WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

By redefining roles and responsibilities, Whorton helps create more sustainable, effective systems that support both student learning and educator development. This book is an essential guide for building stronger, more resilient school communities.

—Sarah Beal
Executive Director, US PREP
Phoenix, Arizona

This practical book is grounded in deep and wide experience that will help every school system reimagine and remake leadership roles that are sustainable and effective. Whorton understands the complex realities that educators face and offers a compelling, accessible, and helpful antidote to the superhero myth of leadership.

—Elizabeth A. City
Senior Lecturer, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Sustainable school leadership isn't about one hero at the top—it's about building a team of empowered leaders at every level. Rather than superheroes, schools need strong, collaborative structures that allow leadership to thrive beyond a single person.

—Chassie Selouane
Principal, MLS International Riyadh
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Lindsay Whorton knows how to make the most of educators' talents and time. Her clear-eyed goals, thought-provoking questions, and expert guidance make A New School Leadership Architecture *vital reading for anyone serious about improving education.*

—Susan Moore Johnson
Research Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Cambridge, Massachusetts

This book offers a fresh, thoughtful approach to school leadership, providing a framework that balances the principal's role, distributes leadership, and creates meaningful opportunities for teacher growth. A must-read for educational leaders seeking inspiration for change and practical ideas to build a more sustainable and supportive system.

—Kristina Fulton
Curriculum & Instruction Specialist, Lancaster-Lebanon IU13
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

This book offers practical tools and thoughtful insights, redefining what leadership and leadership structures can look like in today's ever-changing educational landscape. It is a must-read for anyone striving to create transformative learning environments.

—Sammie Cervantez
Program Specialist: ELA/ELD/Literacy Program,
San Luis Obispo County Office of Education
Pismo Beach, California

This book is a practical guide to growing effective principals in our ever challenging educational landscape.

—Tanna Nicely
Executive Principal, South Knoxville Elementary
Blaine, Tennessee

This is a clarion call for school district leadership to redesign leadership architecture and provide essential support that will systematically build leadership capabilities. A New School Leadership Architecture *offers step-by-step guidance for how a teacher can move through the process of becoming a team member and eventually a school leader.*

—Jerry Jailall
Assistant Chief Education Officer, Ministry of Education, Guyana
Baldwin Harbor, New York

Lindsay Whorton offers an inspiring vision that challenges what we think we know about "how schools must work"—and empowers forward-thinking leaders with the real-life examples and practical guidance they need to convert vision to action.

—David Rosenberg
Facilitator, Coalition to Reimagine the Teaching Role
Leader-in-Residence, Teach Plus
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Lindsay Whorton's framework offers a practical roadmap for designing roles that are sustainable, scalable, and centered on impact. This book is essential reading for any system leader serious about transforming schools for the better.

—Janice K. Jackson
Former CEO, Chicago Public Schools
Chicago, Illinois

Whorton offers a refreshing blueprint for how we can redesign our schools to support what we know is essential: ensuring that every teacher receives the mentorship, coaching, and support necessary to grow and thrive. Whorton's synthesis of research and theory into a practical approach will help educators advance much needed change.

—Ellen Moir
Founder, New Teacher Center
Santa Cruz, California

A noteworthy combination of bold and practical, A New School Leadership Architecture *will spark the thinking of educators to redesign schools that unlock the potential of our teachers and students. A timely addition to the field, given today's challenges and tomorrow's possibilities.*

—Vicki Phillips
CEO, NCEE
Washington, DC

A New School Leadership Architecture

A New School Leadership Architecture

A Four-Level Framework for Reimagining Roles

Lindsay Whorton

CORWIN

CORWIN

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companion.corwin.com/courses/newschoolarchitecture

Preface

We love hero narratives. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has become the highest-grossing franchise ever, bringing in a staggering $29.8 billion. The superhero industry emerged in the 1930s as we careened toward a second world war. Uncertainty, fear, and a sense of powerlessness were overwhelming. Captain America. Batman. Black Panther. Wonder Woman. These heroes reminded us that good people could stand up to and overcome evil. They showed us that individuals could make a difference. And they told us that we could harness our strengths and overcome our weaknesses. Superheroes provided encouragement and hope.

The chapters of history have turned, but we continue to have a sweet spot for heroes. We continue to wish that one person could save us. That the solution to our problems could be that simple, that maybe we can be that person. We see these dreams reflected in the stories we tell, including our stories about schools. The late 1990s and early 2000s churned out one hero-educator story after another. Even when they depicted true stories of educators working tirelessly and creatively to help their students achieve great things, they reduced the sustained, shared work to support students to a simple story of one person's ingenuity and effort.

Stand and Deliver, profiling the inspiring educator Jaime Escalante, illustrates the pattern. Escalante was a gifted math teacher who achieved remarkable results at one of Los Angeles's poorest high schools. His story deserves to be known and celebrated. But the film tells an untrue version of a true story. It tells the tale of one man working alone to elevate a cohort of high school students from seventh-grade math to mastering calculus in one year. The reality is that Escalante worked with a *whole team* of educators to change the sequence of the math curriculum across the high school and build a system of targeted support that helped students learn and achieve at high levels over many years. It's a remarkable achievement. But it isn't the story of a lone hero. It is the story of a team of leaders working together to create systems for students to thrive.

Our public schools are facing enormous pressures and challenges: financial challenges linked to declining enrollment and persistent inflation. Growing politicization of education and distrust of public schools. School safety. A crisis of student mental health, well-being, and belonging. The lingering scars of the pandemic show up everywhere, from student attendance and behavior to academic outcomes. Schools' and districts' ability to meet and overcome these

challenges depends on their people. What is the depth and capacity of talent and leadership available to tackle these challenges? Unfortunately, most schools and districts are struggling to find and develop the talent and leadership they need. There have been worrying signals about the health of the education profession for decades. The challenges are now reaching crisis levels.

Across the country, schools struggle to find enough qualified educators to teach every class (Tan et al., 2024). Educators are burning out and leaving the profession (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; Doan et al., 2024; Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Young people's interest in the teaching profession is low and declining (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). New teachers are increasingly underprepared (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Marder et al., 2024; Templeton et al., 2024). And many principals have headed for the exits (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2022).

Many factors drive these trends—from pay to disrespect to chronic stress and discouragement (Walker, 2022). But we need to confront the reality that jobs in our schools are too hard, approaching impossible. Working in a school and sustaining high performance over time basically requires super heroism. This is true of every role in our schools, from the classroom to the principal's desk. In many schools across the United States, jobs have become increasingly undoable. When you have undoable jobs, *will* or *skill* is not enough to make them sustainable. Principals and assistant principals alone can't provide the coaching and support our teachers need and deserve, especially when more teachers are new and underprepared. Though there are many challenges facing the profession, there are reasons for optimism: Teachers have great leadership capacity, and we must unleash it, including giving them time to focus on leadership responsibilities. But we can't just add new roles to the existing structure. Doing so won't be coherent, and it won't be sustainable. We need to redesign the whole building.

We can't just keep doing the same thing and expecting different results. We must think *differently*. This book will help you do that by building mental models that will allow you to see school leadership and leadership development in new ways and to find the steps to move toward a new reality. We need a new school leadership architecture—a new "unifying or coherent structure" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)—that sets leaders and schools up for success.

The school leadership architecture that we present in this book is inspired by *The Leadership Pipeline* (Charan et al., 2011; Charan et al., 2024). *The Leadership Pipeline* argues that in order for organizations to succeed and thrive, they must structure leadership appropriately and they must support every leader to build the capabilities they need to succeed in their role. They define a series of leadership levels, each characterized by what the authors call "the job to be done" (Charan et al., 2024, p. 33). This is the structural part of the

work—appropriately organizing and distributing leadership work. Then, as individuals move between leadership levels, they navigate a "leadership passage," requiring them to embrace new skills, time applications, and work values (Charan et al., 2024, p. 22). This is the behavioral part of the work. This book puts these ideas to work for public schools. By clearly defining the work that needs to be done across four leadership levels (Team Members, Team Leaders, Bridge Leaders, and the School Leader) and outlining the transition in skills, time, and values that individual leaders need to make to succeed at each level, the school leadership architecture can help individual leaders and schools thrive. By improving structures and helping leaders build the skills to lead effectively within them, the new architecture can provide school leaders with the capacity they need to build capacity and get results.

This book is designed to support multiple audiences:

- District leaders: You play an irreplaceable role in designing and improving how school leadership is structured in your district and ensuring that sitting and aspiring leaders have the skills and capabilities they need to succeed.
- Principals: You are a critical partner for district leaders who are working to change district-wide systems and structures. You may not have the power to unilaterally change your school's organizational structure, but you can still work to improve your individual leadership practice or to provide stronger coaching to the leaders you support. Within your sphere of influence, you can embrace the most important work for your leadership level, and you can hone the skills, time applications, and professional identity that you need to succeed. And if you have the responsibility of coaching and developing other leaders, you can use these tools to sharpen your coaching.
- All aspiring school leaders: Whether you are a teacher aspiring to make a great impact on your campus, an assistant principal working to sharpen your skill, or any other school-based leader, this book is designed to be a resource for you to succeed in your current role and prepare for future leadership roles.

The book is organized in three parts. Part I introduces the framework, the school leadership architecture. Chapter 1 explains the four leadership levels, the distinct work at each level, and how they promote a thriving school. In Chapter 2, school and district leaders deepen their understanding of the framework by putting it into practice. Application exercises support readers to diagnose holes or weaknesses in their school leadership architecture. Then, the second half of the chapter compares their findings to common challenges. We encourage all readers to start with Part I.

Understanding the framework is critical to using the tools and resources offered in the rest of the book.

Part II lights the path to system-level, structural change. It is designed to help districts rebuild and redesign school leadership roles. Chapter 3 highlights concrete examples of how the school leadership architecture has and can come to life. It will also unpack common barriers and challenges that districts will need to navigate to prioritize this work. Chapter 4 provides a practical roadmap for this leading change—first through a small pilot project and then at scale. Part II will be essential reading for district leaders and for principals interested in rethinking how school leadership roles are structured.

Part III focuses on how to help leaders build the new skills that they need to succeed in new structures. Districts must do more than change structures. They need to support leaders to evolve their behaviors and lead differently. Chapter 5 dives deeply into how an individual experiences the change from one leadership level to the next, and how we can support leaders who are navigating these shifts. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 break down the specific shifts that each leader must make at a new leadership level. Chapter 9 identifies the key principles of a strong district-wide leadership development system that ensures a deep bench of leaders who are ready to lead at each level. In addition to informing districts' leadership development strategies, Part III provides concrete tools and strategies for all sitting and aspiring school leaders to use to inform their personal development and to coach and support the leaders around them.

Leadership is certainly not the only thing that must be addressed to build the system of public education that we aspire to and that our children deserve. But it is the core resources that we will need to meet each challenge that we face. And too often the strength of the people in our schools is the condition that is skipped over as we race to chase a long list of initiatives that schools need to drive. So while there are many steps that we need to take to build stronger, more impactful, more joyful schools, we offer the strong leadership architecture as a critical first step.

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Books are made of hundreds of solitary hours. But writing one has been another reminder that we don't do anything entirely on our own. I am grateful to many people who encouraged me and helped bring this book to life. I never would have undertaken this project without the encouragement and support of the board of the Holdsworth Center, especially our founding chair, Ruth Simmons, who gave me the push to get started, and Robert Gates, who supported it across the finish line. Thank you for always pushing me and us to do all we can to fulfill our mission and support education leaders. To my Holdsworth teammates: I am lucky to work alongside such incredible colleagues. The ideas in this book are a product of our shared work and learning. All errors in thinking or presentation are mine, and any positive contribution this book makes will be ours.

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Lindsay Whorton is proud to be a founding member of The Holdsworth Center, a nonprofit organization in Texas dedicated to building educational leaders. She is proud to have led the organization through a period of significant growth, from serving seven school districts and 42 leaders in 2017 to more than 1,900 leaders in 89 public school districts through 2025. Lindsay is a teacher, writer, speaker, and advocate for public education and champion of the educators who make them great.

PART I

A New Architecture

Solutions-oriented readers will be eager to jump into the action. But before we can act in new ways, we need to think in new ways, and that is the work of Part I. Over the course of two chapters, Part I introduces a new way of seeing school leadership. Chapter 1 introduces and makes the case for the four-level leadership architecture. Chapter 2 offers readers an opportunity to apply the model to their own school or district and compare what they find to common weaknesses in the school leadership architecture. Equipped with a strong understanding of the four leadership levels, readers will be ready to revamp the structure of roles (Part II) and help leaders build the skills they need to succeed in new structures (Part III).

CHAPTER 1

A New School Leadership Architecture

Plum Creek Elementary is a single-story brick structure, squat and long, nestled between parks and a small neighborhood in Lockhart, Texas. Jamee Griebel has been the principal at Plum Creek, which serves just over 500 students, since 2016. But she will tell you that her job in 2025 is completely different from when she was first promoted from the assistant principal role.

"When I think back on my first few years as a principal, I felt like all the decisions had to come through me. It was my responsibility to approve everything, communicate everything, and be involved in every decision that was made across the entire campus," Griebel reflects. "I was working seven days a week, 10, 12, sometimes 14 hours a day trying to keep up with everything that needed to be done. I was coaching teachers, coaching assistant principals, and coaching aides. I was stretched so thin in terms of my time and my content knowledge. It is hard to know everything and every aspect of the work across the entire campus." She was discouraged: "Despite how hard I was working, I didn't feel like I was doing a really good job when I thought about everything I was responsible for. And I wondered how long I'd be able to keep the speed that I was going at, how long I could sustain in this role."

After Lockhart Independent School District (ISD) launched a process to overhaul school leadership structures in 2019, an effort called Shared Leadership, Griebel can hardly believe the change. "This shift with shared leadership has really allowed the time and space to really build the success of the school. Before Shared Leadership, I was in every aspect of everything across the campus. I was planning our in-service schedules, professional development, making the master schedules, being the sole person responsible for coaching all our teachers. Now, I have a team of people I trust with different expertise who are growing teachers in ways I never could have on my own. This allows me to focus on growing leaders across my school, getting out of the weeds of every decision, and truly leading from a balcony view."

Five-plus years into this new model, the results are evident. Lockhart ISD has a district-wide commitment to grow every student, no matter their starting point, at least 1.5 years in reading and math. "Prior to Shared Leadership," Griebel says, "20% to 30% of our students were growing 1.5. This year, 94% of our students grew by 1.5 years in reading. The impact of this change has just been huge."

Griebel's early experience will sound familiar to many principals, novice and experienced: the stress, the doubts, the relentless pressure. Too often, our advice to leaders like Griebel is simply work harder and be a better leader. But what if jobs in our schools are too hard, approaching impossible? If that is the problem, sending the message that all will be well if people just work harder or if we just train them better is irresponsible. It adds fuel to a fire that is already raging. It's another voice whispering in the ears of mission-driven educators: "This is your fault. If only you had worked a little harder, things would be better." What we need to be screaming is "This is unsustainable! Something must change!" This book argues that the challenges Griebel experienced are structural: we have layered on more and more without giving schools the leadership capacity they need to succeed. The story of Plum Creek Elementary reminds us that change is possible. We can build the leadership capacity that our schools need to thrive. Doing so will require us to change both how we structure leadership roles in schools and how we develop people for them.

The mission of this book is to support you to do that work. We can design roles that are doable, that allow the school's most important work to be done, starting with every teacher receiving the support they need to grow and thrive. The new school leadership architecture provides a framework for thinking about what this could look like. It is composed of four levels, each with a unique leadership mission: Team Members, Team Leaders, Bridge Leaders, and School Leaders. It is a framework, not a prescription. It is a lens through which we can see how to make things work better for both individuals and the organization. It can help us rethink how we structure roles in our schools. And it can help us improve how we identify, develop, and support leaders in those roles. After presenting the theory of the problem, this chapter will make the case for replacing our principal-centric leadership structures with a four-level leadership model.

THE THEORY OF THE PROBLEM: UNDOABLE JOBS

In the early 2000s, mental models about school leadership began to shift seismically. Pre-2000, many principals had seen themselves as "building managers." In that era, administrators kept the trains running on schedule, ensured smooth operations, and created a

supportive atmosphere for teachers, who operated largely autonomously to deliver instruction. High-stakes accountability, which accelerated with the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, shifted the context and demanded a more proactive approach to managing instruction and driving results. The era of instructional leadership had begun.

In this new era, principals needed to do more than manage operations or work effectively with teachers and staff. They needed to understand what effective instruction looked like, monitor and evaluate the instructional program, and be able to coach and develop staff members to deliver against their instructional expectations. Ultimately, principals were responsible in a new way for the school's academic performance. This shift in focus was—and is—a great thing. Of course the leader of the organization should have a deep understanding of its core work and the skills to recognize and cultivate excellence. Of course they should be held accountable for the results the organization produces. So far, so good.

But here's the challenge. Being the "instructional leader" was communicated as a long list of things that the principal needed to *personally* do. What many principals heard was that they were the (only) instructional leader. The shift to instructional leadership added priorities to the principal's plate without taking much off. The job wasn't just different; it was bigger and harder.

Researchers and policymakers almost certainly didn't intend to send a message to principals that they needed to personally execute a growing list of tasks to be an instructional leader. Surely, the goal was to send the message that the principal was responsible for ensuring that these things occurred (in a high-quality way), not that they were personally responsible for executing them. But that's not what most principals heard.

The result? The implicit expectations we hold for our principals outstrip what is realistic for a single human being to do. Take just one aspect of their job—coaching and developing staff. According to a 2016 study, 96% of principals said they were responsible for the performance of teachers in their buildings; 82% said they were the primary person responsible (Bierly et al., 2016). An average U.S. public school serves almost 500 students and employs around 33 teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022–2023). So, the principal of an average school views themself as the primary person responsible for the development of 33 teachers.

Even if developing teachers was the *only* thing principals did (and we know it is far from the only thing principals do), it would be an extraordinary expectation. The number of people a leader supervises is called their "span of control." For knowledge workers such as accountants, lawyers, and engineers, the average span of control is five people (Bierly, et al., 2016). Many principals are responsible

for at least six times as many people. What happens when a principal views themself as the primary person responsible for the development of more than 30 teachers?

- Principals are less likely to delegate work to others, such as assistant principals and other school leaders.
- Principals experience a persistent sense of failure. There's never enough time to dedicate to developing teachers the way they would like to while still meeting all the other responsibilities they face.
- Teachers don't receive the coaching, feedback, and development they need or deserve.

It's simply impossible to provide consistent support and coaching to that many people. Wide spans of control force principals to make choices. One choice is to cut corners on observation, feedback, or evaluation. Another choice is for principals to triage, concentrating their efforts on the handful of teachers who are struggling the most, leaving other teachers who are still eager to grow, improve, and fend for themselves.

We all need to care about the principal's job being impossible. Not just because we care about principals, but because we know the impossibility of the principal's job impacts every other person in that school building. The challenges facing principals—they are stretched thin and forced to be reactive—are directly linked to the pressures teachers face—they are overloaded and undersupported. When teachers don't get the support they deserve, it generates a negative feedback loop. Teachers don't grow, improve, or become their best. They don't experience self-efficacy or confidence. Instead, they feel overwhelmed and discouraged as they pour everything into their teaching but feel like it is never enough. Eventually, beaten down and burned-out teachers leave the profession. As these dynamics churn, students are the ones impacted.

From the classroom to the principal's office, we have created jobs that require superheroes. While demands have steadily increased, school leadership and staffing structures have changed little. These jobs are too difficult—approaching impossible. That is why we have a human capital crisis playing out in public schools across the country. Ignoring that reality is a huge mistake.

There are close to 100,000 public schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Let's say that you can prove that some percentage of principals have the skillset and capacity to do the job as currently designed. We say, *"Who cares!"* We *must* give up on the dream that we can build excellent, sustainable school systems through a superhero strategy. We have to build a system that can succeed consistently and at scale. Continuing to design a system with an "only the strong survive" logic guarantees

we will keep getting the results we currently have—a system where many kids are not receiving the educational opportunities they deserve.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- What is your reaction to this framing of the problem?
- How does it connect to your experience as a leader or to what you have witnessed?
- What questions does it raise for you?

THE WORK OF SCHOOL LEADERS: BUILD CAPACITY AND DELIVER RESULTS

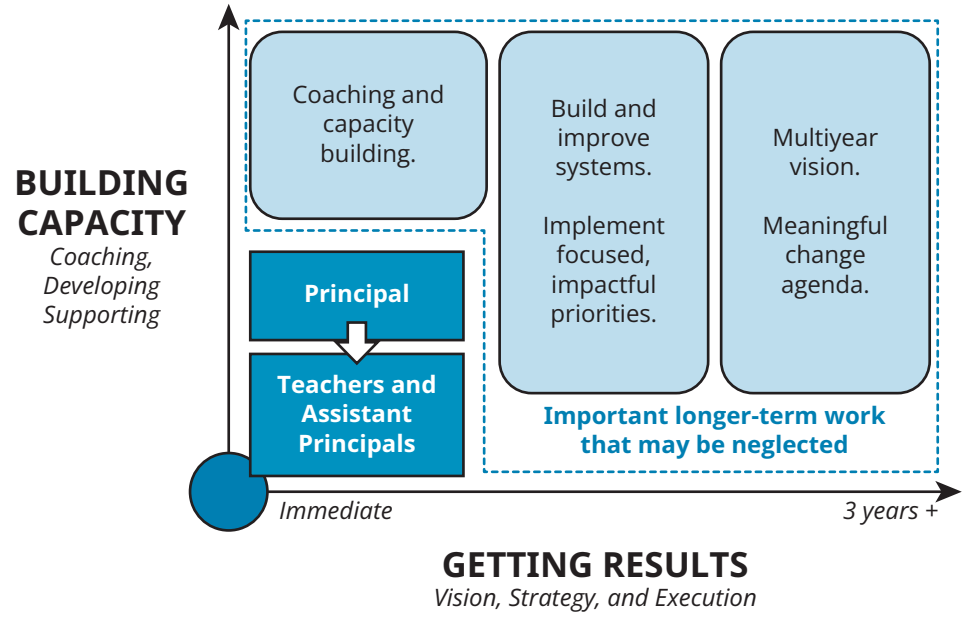
In many schools, school leadership structures fail to create enough leadership capacity on two dimensions. The first is coaching and developing others—what we'll call *building capacity*. The second, which we'll summarize as *delivering results*, is the work of strategy, planning, and execution. Restructuring responsibility for building capacity starts with establishing reasonable spans of control—the number of individuals each leader is responsible for coaching, developing, and supporting. Spans of control need to be much closer to the average for knowledge workers.

The need for smaller spans of control is especially important as schools work to support and develop an increasing proportion of inexperienced and underprepared classroom teachers. Nationally, the shares of inexperienced (less than five years of experience) and novice (less than two years of experience) teachers, those teaching without a credential, were growing before the pandemic arrived. From 2011–2012 to 2015–2016, the share of inexperienced and novice teachers increased from 20.3% to 22.4% and 6.8% to 9.4%, respectively, and teachers without a credential grew from 8.4% to 8.8% (Garcia & Weiss 2019). In 2023, at least 41,920 positions were unfilled in 30 states and Washington, D.C., and an additional 365,044 classrooms were staffed by teachers not fully certified for their assignment across 49 states and D.C. (Tan et al., 2024). In Texas, these trends are particularly alarming. In 2013–2014, 10% of new teachers were uncertified; in 2023–2024 the share of new teachers who were uncertified had risen to 52% (Marder et al., 2024). Though schools may not be able to quite get down to 5 teachers, we should strive for leaders to be responsible for the growth and development of no more than 6 to 10 teachers (Kraft & Blazer, 2017).

When it comes to delivering results, the organization needs capacity to drive short- and long-term excellence. Every day, teachers must design and deliver lessons, assess learning, and respond to student needs. Every day, the school needs to be responsive to the needs and concerns of caregivers and community members and respond to unexpected events and needs within the school community. But these actions aren't enough to create an excellent school. School Leaders must build, refresh, and communicate an inspiring and aspirational vision for the school's future and prioritize the change agenda that will help it move closer to that vision in the next three to five years. And between the daily execution and the big vision and strategy is the medium-term work (one- to two-year time horizon) of building and improving systems and driving continuous improvement.

If principals are spending all of their time directly coaching teachers and constantly fighting fires, the organization is in trouble (Figure 1.1). On the building capacity dimension, we know that one principal can't provide the support that 30+ teachers deserve. But while they try, dedicating most of their capacity to teachers, assistant principals and other school leaders aren't receiving the coaching and support they need to succeed in their role and grow as leaders. In terms of delivering results, principals who are consumed with the immediate are neglecting their essential responsibility as senior leaders—to be thinking, planning, and acting with a long-term view in mind. That is the time horizon on which innovation, change, and improvement occur.

FIGURE 1.1 ● In Many Schools: Impossible Jobs and Schools Struggling to Improve



It is easy for (new) principals to get trapped in a cycle of responding to pressing problems. At first, they may think that if they just deal with the small stuff, they will eventually get to the strategic priorities. But this is an illusion. There is an endless supply of small, urgent things to respond to. An organization that is consumed with day-to-day problem-solving is an organization that will struggle to grow and improve. In short, when schools' leadership architecture is broken, several bad outcomes occur:

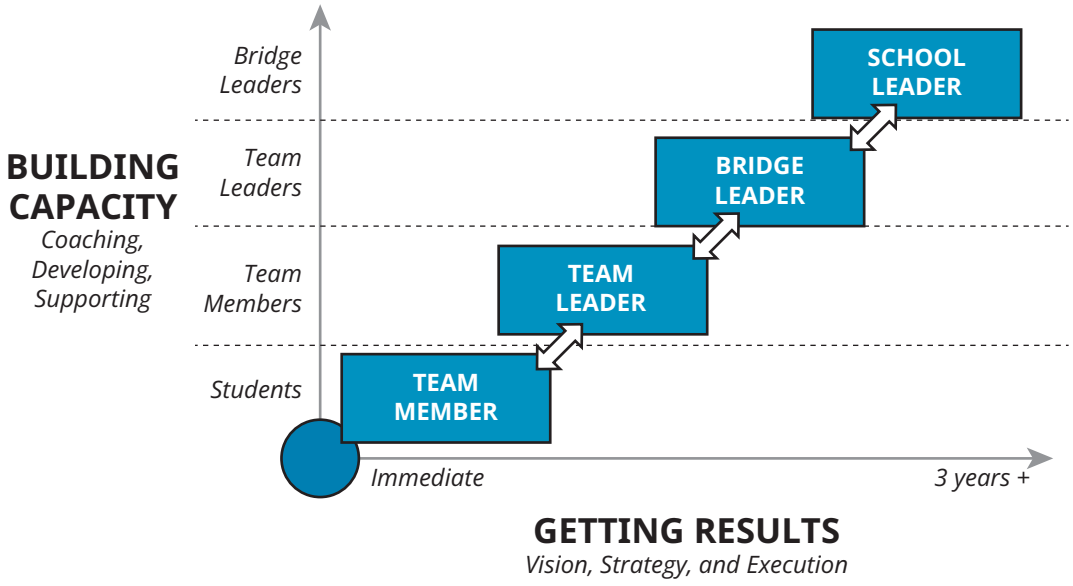
- The school is constantly in reaction mode. The most important work is not getting done consistently, especially long-term vision, strategy, and planning.
- The school does not deliver results. Or it delivers results it cannot and will not sustain.
- Teachers, assistant principals, and other staff members are not growing and developing as leaders.
- Jobs feel undoable. Leaders are exhausted, discouraged, and lose confidence.

A SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ARCHITECTURE THAT SETS LEADERS AND SCHOOLS UP FOR SUCCESS

The new school leadership architecture is composed of four distinct leadership levels: Team Members, Team Leaders, Bridge Leaders, and School Leaders. Each of the four leadership levels plays a distinct, essential role in building capacity and getting results (Figure 1.2). In terms of building capacity, each leadership level has a clear focus: the School Leader coaches and supports Bridge Leaders, who support Team Leaders, who develop Team Members. The work of getting results—vision, strategy, and execution—is also clearly defined. In strong school leadership architectures, this work is clearly assigned across the four levels, not owned exclusively by one person. Team Members and Team Leaders are primarily focused on execution, Bridge Leaders shift toward system-building and continuous improvement, and the School Leader drives vision and strategy, while monitoring continuous improvement and execution.

Figure 1.2 provides a high-level snapshot of how these roles fit together. But the unique leadership mission for each level provides a more detailed view (see Figure 1.3). Together, the leadership missions are focused on the heart of a great school—effective, engaging instruction available to every student in joyful classrooms supported by a vibrant, positive school culture.

FIGURE 1.2 ● The Four-Level School Leadership Architecture Builds Capacity and Gets Results



Before we summarize the unique leadership mission of each level, we want to explain why we use leadership levels instead of titles. The simplest reason is that there will often be multiple roles (and multiple titles) operating at each level. For example, schools will have many people operating at the Team Member level—teachers, librarians, custodial staff members, instructional specialists who work directly with students, and the list goes on. The more complex reason we use levels instead of titles is because *a leader's level is defined by their work, not their title or position in the organizational chart.*

A person can have a big title and still be operating as a Team Member. Many school districts use the same title to describe significantly different work. For example, an instructional specialist who works directly with students and does not coach or support other teachers is operating at the Team Member level. An instructional specialist who works primarily as a coach who delivers results through others (e.g., providing feedback on lesson plans, observing instruction and coaching teachers' practice) is operating at the Team Leader level. Same title, different role and different leadership level. Chapter 2 covers this in depth. For now, our focus is clearly defining the work of each leadership level.

TEAM MEMBERS

Team Members, often called individual contributors, deliver results through their personal knowledge and skills. Though they collaborate with others, most of their time will be spent working independently. In most organizations, especially larger ones, most staff will be individual contributors. In school systems, the largest group of Team Members is teachers. They are the heart of the school. They drive the day-to-day work and are responsible for responding to the needs of students from moment to moment. The quality of their work is what produces the school's results.

The other leadership levels are responsible for creating the conditions or building the capacity for Team Members to be effective and successful. Teachers, and other Team Members who may work on campuses or in the central office, derive their sense of pride and accomplishment from the quality and impact of their individual work. They develop and hone deep and wide-ranging knowledge and skills—from deep content knowledge to the skill of designing and delivering instruction, to the knowledge and skill to build relationships with students and create a vibrant classroom culture.

TEAM LEADERS

Team Leaders are directly responsible for coaching, developing, and supporting a group of Team Members. They build their team's knowledge, skill, and capacity to deliver the school's vision of excellent teaching and learning. They support their team to set data-informed goals, track progress and drive continuous improvement, and surface and address barriers to progress. Each Team Leader will have the following characteristics, which align to the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's (2018) recommendations for formal hybrid leadership roles:

- They have significant time—50% or more—dedicated to their team leadership work. For classroom teachers stepping into a Team Leader role, that means they will have significant release time from their instructional duties. They won't just have leadership tasks layered on to their existing responsibilities without time allocated to complete them, as if they can magically generate more minutes in the day or additional capacity. They are "player-coaches"—like Bill Russell, who took on formal coaching duties of the Boston Celtics from 1966 to 1969 but continued to suit up and play.

- They are responsible—in their mind and according to other leaders in the school—for the results and student outcomes of their Team Members. If their team is not growing and improving, they are not succeeding as a Team Leader.
- Team Leaders have authority with their teams; for Team Members, engaging with the Team Leader isn't optional. This authority can take a variety of forms. In some schools, Team Leaders will evaluate their Team Members. In others, they will not (further discussed in Chapter 3). But what must be true—through shared expectations and the school culture—is that Team Members do not view the coaching and support they receive from their Team Leader as an optional resource.

What about "teacher leaders" who don't meet these three criteria? Most of the time, when we call someone a teacher leader, we are referring to situations where teachers are given an honorific title, more work to do, and minimal pay and time to complete it. The result is leadership-in-name-only opportunities that are not effective in improving teaching and learning (Suppovitz, 2017). These individuals are Team Members who provide leadership in a wide variety of ways to the school and the team. Team Leader roles are formal roles. Consultative, organic, and informal leadership is important and should be celebrated. But there is a difference between being a team captain and the team's coach (or player-coach). Team captains provide leadership as Team Members. They don't make decisions about who plays, what drills to run at practice, or what will be the focus of post-game analysis. That is the role of the coach, or Team Leader. Both are important forms of leadership, but they are distinct. And in most schools, we are confusing team captains with team coaches. We need more of the latter.

BRIDGE LEADERS

Bridge Leaders report to a School Leader and support a group of Team Leaders. The Bridge Leader is the glue of the school. They keep everyone connected—to each other, to the vision, to the most important priorities for students. The bridge that these leaders create isn't a single, one-way road with information flowing, top-down, from the principal to everyone else. A better analogy is the U.S. Interstate Highway System. The Bridge Leader's job is to build and maintain the structures, systems, and relationships that advance the mission and allow information and ideas to flow in all directions. Yes, the Bridge Leader keeps Team Leaders connected to the vision of the School Leader. But they also ensure that the School Leader knows what Team Leaders are seeing and benefits from their ideas and insights. They also keep Team Leaders connected to and aligned with each other—ensuring a shared understanding of the school's vision for excellent teaching and learning and consistent use of school-wide routines, structures, and practices.

Their role, as capacity builders, is to coach and develop Team Leaders. They must ensure that Team Leaders have the skills, knowledge, and resources that they need to effectively develop Team Members. They use data to identify where teams need additional support and coach and collaborate with their Team Leaders to provide it. Most of Bridge Leaders' time (75%–100%) is dedicated to delivering results through others or to building the conditions and systems that teams need to succeed.

Bridge Leaders play a critical role in delivering results. They connect and align teams to the vision and goals established and communicated by the School Leader. They must make sure that each team understands the vision and goals and has a plan to drive improvement and results in the short term (e.g., this semester, this year). Then, the Bridge Leader's role is to take a longer view and identify the systems and processes that must be put in place to set the school up for success in the future. They have time to act and think strategically, to plan projects and initiatives with an eye on one or two years versus one or two months. They lead their teams to build and implement these systems and to drive continuous improvement.

SCHOOL LEADERS

School Leaders are ultimately responsible for delivering results in all areas of the school—its culture and climate, the strength of its teachers and staff, and student outcomes. The School Leader sets the school's vision, short- and long-term goals, and strategy (the focused priorities that will enable the school to improve and succeed). The School Leader must communicate these priorities clearly because they set the direction for the team (Team Members, Team Leaders, and Bridge Leaders) that will drive day-to-day execution. Though the School Leader is ultimately accountable, they lean on a strong team to deliver results.

The School Leader must carry the vision and represent the school in all they do—with staff and the community. In terms of building capacity, the School Leader's focus is on developing and supporting their Bridge Leaders and any Team Leaders who report to them. In addition, they monitor the school's overarching efforts to develop staff capacity and provide direction and accountability to the leaders who design and implement those efforts to ensure that they are tightly aligned to the instructional vision and the school's priorities.

The unique leadership missions of each of the four levels are detailed in Figure 1.3. The figure shows how leadership responsibilities can be organized across a school to enable the most important work to get done in a way that is realistic and sustainable. It is *not* a set of job descriptions that comprehensively itemize the responsibilities and duties of every role on campus. If you look for

that level of detail in Figure 1.3, you are going to find a lot that is missing. The bottom row, "Other duties & responsibilities," is a nod to this reality: every educator in every school has some duties and responsibilities that must get done because they're essential to how the school functions and how students get what they need. That's just part of the work. Chapter 3 will provide more detail on this. For now, what if there were different ways that we could staff schools to do the blocking and tackling that is currently done by certified administrators to free those leaders up to focus more on instruction and mission-critical work?

FIGURE 1.3 ● Unique Leadership Missions, by Leadership Level

	TEAM MEMBER	TEAM LEADER	BRIDGE LEADER	SCHOOL LEADER
DELIVER RESULTS	• Work to consistently exemplify established standards of high-quality instruction. • Use data to drive instructional decisions. • Meet deadlines, fulfill responsibilities, and be prepared. • Demonstrate openness to new ideas and practices.	• Ensure every Team Member understands campus vision and definition of high-quality instruction. • Establish data-informed team priorities and goals. • Track progress and drive continuous improvement. • Identify barriers and make recommendations for school-wide improvement efforts.	• Track progress toward campus vision and successful execution of priorities. • Build Team Leader understanding of campus vision and priorities. • Ensure alignment between school-wide and team-specific priorities. • Remove barriers and create supportive conditions (culture, systems, etc.) for teams to thrive.	• Establish shared vision for the campus (including vision and definition of excellent instruction). • Ensure and manage alignment with district vision and priorities, including advocating for campus needs. • Establish short- and long-term campus priorities. • Through regular, purposeful communication, build understanding and ownership of the campus vision and priorities to all members of the campus community. • Use data to monitor progress and identify areas requiring attention.

	TEAM MEMBER	TEAM LEADER	BRIDGE LEADER	SCHOOL LEADER
			• Support Team Leaders to achieve data-informed goals and close identified gaps.	• Allocate resources (people, money, time) in alignment with vision and priorities. • Establish and maintain school climate and culture.
BUILD CAPACITY	• Demonstrate growth mindset and commitment to development and improvement. • Seek opportunities to build and deepen knowledge and skills. • Give and receive feedback. • Actively contribute to a productive and collaborative team.	• Coach and develop Team Members. • Build and maintain an effective team and facilitate collaboration. • Ensure coherence of support (professional development, coaching, evaluation, etc.) for Team Members. • Understand and use protocols in support of school-wide consistency and alignment.	• Coach and develop Team Leaders (as coaches). • Monitor Team Member results and development. • Identify priorities for school-wide professional learning—in pursuit of campus vision and driven by needs and gaps. • Drive school-wide professional learning (in partnership with Team Leaders and with input from School Leader). • Train Team Leaders in consistent and effective use of protocols.	• Coach and develop Bridge Leaders. • Monitor Team Leader results and development. • Establish protocols for feedback, team collaboration, etc. • Establish priorities for professional learning and ensure coherence of build capacity efforts and deliver results.
Other duties and responsibilities				

An editable version of Figure 1.3 can be found on this book's companion website.

You may be wondering—especially if you work in a smaller school—whether you need all four levels. Maybe not. If you have fewer than 18 to 24 teachers on your campus, you probably only need three levels: Team Member, Team Leader, and School Leader. (In a three-level model, most of the Bridge Leader responsibilities are absorbed by the School Leader.) Some larger schools may ultimately decide to use a three-level model. But don't pick a three-level model just because it seems easier or because it seems to require less change. Go through the process (partnering with School Leaders in your district) to work through the best way to bring the model to life in a way that meets the needs of your community. Schools are incredibly diverse in their structure and organization, so we should expect incredibly diverse examples of the school leadership architecture. As you work to bring the school leadership architecture to life in your school or district, the details will inevitably vary. And they should! You need to respond to the needs of your community, build on your strengths, and navigate your specific constraints and challenges. The school leadership architecture is anchored in principles, with room to customize the details.

THE CASE FOR THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ARCHITECTURE

For most schools, shifting their school leadership architecture won't be an incremental change. It can't be achieved by tinkering with one or two positions or by changing someone's title or job description. It requires districts to comprehensively rethink how *all* staff members on a campus are deployed. It isn't easy, but it is work worth doing. If a school operated in alignment with the four leadership levels, several important benefits would occur.

1. **Teachers would receive strong, effective, and consistent coaching, improving their practice and increasing the likelihood they will stay in the role.**

   All teachers need to be coached, developed, and supported so they are highly effective in their current roles and prepared to step into positions of greater responsibility over time (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Papay & Kraft, 2016). Some of you may be thinking of schools with very flat hierarchies that appear to only have two layers—teachers and principals—and wondering whether it's possible for a school to have only two leadership levels. Yes, these schools exist, but omitting the Team Leader level is

unlikely to be effective over the long term, particularly as the teaching ranks are increasingly made of new teachers with minimal preparation or training. Team Leaders—individuals tasked with building the capacity of Team Members and who have significant time dedicated to this responsibility—are essential to a sustainably successful school that delivers positive student outcomes year after year and retains its staff over time.

This conclusion is driven by the importance of coaching for a teacher's development. A school with 200 to 300 students will employ 25 to 40 teachers and many more additional staff. One principal simply cannot provide the level of coaching, feedback, and support that 25 teachers deserve. If turnover and the unattractiveness of the teaching profession continues to drive down teachers' average experience and new entrants to the profession are receiving less rigorous pre-certification training, the need for high-quality and high-frequency coaching and support—and the importance of the Team Leader leadership level in schools—will only increase. Historically, the United States' approach to teacher development has placed a big emphasis on pre-service preparation with lighter touch, less systematic supports for new teachers once they become teachers of record (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Regardless of our preferences or our view of the ideal model, this is our reality: new teachers are less and less likely to have completed a rigorous pre-service preparation program (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2021; Marder et al., 2014; Partelow, 2019). How should we respond to this reality?

We can, and should, work to increase the number of rigorously prepared new teachers. Yes, this is about increasing the quality and strength of clinical experiences in both traditional and alternative certification programs. This is a long-term goal because the attractiveness of the teaching profession is at the heart of this challenge. If young people and career changers are motivated to pursue teaching long term due to low wages, low prestige, working conditions, or any other factor, it is going to be hard to convince them to spend more money, more time, or more effort on a more rigorous pre-certification experience.

We can't afford to sit idly by, clutching our preferred strategy, waiting for these trends to turn. We must embrace a *yes, and* strategy: *yes*, we need to invest in long-term strategies, *and*

we have to embrace an approach that will support the new teachers that we have today. We need to invest in rigorous support—mentoring, coaching, professional learning, and every form of scaffolding we can imagine—for new teachers in their first two years. The source of these supports are excellent, experienced educators with time, authority, and responsibility for building the capacity of new teachers. The school leadership architecture can unlock this resource. Coaching and developing others is a core leadership responsibility and one that most of our current school structures are not built to deliver.

2. **Schools would have the capacity they need to drive key initiatives and tackle their most important priorities.**

   The education sector is brimming with promising ideas to strengthen and improve schools that never get off the ground. The cycle repeats again and again:

   - A new hot idea gains a following.
   - Funders and policymakers work hard to create incentives and supports to drive change.
   - Schools and districts—often desperate for resources and willing to try anything to improve student results—jump in and give the new thing a try, piling it on as "one more thing" at the end of a long list of things for educators to accomplish.
   - Everyone inside and outside of schools knows that schools don't have the capacity to do one more thing. But no one wants to address the capacity issue—that work is too hard, too slow, too big to take on. So, instead, we create a special position, randomly inserted into the school or district to drive the initiative. Or we throw a bunch of technical assistance at schools and districts—a shot in the arm of capacity to get the initiative off the ground.
   - Time passes and before you know it the new thing is old news. By siloing the work in one position, it never got integrated and embedded in the work of teachers and staff. Or there wasn't enough technical assistance to build momentum or when the technical assistance faded, the work did too.

A debate carries on for a while sorting out why the thing didn't work or gain traction. Some argue vehemently that it was a wrong-headed idea from the beginning. Others point their finger at poor implementation. Everyone walks away more cynical. For educators, the experience adds to the accumulating "here we go again" attitude toward educational change. People outside of schools add the story to their mythology of the intransigent school system, becoming more and more convinced that things will never change.

Strengthening the school leadership architecture will expand the school's capacity to drive and sustain changes and can help us escape the loop of initiative fatigue. That's because the four-level architecture, through the unique leadership missions, provides capacity to drive any new initiative or change. At the risk of dating this text, let's take one current example—the implementation of a new curriculum.

Districts who have adopted a new curriculum know that achieving the promised outcomes, from improved student outcomes to saving teachers time, requires a big investment in implementation. Specifically, districts have realized the need for significant professional learning, coaching and feedback, and modelling and support to help teachers understand the curriculum, how to plan lessons, and what great instruction looks like using the new materials. The challenge for districts and schools is to find the capacity they need to do this work. Some try to deploy technical assistance providers or inject a boost of short-term instructional coaching to drive the change. Both efforts are hard to sustain long term and are likely to be experienced as "one more thing"—a barnacle tacked onto the system.

A school with a healthy and thriving school leadership architecture has more built-in capacity to tackle a strategic change initiative like curriculum implementation. Figure 1.4 illustrates how the specific work of curriculum implementation connects to the unique leadership missions framework.

FIGURE 1.4 ● How the Unique Leadership Missions Translate to a Specific Initiative—Curriculum Implementation

	TEAM MEMBER	TEAM LEADER	BRIDGE LEADER	SCHOOL LEADER
DELIVER RESULTS	• Work to consistently exemplify established standards of high-quality instruction. • Use data to drive instructional decisions. • Meet deadlines, fulfill responsibilities, and be prepared. • Demonstrate openness to new ideas and practices.	• Establish data-informed team priorities and goals. • Track progress and drive continuous improvement. • Identify barriers and make recommendations for school-wide improvement efforts.	• Track progress toward established milestones. • Build Team Leader understanding of curriculum and/or connect them to resources and supports. • Translate campus goals and milestones into team-level goals. • Remove barriers and create supportive conditions, both cultural and systemic, for teams to thrive.	• Communicate the case for change—build shared understanding and commitment. • Help teachers and staff understand how curriculum connects to the campus vision and why it is an important priority. • Define clear goals or milestones for curriculum implementation. (How will we make progress over time? How will we know that we are on track?) • Make choices about what work to de-prioritize or stop to be able to focus on curriculum. • Allocate resources—people, time, schedules, money—to support the work. • Use data to monitor progress and identify areas requiring attention, and drive continuous improvement.

	TEAM MEMBER	TEAM LEADER	BRIDGE LEADER	SCHOOL LEADER
BUILD CAPACITY	• Demonstrate growth mindset and commitment to development and improvement. • Seek out opportunities to build and deepen knowledge and skills. • Give and receive feedback. • Actively contribute to a productive and collaborative team.	• Coach and develop Team Members. • Use team meetings for shared planning, problem-solving, and internalization of curriculum. • Ensure coherence of support (professional development, coaching, evaluation, etc.). • Understand and use protocols in support of school-wide consistency and alignment.	• Coach and develop Team Leaders. • Monitor team member results and development (walkthroughs, etc.). • Identify priorities for school-wide professional learning. • Drive school-wide professional learning (in partnership with Team Leaders and with input from School Leader). • Train Team Leaders in consistent and effective use of protocols.	• Coach and develop Bridge Leaders' understanding of curriculum and key moves they need to make. • Establish and/or refine protocols for feedback, team collaboration, walkthroughs, etc., to support implementation. • Establish priorities for school-wide professional learning to close gaps and address needs.

3. **Educators would still find their jobs extremely challenging, but they also may find them more doable.**

   Being a principal is an extraordinarily complex job. But it would certainly be more doable if the work of the previous levels could be delegated and entrusted to a high-performing team of leaders, as described in this model. Without a strong team operating as part of an aligned leadership structure, a difficult job becomes almost impossible. The same is true for teachers. Without the coaching and support they deserve, a demanding but rewarding job becomes impossible and demoralizing. A strong leadership architecture can help us escape these traps.

4. **Educators would see a path for growing their impact and their careers. We would have a better chance of retaining our strongest teachers.**

   There is growing evidence that teachers want more opportunities for leadership and career growth (National

Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2018). The idea of elevating teachers to leadership roles often produces anxiety. We may not want to encourage our most talented teachers to leave the classroom, and they may not want to either. When teachers describe career growth, they aren't necessarily talking about becoming a principal. According to one survey, only 16% of classroom teachers were interested in being a principal, and 69% were not at all interested. However, 51% were interested a hybrid role that combines teaching with other responsibilities, a finding that has been supported in other research (Johnson & Donaldson, 2004; MetLife, 2012). All evidence points to these trends, which have been in motion for decades and are accelerating as Gen Z, who place a high priority on career advancement, moves through the workforce (De Smet et al., 2023).

There is a way to design leadership opportunities that allow our strongest teachers to remain in the classroom and have time allocated to lead and contribute in other ways. We need to face the reality that we are *already asking* these exceptional teachers to lead beyond the walls of their classroom, for example, to lead professional learning communities (PLCs), facilitate staff professional development, or mentor new teachers. Yet, they aren't receiving the time they need to do things well or the compensation they deserve. Our current approach makes these jobs undoable, requiring teachers to work unsustainably or to make choices about where they will allow quality to slip. It's a surefire recipe for demoralizing our strongest classroom leaders. The new school leadership architecture proposed in this book allows us to unlock teacher's leadership in a more sustainable way.

CONCLUSION

Think of what could be possible if we could get this right. Think of the leaders who could feel a little bit lighter, finding the ability to focus on their most important work and leaning into the joy of empowering and supporting others. Think of the teachers who would feel more confident and equipped. They would have a strong coach to rely on and could see themselves getting better. Think of the students who would benefit—today and down the road—by a school that is built to be responsive and strategic, to solve today's problems and plan for bigger success in the future. A more effective and sustainable approach to school leadership is possible, and a different approach to leadership development is required. How do we get there? First, we must identify where we are: Where are the holes or breakdowns in our current leadership architecture? That is the topic of Chapter 2.

Big Ideas and Key Takeaways

- Leadership demands have steadily increased, but school leadership and staffing structures have changed little. The result is that jobs in many schools feel undoable.
- We need a school leadership architecture that sets leaders and schools up for success, enabling them to build capacity and deliver results.
- Most schools need four leadership levels in order to build capacity and deliver results: Team Member, Team Leader, Bridge Leader, School Leader.
- A leader's level is defined by their work, not their title or position in the organizational chart.
- Restructuring responsibility for building capacity starts with establishing reasonable spans of control, for example, the number of individuals each leader is responsible for coaching, developing, and supporting.
- A strong leadership architecture offers many benefits: more coaching and support for teachers, the ability to prioritize long-term vision and strategy, the capacity to drive key initiatives and priorities, and increased educator satisfaction and retention.