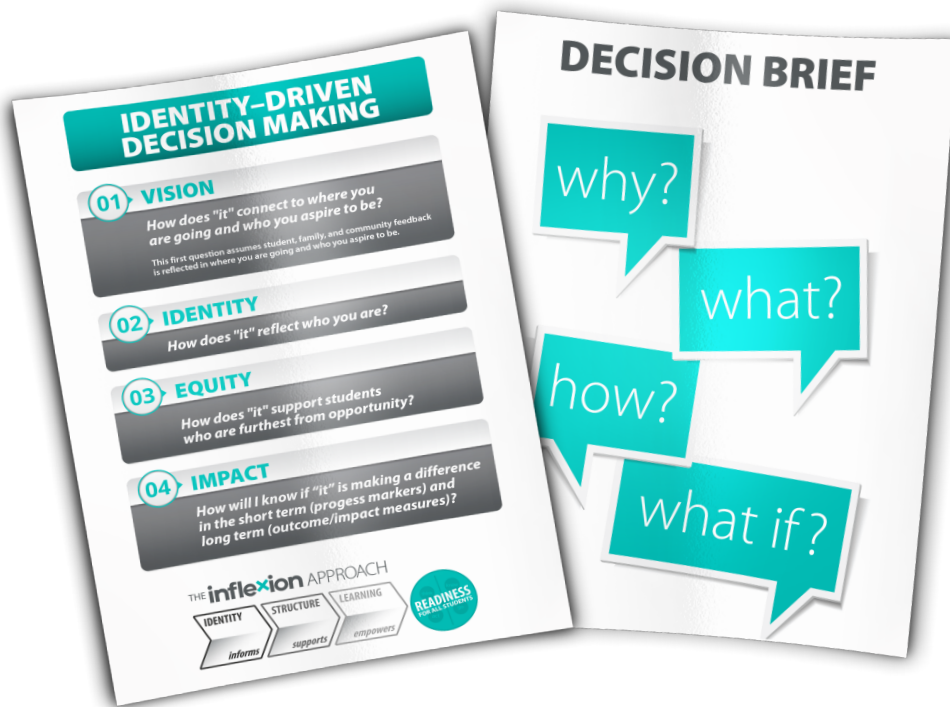
To be realized, a vision for readiness must become a part of everyday decision-making by educational leaders. School leaders make

hundreds of decisions during the course of any given week related to any number of issues; how these decisions align or do not align to the school's identity and its vision for readiness should be an explicit part of every decision. When decisions are informed by a vision for readiness, the school leadership works toward internal coherence—a powerful approach for promoting organizational learning and facilitating school improvement (Forman et al., 2018). Working toward internal coherence can also cement a school's identity, as Ashforth (2016) argues below:

Finally, as stakeholders embed the organization's identity in objectives, value statements, job descriptions, hiring criteria, recurring tasks, information flows, brand names, reward systems, and so on, it becomes increasingly institutionalized...The more institutionalized the identity, the more difficult and even unthinkable major identity changes becomes. Indeed, the identity may become taken for granted, analogous to the air that stakeholders breathe, and only become salient when it's threatened or some major change is considered" (p. 83).

When school leaders continuously build internal coherence it can help staff members see how their personal identity aligns (or does not align) to their school's identity. When a member identifies "strongly with the organization, the attributes they use to define the organization also define them" (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, p. 239). When the shared values, beliefs, and mental models that make up a school's identity are not clear or explicit, it becomes difficult for staff to decipher if they fit or do not fit with the school. Making a school's identity clear eliminates the guesswork and lets staff know if who they are and what they do already aligns with the

school's identity, if they need to change their behavior to align better with the school's identity, or if they need to leave the school because they do not want to adopt the school's identity. And when a school's identity informs a school's hiring practices, it is more likely staff will be hired who align with the school's core identity and where they are going. This is just one of the many ways in which identity-informed decision-making (see Figure below) can improve internal coherence.



The subsequent briefs in this series expand on this idea of coherence as it relates to structures and learning approaches. In those briefs, we provide a mental model for incremental, identity-driven change--what we refer to as *little things, key moves*, and *big plays*. We have found schools have a greater chance of making changes to organizational structures and learning approaches when long-term implementation plans include the little things, key moves, and big plays needed to achieve and sustain change.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, there is an immense need for schools to authentically engage their communities to develop shared values, beliefs, and mental models that become the core components of a shared identity. Bridging the gap between schools and the communities they serve is essential for organizing schools to improve in a continuous and equitable manner. Creating a shared vision for readiness that is informed by a representative school identity signifies a critical step in the improvement process. Importantly, this step cannot be ignored. School change too often centers on changing the organizational structures or learning approaches in a school. Both are necessary and both are insufficient on their own. And if those changes to structures and the learning approaches continue to lead to a situation where students and families do not see themselves in their school, these efforts and investments will continue to fall short. That is, identity and vision work are essential for setting the stage for effective structural and learning approach work. A school's identity and its vision for readiness become the anchors from which all decisions related to structures and learning approaches are made. Without those anchors, schools will continue to suffer from incoherent, sporadic, and unsustainable attempts at system-level improvement.

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