Praise for *Leading Adult Learning 2.0: Building Capacity in Individuals, Teams, and Systems*

Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is the rare combination of best practices and deep developmental wisdom. It gives leaders concrete ways to expand the cognitive, relational, and emotional capacities of the adults in our systems. Based on decades of research and finely attuned to today's complex educational realities, this book is an essential guide for anyone serious about building inclusive, resilient cultures where adult growth and student learning flourish together.

Mary Grassa O'Neill, Senior Lecturer on Education and Faculty Lead
ELOE School Leadership Pathway, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is a powerful resource for leadership preparation, giving faculty and aspiring school leaders a meaningful common language for understanding adult learning, and development across schools and systems. In this book, Drago-Severson brings fresh perspective to her original work, offering new insights, findings, and practitioner voices that demonstrate the realities of leading adults in today's educational contexts. Her work reminds us that leadership is undeniably human; adults grow through trust, reflection, support, healthy stretch, and relationships that honor how people make meaning. For those preparing future school leaders, this book offers practical, evidence-based tools for helping leaders create the conditions where adults can learn, collaborate, grow, and thrive, because the adults who serve students every day deserve the same intentional care, development, and support we seek to provide for children.

John E. Critelli Jr., Director
PROPEL School Leadership Partnership Program, Florida Atlantic University

Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is a wise, timely, and much needed guide for educational leaders at every level who are seeking to cultivate the growth of individuals, learning communities, and systems. Grounded in research and rich with real-world examples, Drago-Severson offers powerful tools for cultivating growth across these contexts—creating more responsive, caring, and effective cultures where educators and students thrive.

Marcia V. Lyles, Professor of Practice of Education Leadership and
Co-Director of Urban Education Leaders Program
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is an invitation to lead courageously from within. It calls us into the vital work of adult development by acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and the concept of self-transformational learning, while distinguishing among the technical, adaptive, and mixed challenges defining our ever-changing world and leadership. What makes this work especially compelling is its emphasis on creating conditions for holding environments—spaces where people feel seen, valued, and safe to stretch beyond what they thought possible. It reminds us that belonging, inclusion, and equity must be intentionally cultivated. This is a must-read for leaders shaping communities and systems.

Kristy Thrasher De La Cruz, Community Superintendent
District 4, NY

Leading Adult Learning 2.0 has deeply shaped how I think about leadership, feedback, and adult growth. Drago-Severson's work on Ways of Knowing has helped me provide faculty and staff with feedback that is more intentional, differentiated, and growth-centered. The Pillar Practices, especially teaming and collegial inquiry, have strengthened how our team uses our time together as a staff, creating space for trust, reflection, shared learning, and meaningful collaboration. This book is a powerful reminder that when leaders intentionally support adult development, they build stronger teams, healthier school cultures, and better conditions for students to thrive.

James V. Monaco III, Co-Principal
West40 Regional Safe School, IL

Drago-Severson's *Leading Adult Learning 2.0* offers much-needed protocols and scenarios to leaders at various levels to facilitate scaffolded support across organizations. The real-life stories, protocols, and examples in this book are a treasure trove for leaders facing the complex demands of schools today. As a superintendent of schools, I have employed the Pillar Practices with my principals and other educational leaders to build leadership capacity across the district. Understanding each principal's Way of Knowing proved to have a significant impact on their professional growth and reflective practice. *Leading Adult Learning 2.0* elevates the dimensions of leadership skills—both old and new—revealed through a global pandemic and political turmoil.

Rafaela Espinal, Assistant Superintendent and Director for
Multilingual & English Language Learners, NYC Department of Education

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Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is the first and last book a school leader will need for success. For newer leaders, learning to see themselves and then others through the lens of adult development reveals so much of what undergirds the complexity and emotional labor they face. These leaders can leverage the case studies for each of the four Pillar Practices to immediately design excellent professional learning and begin shifting school culture in ways that support success for every student. For those who have been leading adult learning for decades, returning to these ideas as we each grow in our capacities and reflect as leaders will yield new wisdom about the complex and adaptive work of leading schools and a renewal of compassionate purpose.

Derek Kanarek, Upper School Head
Catlin Gabel School, Portland, OR

Drago-Severson offers leaders not only a profound understanding of human development but also a practical framework that transforms theory into daily action. This book does not leave school leaders inspired for a moment and abandoned the next morning when reality returns. Instead, it places in their hands an approach they can live, apply, and return to every single day. When minds and hearts are developed together, transformation stops being an aspiration and becomes a lived reality. As someone who has lived these ideas in practice for many years, I found myself reading this book and thinking again and again: yes, this is exactly what school leaders need right now. It is magnificent, timely, and profoundly needed.

Carol de Luca, Founder and School Principal
Spring School & ACE Education Group, Brazil

Leading Adult Learning 2.0 is both a timely and transformative guide for leaders navigating the complexity of today's educational landscape. Drago-Severson masterfully bridges research and practice through a deeply human-centered approach that reminds us that leadership is, at its core, about growing people. This book is an indispensable resource for leaders committed to building capacity and cultivating meaningful collaboration.

Michelle K. Verdiner, Principal
Teachers College Community School, NY

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Leading Adult Learning 2.0

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For the many, many generous educators and other leaders who give hope and joy as they teach—lead—and give with love and care every day, and for all who dedicate themselves nobly and selflessly to the support and growth of others—and especially for my greatest teachers and loves: the late Mama-San, Mrs. Betty L. Drago; the late Papa-San, Dr. Rosario Drago; and my soulmate, Dr. David Severson.

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Leading Adult Learning 2.0

Building Capacity in Individuals, Teams, and Systems

Eleanor Drago-Severson

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CONTENTS

Preface xxi

Acknowledgments xxix

About the Author xxxvii

PART I: FOUNDATIONS 1

CHAPTER 1: Why Adult Development Matters in the Context of Education Today 2

What Do We Mean by a Developmental Approach? 3

How Developmental Capacity Helps Us Meet Current Challenges in Education 5

Technical and Adaptive Challenges 6

Acknowledging Developmental Diversity 9

Introducing the Four Pillar Practices 13

Caring Is the Heart of Our Work 14

The Evidence Base for This Book 15

Developmental Underpinnings of the Model 16

The Turbulent Context of Education Today 16

Teachers: Retention, Burnout, and Well-Being 17

Burnout and Work–Life Balance: A Persistent Struggle 19

Social-Emotional Learning Can Help Retain Teachers 20

Supporting Teacher Well-Being: A Systemic Imperative 21

Expanding Roles and Rising Demands Drive Principal Attrition 22

Supporting Principals for Long-Term Retention 23

A Foundational Strategy: Building Supportive Networks and Fostering Collaboration 23

Contemporary Issues in Education and the World 25

Key Factors Influencing Our Postpandemic Context 25

The "New Normal" as a Catalyst for Change 26

Social Justice in Education: A Call to Action 27

Technology and AI: Navigating the Future of Education 29

Broader Societal and Environmental Challenges 31

What We Know: Professional Learning Is Like Oxygen for Educators and Leaders Across the System 31

New Roles for Leaders Demand a Developmental Approach 34

The Power of Transformational Learning Across the System 36

Summary and Conclusion 36

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CHAPTER 2: Constructive-Developmental Theory **39**

Constructive-Developmental Theory and Transformational Learning 40

History of Constructive-Developmental Theory 42

Foundations for Understanding Constructive-Developmental Theory 43

Constructivism, Developmentalism, and Subject–Object Balance—How Do We See and Make Sense? 45

Self and Other, Subject and Object—How Do We See and Make Sense? 46

Transitions 48

Orienting to the Ways of Knowing 50

Growth Takes Time 50

Moving From One Way of Knowing to the Next 51

What Ways of Knowing Are—And Are Not 52

Differentiation Matters 56

Ways of Knowing: Developmental Strengths, Supports, Growing Edges, and Stretches 56

The Instrumental Way of Knowing: Rule-Oriented Self 56

Developmental Strengths 57

Supports, Growing Edges, and Developmental Stretches 58

A Real-Life Example (A Principal's Experience) 60

The Socializing Way of Knowing: Other-Focused Self 61

Developmental Strengths 62

Supports, Growing Edges, and Developmental Stretches 63

A Real-Life Example (Working With Yee) 65

The Self-Authoring Way of Knowing: Reflective Self (*Also Sometimes Referred to as "Systems-Focused"*) 65

Developmental Strengths 66

Supports, Growing Edges, and Developmental Stretches 67

A Real-Life Example (Working with Ale) 69

The Self-Transforming Way of Knowing: Interconnecting Self 69

Why This Stage Is Hard to Pin Down 70

The Transition: Both Liberating and Disorienting 70

Characteristics of Self-Transforming Knowers 72

Developmental Strengths 73

Supports, Growing Edges, and Developmental Stretches 73

A Learning-Oriented Model of Leadership and Developmental Awareness 76

Preconditions for Supporting Adult Development 78

Psychological Safety as a Form of Holding Environment 80

Why They Matter in Practice 81

Expanding Openness and Reducing Blind Spots 81

No Such Thing as a "Little Trust Problem" 81

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Different Ways of Knowing: A Developmental View of Safety, Trust, and Respect 82
The Holding Environment and Why It Matters for Adults in Teams, Schools, Districts—Everywhere! 83
The Three Functions of a Holding Environment 85
Growing the Growers—About Wings and Butterflies 85
Loving People Into Being 87
Frequently Asked Questions 88
Chapter Summary 91
Application Exercise 2.1: Shaping Team, School, and District Cultures: Noble Expectations and Hidden Developmental Demands 92
Application Exercise 2.2: Attending to Ways of Knowing 95
Questions to Consider in Relation to Box 2.1 98
Sample Responses 99

PART II: PILLAR PRACTICES FOR GROWTH 103

CHAPTER 3: Teaming: Growth Opportunities for Individuals, Organizations, and Systems 104
How Teaming Has Changed—And Remained the Same 104
How This Chapter Will Discuss Effective Teaming 105
A Roadmap for This Chapter 106
Teaming in the Literature Today 107
The Importance of Teaming 107
Conditions Research Shows Make for Great Teams . . . 107
. . . And a Word About the Use of Time 108
The Need to Build Collaborative Cultures and Safe Spaces 109
What Do Educators Value About Teaming? 111
The Team as a Source of Individual Development: Engaging in Reflective Practice 112
The Bedrock of Teaming: Trust 113
About Vulnerability, Trust, and Teaming 114
More About Psychological Safety and Its Importance to a Developmental Approach 116
Attending to Developmental Diversity 119
The Instrumental Knower as Team Member 125
The Socializing Knower as Team Member 126
The Self-Authoring Knower as Team Member 127
The Self-Transforming Knower as Team Member 128
The Value of the Developmental Perspective in Teaming 130

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What I've Learned About Teaming From School and District Leaders 131
What Leaders at All Levels Taught Me About Teaming 132
How Leaders Use Teaming 134
Dr. Myatt, Fenway Pilot High School 137
Mr. Beshir Abdell, Assistant Principal, Bayside High School, New York City 138
Ms. Christina Vittiglio, Teacher-Leader, Francis Lewis High School, New York City 138
How Effective Teaming Promotes Adult Development 139
Establishing Ground Rules, Norms, and Commitments 139
On Powerful Norms, Open Dialogue, and the Need for Safe and Brave Spaces 140
A Word About Safe and Brave Spaces 142
Sample Norms, Agreements, Guidelines From Teams in the Field—And Two Tales of Norm Setting 147
Building Norms Helped One School After a Year of COVID-19 148
A High-Trust, High-Functioning Team 149
Framing Questions to Attend to Ways of Knowing 150
Assessing Team Performance 152
Additional Protocols for Furthering Team Progress 156
Implementing Teaming: Stories and Lessons From the Field 159
Adults Need Spaces for Vulnerability—A Principal's Realization 159
How a Principal Used the Pillars to Guide Teams 160
A Fresh Start in Leading a Grade-Level Team 163
A Protocol for Teaming Dilemmas 165
Frequently Asked Questions 169
Chapter Summary 169
Application Exercise 3.1: Bridge to Practice 171
Application Exercise 3.2: Capitalizing on Developmental Strengths and Growing Edges of Teammates 172

CHAPTER 4: Offering Leadership Roles: Learning and Growing From Leading Together 174

About Offering Leadership Roles 176
How Is Offering Leadership Roles Different From Distributing Leadership? 178
What the Literature Says About Offering Leadership Roles 179
The New Keys for Leading in Complex Times 180
Pathways for Sharing Leadership 181
The Principal's Role: Relationships and Leadership Style 182
Needed: Structural Supports and Clear Expectations for Leadership 183
Current Thinking About Teacher Leadership 184
Developmental Benefits of Offering Leadership Roles 189

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Relating Leadership Roles to Ways of Knowing: Pulling the Developmental Thread 191
The Instrumental Knower as Leader 197
The Socializing Knower as Leader 197
The Self-Authoring Knower as Leader 198
The Self-Transforming Knower as Leader 198
The Leadership Role as Holding Environment 199
What I've Learned About Offering Leadership Roles from Schools and District Leaders 200
Offering Leadership Roles to Teachers and to Principals 201
Barriers to Offering Leadership Roles 205
Learning From Leadership Roles 205
Supports for Those Assuming Leadership Roles 207
Examples of Leaders' Use of Offering Leadership Roles 208
Principals Offering Leadership Roles for Teachers 208
Building Capacity by Offering Leadership Roles at Middle School 88 in Park Slope, Brooklyn 210
The Case: In Principal Mitchell's Voice 210
Implementing Teaming and Lifting Teacher-Leaders 211
How Teams Functioned and Were Supported 212
Impact and Observed Benefits of Our Approach 212
My Insights—and Tips and Takeaways 213
Teacher Leadership Roles Inside the School 214
Teacher Leadership Roles Outside the School 219
Principals Assuming Additional Leadership Roles 221
Principals as Mentors and Coaches to Aspiring and Practicing Principals 221
Principals as Facilitators of Conversations With Newer Principals 222
Principals Assuming Leadership Roles in Collaborative Inquiry Groups 222
The Case: Leading for Sustainable Change (In Dr. Wilson's Voice) 222
Offering Leadership Roles and Self-Insight—And Outcomes of the Approach 223
My Reflections on the Process—And Some Takeaways 224
Teachers Assuming Their Own Additional Leadership Roles 225
How One Leader Offers Teachers Leadership Roles Within Schools and Districts 226
Cases and Lessons From the Field 228
Growing Into and From a Leadership Role—Peter's Story 228
Jenni's Story: Stuck in the Middle 237
Edgar's Story: Changing a Math Program Through Teaming and Inviting Teachers Into Leadership 241
References 244

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Christy's Case: Offering Leadership Roles and Developmentally Intentional PD 245
References 249
Chapter Summary 249
Application Exercise 4.1 252
Application Exercise 4.2: Insightful Questions to Ask Colleagues 253
Endnotes: Chapter 4 253

CHAPTER 5: Mentoring: Building Meaningful and Growth-Enhancing Relationships 254
Mentoring: Origin and Overview 256
Key Definitions and Roles of Mentors 257
Mentoring in the Professional Development Literature: Across Sectors 258
The Benefits of Mentoring 259
Learning to Be a Good Mentor 260
Mentoring as a Lever for Equity 262
Mentoring in the Professional Development Literature: In K–12 Education 264
The Link Between Mentoring and Retention 264
Mentoring New Teachers 265
Mentoring Helps Mentors, Too 268
Mentoring School Leaders and Administrators 268
Remote Mentoring 271
A Note on Coaching in K–12 Education and Leadership Contexts 271
Effective Coaching Doesn't Work in a Vacuum: Culture Matters 272
Coaching and Equity 273
Coaching and Cultural Sensitivity 274
The Emotional and Intellectual Weight of Coaching 275
The Inner Life of the Coach 275
Coaching Leadership 276
Mentoring in the Adult Development Literature 277
The Mentoring Relationship 278
Mentoring as a Holding Environment for Growth 280
How a Mentor Can Offer Supports 282
How a Mentor Can Provide Challenges— Stretching (When the Person Is Ready) 283
Key Things to Keep in Mind 284
About Building Mentoring Programs—A Developmental Perspective 285
Mentoring and Developmental Diversity 287
Relating Ways of Knowing to Mentoring 288
The Instrumental Knower as Mentee 292
The Socializing Knower as Mentee 292

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The Self-Authoring Knower as Mentee 293
The Self-Transforming Knower as Mentee 294
How Our Way of Knowing Influences How We Mentor 296
Why and How School and District Leaders Employ Mentoring 297
Examples of Principals' Use of Mentoring to Support Teachers' Growth and Learning 301
General Features of Mentoring Programs Used by Principals 302
Programs for Beginning Teachers 303
Mentoring Teachers in Using Technology 304
An Example of Principals' Mentoring Assistant Principals' Learning 305
Conceptions of Mentoring 306
Characteristics of "Good Mentors" 307
What Supports Mentees Most Want 308
What Mentors Feel Most Proud Of 309
Some Themes in District-Level Leaders' Use of Mentoring 309
Implementing Mentoring and Coaching: Stories From the Field 310
A View From a Successful Mentoring Program 311
A Transformative Mentorship: Redefining Wellness in Leadership Through Coaching and Mentoring 312
Learning to Prioritize Wellness Through Mentorship: In Jullia Lim's Voice 313
A Shift to Prioritizing Emotional and Mental Well-Being 313
Embracing a Comprehensive Approach to Wellness 314
The Impact of Mentorship on My Life 314
Developmental Mentoring in a Bronx High School 315
Supporting Adult Development in Schools: In Michael Barakat's Voice 315
Meeting—and Mentoring—Teachers Where They Are 315
Mentorship: No Quick Fix, but a Powerful Tool 316
Mentorship as a Catalyst for Continuous Development 316
Mentoring New Principals in Chicago Public Schools 317
Meeting the Developmental Needs of First-Year Principals: In Tai Maria Basurto's Voice 317
Implementation 318
Benefits 318
Reflections and Insights—Tips and Takeaways 319
Growing From Being Coached to Coaching Teachers and Leaders in Australia 319
The Transformative Power of Coaching for Adult Learning: In Andrea's Voice 320
Using Differentiation and Trust-Building in Coaching 320
Building Others' Coaching Knowledge and Skills 321

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My Journey Continues 322
What These Cases Reveal About Mentoring 323
A Protocol for Building Mentoring Relationships That Nurture Adult Development 324
Chapter Summary 328
Application Exercise 332

CHAPTER 6: Collegial Inquiry: Engaging in Shared Dialogue and Reflection on Practice 333

Collegial Inquiry: A Kind of Reflective Practice—And More 334
Reflective Practice Supports Personal and Professional Learning 336
Reflective Practice Helps Us Identify Our Assumptions 336
Reflective Practice Helps Us Reconceptualize Our Assumptions 337
Building a Culture of Collaborative Reflective Practice 338
Who Should Engage in Reflective Practice? 339
Requirements for Engaging in Reflective Practice 340
Developing Structures for Shared Reflection and Dialogue 340
Narrative Spotlight: One Teacher's Call for Safe Spaces 342
Creating the Conditions for Shared Reflection and Dialogue 343
Modeling How to Engage in Dialogue and Reflection 345
Increasing Self-Awareness Through Meaningful Dialogue and Reflection 346
Acclimating Teachers to a New Culture 346
How Collegial Inquiry Connects to Developmental Diversity 348
Relating Collegial Inquiry to Ways of Knowing 349
The Instrumental Knower and Collegial Inquiry 352
The Socializing Knower and Collegial Inquiry 353
The Self-Authoring Knower and Collegial Inquiry 353
The Self-Transforming Knower and Collegial Inquiry 354
Collegial Inquiry as a Path to a Different Way of Knowing 355
Application Spotlight: Goal Setting Across Ways of Knowing 355
How Leaders Can Developmentally Tailor Goal-Setting Practices With Adult Learners 356
How Collegial Inquiry Applies to Feedback 358
Developmental Feedback as a Powerful Form of Collegial Inquiry 358
Compassionate Listening 359
Differentiating Feedback for Growth 359
The Flower Metaphor: Tuning Into Inner Growth 360
Feedback as a Holding Environment for Growth 360
Building a Feedback Culture Through Collegial Inquiry 360
Giving and Receiving Feedback 361
Application Spotlight: Exercises to Practice Developmental Feedback 363

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Application Exercise 1: Questions for Checking in and Requesting Feedback on Your Coaching/Training/Leadership Work 363
Application Exercise 2: Naming Your Feedback Dilemma/Challenge 364
Application Exercise 3: Practicing Feedback Giving With a Feedback Partner 366
How and Why Leaders Employ Collegial Inquiry 368
How Leaders Are Having Collegial Conversations 371
Engaging in Courageous Conversations 372
Preparing for Challenging Conversations 373
Collegial Dialogue in a Racially and Culturally Diverse Public School 373
Teacher Conversations Within PLCs 375
Developmental Conversations Between Schools and Families 376
Practices School Leaders Are Using to Initiate Collegial Inquiry 377
Practices Used by Principals and Assistant Principals With Teachers and Other Adults 377
Practice 1: Reflection Through the Process of Writing 377
Practice 2: Reflection Through Dialogue 379
Practice 3: Reflection Through Decision-Making 388
Practice 4: Reflection Through Helping and Advising Others 389
Practices Used by Principals With Fellow Principals 390
Practices Used by Teachers With Other Teachers 392
Practice 1: Initiating Book Clubs 392
Practice 2: Initiating Groups for Sharing Best Practices 393
Practice 3: Initiating Groups on Grant and Proposal Writing 394
Four Case Studies From the Field Using Collegial Inquiry 394
Dealing With Profound Change: Making Sense of AI and Instructional Redesign 394
The Challenge of AI in Education: In Jerry Crisci's Voice 395
A Prime Opportunity for Collegial Inquiry 395
The Process 395
Making Time for Mourning and Incorporating Diverse Voices 396
How This Learning Experience Benefited Teachers 396
Questions to Consider 397
Faculty Self-Identifying Their "Way of Knowing" and Teaming With Complementary "Knowers" for Collegial Conversations 397
The Ways of Knowing—A New Lens: In Mark Erlenwein's Voice 398
The Framework: Merging Ways of Knowing With Trust, Safety, and Respect 398
The Impact of WOK-Centered Feedback on Leadership and Teaching 398
Leveraging Collegial Inquiry for Effective Grade Reassignments 401

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Our Challenge and the Pillar of Collegial Inquiry: In Felix and Jennifer's Voice 401
Building Trust and Easing in Change 402
How Collegial Inquiry Benefited Our Community 403
Insights, Tips, and Takeaways 404
How One Principal Helped a New Team Bond With Each Other 404
A Day for Bonding—And Learning From Geese 405
Setting Goals for Working Better as a Team 407
An Exercise to Surface Values and Build Trust 408
Chapter Summary 410
Application Exercises 413
Exercise 6.1: Convening: Personal Case-Based Discussions That Support Collegial Inquiry 413
Organizing the Case 418
Exercise 6.2: Goal Setting as an Instructional and Developmental Practice 420

CHAPTER 7: Futuring Forward 423
Building Developmental Capacity to Meet Adaptive Challenges 425
Schools and Districts as Learning Centers 425
A Learning-Oriented Leadership Model for Promoting Growth 426
Attending to and Honoring Our Own and Each Other's Internal Capacities 428
Valuing Adults' Ways of Knowing 429
Supporting Different Ways of Knowing—Without Labeling 433
Why Developmental Diversity Matters in Leadership and Learning 434
Putting the New Learning-Oriented Model Into Practice 435
The Power of Cathedral Thinking as We Try a New Model 438
Cathedral Thinking in Schools 439
On This Journey, Renewal and Hope . . . 440
The Challenge and Promise of Renewal—And Transformation 441
Love and Listening Make Renewal Possible 442
A Call to Action: Carrying the Work Forward 445
Walking in Hope Toward Today's—And Your Future—Purpose 447

Epilogue 449
Glossary 453
References 457
Index 500

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RESEARCH APPENDIX

PUTTING THE PILLARS INTO PRACTICE: CASES FROM THE FIELD

A Reader's Guide to What Follows

Drew's Case: Building Norms to Pave the Path to Teaming

Fernando's Case: Cultivating Trust Through Collegial Inquiry by Daily Checking In

Sheldon's Case: Navigating the Gray and Leading Through the Ways of Knowing

Jed's Case: The Superpower of Asking What Others Need to Grow

Michelle's Case: Leading Through Teaming and Rebuilding Together

William's Case: Developing a Collaborative Learning Community for Digital Learning and Literacy

Rafaela's Case: Building Capacity in Adult Leaders to Transform a District

Maddy's Case: Growing for Justice at NESA—The Promise of a Developmental Approach

Jessica's Case: Seeing in Story

Luza's Case: A Leader With a Self-Authoring Way of Knowing Grows Trust

Chapter Summary

Reflective Questions

Application Exercises



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PREFACE

I am still learning.

—Michelangelo

Educators and educational leaders have always been my heroes. Throughout my career as a teacher, developmental coach, and facilitator, I have witnessed the profound impact that compassionate, thoughtful leadership can have—not just on individuals and schools but also on entire communities. My work has always centered on creating professional learning spaces and helping others to do the same—communities where teachers and leaders at every level can grow together. These spaces are meant to nurture not only professional skills but also the deep internal growth that enables leaders to thrive in their roles, no matter how complex or demanding the landscape.

When *Leading Adult Learning* was first published in 2009, it reflected decades of lessons I had learned through working and partnering with leaders. The book was a labor of love, designed to help educators understand the importance of adult development in their own growth and leadership. Over the years, I have been humbled and moved by how educators have embraced the book, describing it as their "bible" for leadership and learning. Knowing that it has reached its 25th printing is a testament not to my work but to the hunger and passion adults have for meaningful, transformational growth. However, so much has changed since 2009. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the world in ways that we are still coming to understand, laying bare vulnerabilities in our systems and inequities in our communities. At the same time, global and domestic crises—from the racial reckoning to climate change to the polarization of our political landscape—have reshaped the context in which we live and work. These changes demand that we evolve our thinking and leadership practices.

This book is not just another edition of *Leading Adult Learning*, nor is it a direct sequel in the traditional sense. It is a new book for new times, written to address the profound shifts and challenges that educators and leaders face today. While it builds on the foundation of the first book, it stands independently, offering fresh tools, perspectives, and insights designed to meet the realities of today's schools and systems, educators, and communities. Where the original *Leading Adult Learning* laid the groundwork for understanding adult development as a cornerstone of leadership, this new book reflects the unique demands of our current moment. While the two books are companions, linked by shared principles and a commitment to growth, they can also be read independently. Each has its own purpose and offers its own unique perspective. Together, they form a complementary body of work—a dialogue across time about the enduring and evolving nature of leadership. Yet this book is not bound

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by the past; it looks forward, standing on its own as a guide for leaders seeking to thrive—and to help those in their care do the same—in these unprecedented times. Leaders and educators across the system inspire me. They are hope. You are hope.

The challenges we face today—whether caused by global pandemics, systemic inequities, or the rapid pace of technological change—demand new tools, new strategies, and new ways of thinking. Education stands at the crossroads of this change. The resilience and dedication of educators have always been a source of strength for me, but the past decade has taught me that educators are not just leading schools or districts—we are helping to reimagine what it means to learn, lead, and connect in an increasingly complex world. This second book is both a reflection of how far we've come and a guide for where we need to go. It doesn't replace the first edition but builds upon it. My hope is that this new book will continue to serve as a resource and companion for educators and leaders around the world, supporting them in their vital work of leading and learning with intention, courage, care, and love.

While this second book builds on the foundation of the first, it also reflects the ways in which so many educators have grown together. Since the 2009 publication of *Leading Adult Learning*, I have learned so much—from the extraordinary leaders and educators who have shared their stories with me, from the challenges we've faced together, and from the opportunities that continue to inspire hope and change. Through the generous collaboration of educators across the globe, I've been privileged to refine the pillar practices, create and update protocols, develop new strategies for capacity building, and build new frameworks that meet these emerging needs. This book aims to help educators—whether in bustling classrooms, virtual learning environments, district leadership offices, or other sectors—navigate the technical and adaptive challenges of our time with courage, compassion, and developmental intentionality.

WHAT IS IN THIS NEW BOOK, AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM THE FIRST?

When I wrote *Leading Adult Learning* in 2009, I drew from decades of experience working alongside educators and leaders. Those lessons, coupled with my own deep learning journey, shaped the practices and frameworks in the first edition. But as the world has changed—and as I've continued to learn from the brilliant, magnanimous, resilient educators I've had the privilege of partnering with—so, too, has this book evolved. This new book expands on the original ideas with new tools, protocols, and insights. It also incorporates emerging challenges and opportunities that simply didn't exist in 2009, like the rise of online and hybrid learning and the critical work of equity and inclusion in deeply divided times. Below are some specific things I've added.

- **New Protocols and Strategies:** Over the years, I've developed and refined additional protocols for teaming, mentoring, collegial inquiry, and inviting adults into leadership roles to support leadership development—both

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in response to real-world challenges and through my ongoing learning alongside educators. In this book, I've included these new strategies to help educators and leaders navigate both the technical and adaptive challenges of their work, whether they're operating in person or online. For example, new protocols for teaming and collegial inquiry have been created, and others have been updated to reflect the complexities of virtual collaboration, offering strategies to sustain trust, connection, and engagement in hybrid spaces. These tools are not abstract concepts—they are practical, tested approaches designed to make the work of leading and learning just a little bit easier, a little more purposeful, and a little more human.

- **Enhanced Focus on Equity, Belonging, and Inclusion:** Also reflected in this book is a renewed focus on equity, belonging, and inclusion. The work of fostering equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness has always been essential in education, but it has taken on new urgency in recent years. Today's leaders are called to not only manage schools but also actively disrupt inequities, create spaces of belonging, and foster collaboration across lines of difference. The pillar practices—teaming, inviting adults into leadership roles to support their leadership development, developmental mentoring, and collegial inquiry—are essential tools for this work. They offer us a way to honor diverse voices, address systemic inequities, and build cultures that reflect the values of care and connection. This book emphasizes practical strategies for addressing creating inclusive spaces where all educators—and all students—can thrive. It offers new case studies, reflective questions, and resources to support this journey. I hope these tools and insights will inspire leaders to approach equity work with both courage and care, fostering and deepening trust and collaboration even in difficult conversations.
- **Connection to Current Standards:** This new book aligns the pillar practices with Learning Forward's (2022) new standards for professional learning. These standards, updated to reflect the pressing needs of today's educational environments, provide a lens through which the pillar practices can be embedded into professional learning opportunities in practical, impactful ways. This alignment ensures that the ideas in this book are not only timeless but also responsive to the evolving demands of the field.
- **Insights Into Online Learning:** The world has been reshaped by the shift to online and hybrid work environments. As someone who's learned alongside educators navigating this shift, I've seen the challenges but also the opportunities it presents for connection, creativity, and growth. This edition weaves these insights throughout, offering guidance on how the pillar practices can be adapted to virtual spaces while maintaining their human-centered core.

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- **New Case Studies and Examples:** One of my favorite parts of this edition is the inclusion of updated, real-world examples from educators and leaders across the system who have successfully applied the pillar practices in diverse contexts. These stories highlight the resilience and innovation of educators in navigating today's complexities. My hope is that readers will see themselves in these narratives, gaining both inspiration and practical takeaways for their own journeys. I've included examples from international settings, which I hope will help readers feel supported no matter where they lead or learn. One of the lessons I've learned is that while many of our challenges in education are universal, their solutions are often deeply local. A rural principal in Kenya navigating resource scarcity may draw on the same pillar practices as a district superintendent in New York, but the application will look different. This edition embraces both the universality of the challenges educators face and the unique contexts in which we work.
- **Highlighting the Quadruple Pandemics:** This book directly addresses the profound impact of what I call the "quadruple pandemics": COVID-19, racial inequity, economic instability, and climate change. These global crises have reshaped how we live, learn, and lead. Here we will explore how the pillar practices can help us not only respond to these challenges but also find opportunities for growth, healing, and transformation within them.
- **Practical Summaries, Applications, and Takeaways:** To make the content more accessible and actionable, each chapter now includes condensed summaries of key points and chapter highlights, designed to provide leaders with quick, practical insights they can refer to as they engage in this work. These additions are designed to help readers pause, think deeply, reimagine, and apply what they're learning in ways that feel relevant to their own contexts. I hope that these tools will inspire you, stretch you, support you—and remind you that you are not alone in this work.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Each chapter in this book is designed to guide readers deeper into the work of supporting adult development, fostering collaborative leadership, and creating spaces where educators and leaders can thrive. Together, these chapters form a journey—one grounded in research, enriched by stories from the field, and elevated by the belief that growth is always possible.

PART I: FOUNDATIONS

The two chapters in Part I provide a foundation upon which the chapters in Part II—which consist of an in-depth exploration of the pillar practices for growth—can stand. They serve as the bedrock for the ideas and practices explored in this book.

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My intention in Chapter 1 is to paint a vivid and honest picture of the context in which we live, breathe, work, and love. It examines the profound challenges and opportunities that define our current moment, exploring the complexities of leadership in today's world and the state of education, equity, and well-being. By situating ourselves in this context, we can better understand the urgency of cultivating growth—for ourselves, our colleagues, and the communities we serve. Chapter 1 also highlights why adult development matters now more than ever. It is not just a theoretical endeavor; it is a practical necessity for navigating the adaptive challenges of our time with courage, care, and intention.

In Chapter 2, we turn to the constructive-developmental theory that serves as the backbone for understanding how adults grow and learn. This chapter explores the developmental stages that inform our ways of knowing—how we perceive, interpret, and make meaning of our experiences. These ways of knowing shape the strategies we use to engage with challenges, interact with others, and make leadership decisions. Through this lens, we gain deeper insight into the developmental capacities of ourselves and those we lead, along with practical approaches for creating the conditions that foster meaningful growth. These insights enrich our understanding of the pillar practices and provide the tools to nurture growth—both within ourselves and across the communities we serve.

Together, Chapters 1 and 2 invite us to reflect deeply, to ask ourselves what it means to lead and grow in these times, and to begin building the developmental capacity necessary for creating sustainable, equitable, and thriving schools and communities.

PART II: THE PILLAR PRACTICES

Each of Chapters 3 through 6 is devoted to exploring one of the four pillar practices in depth, offering a comprehensive look at how these practices support both individual and collective growth. These chapters are designed to guide readers through the complexities and possibilities of each practice, building a rich understanding of their transformative power.

Chapter 3 delves into the pillar practice of teaming, illustrating how collaboration forms the bedrock of professional growth and shared leadership. Teaming is not merely about bringing people together; it's about creating environments where trust, mutual respect, and shared purpose thrive. Drawing on insights from the professional learning and adult developmental literature, this chapter examines how effective teaming fosters cognitive, emotional, and relational growth among educators. Case examples show readers how leaders in diverse school contexts have used teaming to address complex challenges, build resilience, and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility.

Chapter 4 explores the pillar practice of inviting or offering leadership roles—an essential component of sharing leadership with developmental intentionality and capacity building. This chapter discusses how inviting adults into leadership

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opportunities lets educators step into new roles, stretch themselves, gain confidence, and develop their internal capacities. From inviting teachers to serve as instructional leads to empowering principals to mentor their peers, this chapter illuminates how providing leadership roles can unlock potential at every level of the system. Case studies highlight how leaders have navigated the opportunities and challenges of shared leadership, creating pathways for both individual and organizational growth.

Chapter 5 focuses on the pillar practice of developmental mentoring and coaching from a developmental perspective, emphasizing their role as transformative tools for adult growth. Unlike traditional approaches, developmental mentoring goes beyond offering advice or addressing immediate challenges. Instead, it provides the "holding environments" necessary for individuals to reflect, stretch, and grow. This chapter integrates insights from adult developmental theory to show how mentoring relationships can foster deeper self-awareness, emotional resilience, and adaptive capacity. Real-world examples demonstrate how mentoring and coaching with developmental intentionality have been used to support leaders navigating the complexities of today's educational landscape.

Chapter 6 examines the pillar practice of collegial inquiry and engaging in meaningful conversations. Collegial inquiry is about creating spaces for reflective dialogue where educators can challenge assumptions, deepen understanding, and co-create solutions to complex problems. This chapter explores how intentional conversations not only build trust and collaboration but also support the kind of transformational learning—internal growth—needed to address adaptive and technical challenges. Through case examples, the chapter demonstrates how leaders use collegial inquiry to foster growth, address inequities, and build stronger, more connected teams.

PUTTING THE PILLARS INTO PRACTICE: CASES FROM THE FIELD

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There is also an online chapter that brings the insights from the previous chapters to life through real-world narratives and case studies. This chapter offers a rich collection of examples that illustrate how educational leaders across diverse settings have applied the pillar practices to create meaningful, positive change. The cases presented build in complexity, offering a vivid look at how the pillar practices are applied in real-world contexts. These stories highlight the creativity, courage, and commitment of leaders who have embraced these practices to transform their schools, districts, and communities. Each

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narrative provides an opportunity to see the principles of this book in action, offering practical insights and inspiration for readers to apply in their own leadership journeys.

In each of these chapters, I weave together main themes from the professional learning literature and adult developmental literature. This dual perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of how the pillar practices support growth—not only in what educators know and do, but also in how they think, feel, and connect. By sharing examples of how leaders employ these practices in varied school and district contexts, I aim to ground the theory in lived experiences, demonstrating both the challenges and the profound opportunities for growth these practices create.

Chapter 7, the final chapter, is an invitation to join me in a developmental pause—a moment to breathe, look back on your learning throughout this book, and consider how you want to "future forward" in your leadership and life. This chapter brings together the book's core ideas about adult development and revisits what it means to build the internal capacities we need to meet the adaptive challenges facing our schools and districts. I invite you to honor your own and one another's ways of knowing, to recognize the developmental strengths you carry, and to imagine how these capacities can be nurtured within your communities. I also offer guidance for putting the learning-oriented leadership model into practice and share thoughts about sustaining renewal, cultivating hope, and grounding ourselves in the commitments that matter most. My hope is that this final chapter serves as a holding space where you can integrate your insights, reconnect with your purpose, and envision the possibilities ahead as you carry this work forward with care and intention.

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In the end, though, maybe we must all give up trying to pay back the people in this world who sustain our lives. In the end, maybe it's wiser to surrender before the miraculous scope of human generosity and to just keep saying thank you, forever and sincerely, for as long as we have voices.

—Elizabeth Gilbert

Gratitude is the memory of the heart.

—Jean Baptiste Massieu

At its heart—this book is one of many hearts, minds, spirits, and hands. In it, I have the honor and privilege of sharing gifts and wisdom from generous and magnanimous educators and other leaders who opened their hearts and minds so that we could benefit from learning from them, their experiences, their wisdom, their insights, and their practices—including how they implement the pillar practices in their own contexts. These are gifts of love and shine light on what I have learned from having the honor of partnering with—and of learning with, from, and alongside—these courageous leaders and educators. In essence, these are gifts from the noble, dedicated educators, leaders, and colleagues I have had the honor of working with in the field, in university classrooms, and in other professional learning institutes and longer-term coaching relationships.

What follows is also intimately connected to cherished teachers and loved ones—those still walking alongside us and those I carry in my heart and always will. My great hope is that every single educator, leader, and connection—and there are many—who has helped bring this book into being feels my sincere and enduring gratitude. Your care and generosity infuse the stories, examples, and pages that follow. This 2.0 book is offered in gratitude to all who have taught me and opened their hearts and minds so generously and courageously since and within the first edition. The lessons shared represent the collective contribution of many people, many hearts, and many minds.

I have deep awareness of the importance, power, blessing, and gift of the many precious connections I have with cherished individuals and of the different and important ways their bright lights and oh-so-big-and-generous hearts and minds inspire, encourage, and strengthen me. One thing I know for certain is that no meaningful endeavor—whether raising a child, caring for an aging parent, teaching, supporting someone's growth, or writing a book—is done alone. Whenever important work is brought to fruition, there is always a team or tribe of generous people who, over many years, offer their gracious and thoughtful help and support. The encouragement and inspiration I have received are impossible to measure, and the individuals and institutions who have contributed are impossible to count. I am

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ideals of big heart, big soul, and big mind. Thank you for the precious gifts you gave, including your thoughtful questions offered in the spirit of making this work more accessible. You are a treasure, and I am deeply grateful for you.

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For more than 35 years, I have also been truly blessed with the precious gift of learning from, with, and alongside Professor Robert Kegan of Harvard's Graduate School of Education. During these decades, I have been a beneficiary of Bob's extraordinary gifts as magnanimous leader, extraordinary teacher, trusted advisor, wise mentor, thought partner and collaborator, treasured colleague, and cherished friend. Bob, thank you for all of this—and for teaching and modeling how to really, *really* hold people and support development. I hope that in your big heart, you feel my deepest gratitude as I work to pay forward your gifts with those in my care. Thank you, from all of me, for all that you are and for helping me to become who I am becoming. You are inspiration, gift, and light. I have benefited from how you, Bob, exquisitely and ingeniously create holding environments. Thank you from my heart for developing your theory—a generative gift to this world—and for the ways that you have altered the course of my life and the contributions I am able to make. Your wisdom and visionary leadership continue to inform, inspire, and guide my work, teaching, research, and life. I stand humbly on the shoulders of a giant—a light—that is you.

All that I have been able to do in my life—and all that I will do—is forever tied to my family: the one I was blessed to be born into and the one I share with my beloved husband, David. It is very important to acknowledge and offer immeasurable gratitude for my beginnings. My tender expressions of love and immense gratitude go to those who most shaped my life and what I am able to offer in support of others—my parents. My late father, Dr. Rosario Drago, and my late mother, Mrs. Betty Brisgal Drago, have been and continue to be beacons, guides, sources of inspiration, lifelong teachers, and friends. Although they have passed from this world into the next, they live each day so brightly in my life, in my work, and in all I can give. With extraordinary love, wisdom, joy, exemplary hard work and service, and care, my parents modeled how to love, give, serve, learn, care, and lead. Their teachings continue to fuel and hold me. Their love, courage, and presence strengthen me and live within me every day.

I thank my six siblings and their families for their love, their presence, and their enduring support. Even though two of my dear brothers—close friends—have passed from this world, I feel them with me each and every day. Thank you all for your love, your faith in me, and for all you have taught me and continue to teach

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me. Thank you for teaching me important lessons about leadership, love, life, and the importance of what can be found—and what can be lost. I thank you and your children for being loves.

Anyone who has engaged in a labor of love and heart such as this knows that it requires sacrifice of so many kinds: patience, love, and support—especially from one's lifelong soulmate. And now, I offer my deepest and enormous gratitude to you, beautiful, magnanimous, wise, David Severson. You, Daye, are my light, loving husband, precious soulmate, best friend, North Star, and cherished, brilliant, sage teacher. How does one thank the sun for its light, warmth, giving, and nurturing? Thank you from my soul for pouring your love into me and for the many ways you help me grow each day and each year. Although words cannot fully capture my immense love and gratitude, I hope that in your gigantic, compassionate heart and brilliant mind, you know and feel how very grateful I am for the enduring blessing and treasured gift of *you* in my life. Your generosity, courage, strength, goodness, love, care, and compassion inspire me every day. Thank you from my soul for your tender love, generosity, enduring support, and deep care. You inspire—in the truest sense of the word, meaning "to breathe life into"—others and me. Sweet Daye-Love, please feel deeply appreciated for being truly exquisite, giving you. Thank you for showing me the way, for teaching me how to be better, and for belaying me. Thank you for your extraordinary love, sacrifices, and compromises that you so generously give each day. You are my kitchen cabinet, Love. Thank you for the gift of you, your loving companionship, and your cherished friendship every step in our journey. Thank you for believing in me—and in us—and the work we do together each day, Star. The contributions we make, we make *together*. You are the brightest Light and beacon in my life. You are my treasured love, angel, and cherished touchstone. I love you, and I thank you from the deepest parts of me. I thank God for all blessings—and especially for you.

In writing *Leading Adult Learning 2.0,* my primary purpose and heartfelt intention was to offer this new perspective that illuminates practices supporting adult development at the individual level and within teams, schools, districts, and systems. I hope this book offers a map that you can use to support adult development in *your* learning community. I warmly welcome, invite, and encourage you to let me know how, if at all, what follows helps in the noble and inspiring work you do. It would be an honor to learn from you about how the ideas and practices presented support your leadership, your work in fostering others' growth, and your own growth. I hope, with all my heart, that they do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eleanor—Ellie—Drago-Severson is Professor of Education Leadership and Adult Learning and Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. A developmental psychologist, Ellie teaches, conducts research, and consults with team, school, district, and systems leaders—as well as teacher leaders—in public, charter, and private schools and systems. She supports professional and personal growth; leadership development for principals, assistant principals, teachers, schools, districts, and organizations; and coaching and mentoring in K–12 schools, universities, medical institutions, educational associations, and other adult education contexts both domestically and internationally. She is also an internationally certified developmental coach who partners with leaders to build internal capacity, lead on behalf of social justice, and strengthen capacity across their systems.

For more than three decades, Ellie's teaching, research, and partnerships in the field have sought—synergistically—to explore and extend the possibilities of adult development and developmental leadership as levers for internal capacity building at the individual, team, organizational, and societal levels. Her work explores interconnected streams that focus on the connection between internal capacities and educational leaders'—broadly and inclusively defined—practice on behalf of growing bigger selves and helping others to do the same. She also takes a developmental approach to creating conditions that support our desires to thrive and support those in our care, as well as feedback for growth, the pressing challenges national and international educational leaders are facing and ways to help them manage these challenges, and leadership preparation and development. In addition, her work offers a new, learning-oriented model for leadership development; supports adult development in individuals and teams within and across systems; lifts leadership at the individual and systems levels; supports diverse adult English language learners and those who serve them; and grows teacher, principal, assistant principal, and district-level leadership.

Consonant with urgent conversations about transforming teams, schools, systems, and society into more learning-inclusive and equity-oriented contexts, her work foregrounds *how* we can support leaders' internal capacity building in schools, districts, organizations, and leadership preparation programs—and how these capacities *inform the gifts* leaders are able to give to those in their care, each other,

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and the world as they lead for social justice and strive to make the world a better place for all. Ellie loves opportunities to accompany educators and other leaders in their vital work—and never takes it for granted. Instead, she considers it a gift.

At Teachers College, Ellie is director of the PhD Program in Educational Leadership. She teaches aspiring and practicing principals in the Summer Principals Academy, aspiring superintendents in the Urban Education Leaders Program, and leaders from a range of for-profit, management, and consulting sectors in the Accelerated Education Guided Intensive Study (AEGIS) Program. She also coaches leaders in the Cahn Fellows Program for Distinguished Leaders and in her private coaching practice to help them grow—*on the inside—and to grow* their practice. In addition, she serves as faculty director and co-facilitator of the Leadership Institute for School Change at Teachers College.

Ellie is author of the best-selling books *Helping Teachers Learn: Principal Leadership for Adult Growth and Development* (Corwin, 2004) and *Leading Adult Learning: Supporting Adult Development in Our Schools* (Corwin/The National Staff Development Council, 2009), as well as *Becoming Adult Learners: Principles and Practice for Effective Development* (Teachers College Press, 2004) and *Helping Educators Grow: Strategies and Practices for Leadership Development* (Harvard Education Press, 2012). She is also coauthor of *Learning for Leadership: Developmental Strategies for Building Capacity in Our Schools* (Corwin, 2013), *Reach the Highest Standard in Professional Learning: Learning Designs* (Learning Forward & Corwin, 2014), *Tell Me So I Can Hear You: A Developmental Approach to Feedback for Educators* (Harvard Education Press, 2016), *Leading Change Together: Developing Educator Capacity Within Schools and Systems* (ASCD, 2018), and *Growing for Justice: A Developmental Continuum of Leadership Capacities and Practices* (Corwin/Sage & Learning Forward, 2023).

Ellie's teaching, scholarship, and developmental approach to leadership foreground the power of growth, relationships, and interconnections—since these are essential to learning, development, individual perspective broadening, authentic collaboration, and capacity building at the individual, team, school, district, and systems levels. Her teaching, mentoring, and life's work are inspired by her husband and soulmate, her parents and family, her relationships, her teachers, her own experiences as a middle and high school teacher, her experiences as a program director and teacher of adults, her work with leaders in the field, her coaching work, and—last but not least—her work with practicing and aspiring leaders in graduate programs and in the field. Taken together, these experiences form an interdisciplinary palette that is complemented by adult developmental theories and other life-changing frameworks.

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Ellie's work has earned awards from the Spencer Foundation, the Klingenstein Foundation, and Harvard University, where she served on faculty for eight years and was awarded the Morningstar Award for Excellence in Teaching and the Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Most recently, Ellie received three outstanding teaching awards from Columbia University. She earned degrees from Long Island University (BA) and Harvard University (EdM, EdD, and a postdoctoral fellowship). Ellie grew up in the Bronx and is deeply grateful for the ways that it—and the community that raised her—have shaped her life.

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Meade

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Foundations

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Chapter

1

Why Adult Development Matters in the Context of Education Today

One moment can change a day, one day can change a life and one life can change the world.

—Buddha

"Everyone has a story," Liina, an urban district leader I recently worked with, said in their reflective essay about leading adult learning. Isn't that the truth—everyone does have a story, and their stories are important. I want to begin this chapter with an important part of my story and life that brought me to my calling of supporting adult **development**—helping others to grow and wanting to grow as well. I love to accompany people as they grow. Later in this chapter, I'll invite you to consider your story too, to welcome you into the journey we are about to take together. But for now, I'll share where my passion and love for supporting adults' development began.

Ever since I was 5 years old, I have loved teaching others. At first my little brother, Paul, was kind enough to "play school" with me at the desk in my childhood bedroom; years later, I had the honor of teaching and learning from middle and high school students. It was a gift. I loved every minute of it—and I still love being a learner and a teacher. That is my calling. That is what brings me to this work—and this book.

After teaching and coaching for several years in middle and high schools, I felt a desire to learn more about how I might help create and sustain schools as places where everyone—the children, adolescents, and the adults who serve them—could grow. Back then—and yes, it was long ago—I had a hunch deep in my heart and mind that there was a relationship between supporting adults—caring for them, seeing them, listening to them, holding them in the psychological sense—and their capacity to lift, love, and support children and adolescents within schools. At the time, I had no "hard data or evidence" to support this hunch; rather, it was just what I felt and thought.

Throughout my early years as a teacher, I had held onto that thought. I watched. I listened. I cared for students and adults. In most cases, I saw that leaders in the

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schools demonstrated care and respect for all of us teachers on the ground. But I also noticed what happened when some colleagues did not feel respected or well held in the psychological sense. I noticed the negative things that happened in their classrooms, in how their students felt, and in how these teachers (and the administrators themselves) felt. I saw that many of these teachers left the profession. I kept thinking—how can we make conditions better for everyone?

Then, several years into teaching, I was fortunate to have a school leader who was a mentor and friend to me. This supportive leader saw me and helped me grow instructionally, professionally, and personally. This leader had attended a growth-enhancing master's program at Harvard University, where students had a lot of freedom to design their own curriculum. The leader thought that, given my teaching approach and what I wanted to learn, this program would be a good fit for me. I decided to attend that master's program for the very reasons my mentor suggested—so I could select what I wanted to learn, to grow and improve.

Soon after I was accepted into this program, a colleague who had been hired to teach my high school courses while I attended graduate school came for a tour of our school and to talk a little about the work I had been leading with some students. Upon learning that I would be attending the same graduate program that she had attended years before, she emphatically exclaimed, "You've got to take the course with Bob Kegan on adult development!" I remember thinking to myself, "Adult development—wow—that sounds amazing!" I did not know then, however, that that course and my learnings from it—and from Bob Kegan—would change the very course of my life and the kinds of contributions I would try to make. I am so grateful that this experience did change my life—and for the gifts I have received since then that have enabled me to be helpful and useful in serving others.

In the following section of the chapter, I offer a brief introduction to the adult developmental framework that I was introduced to by Bob Kegan as a graduate student—a body of work that has guided my research, teaching, and collaboration with schools, leaders, and teachers over the course of subsequent decades. In Chapter 2, I provide a deeper dive into adult developmental theory and its applications.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH?

Looking back, what began as a spark of curiosity has become a guiding truth: supporting adults' growth is not optional—it is essential. We live in a world marked by overlapping crises and accelerating change, and these realities call us to see our work through a developmental lens. Growth does not end in childhood; it continues throughout our lives when we have the right supports and challenges to assist us—so that we can grow. There are a few big ideas that will be helpful to hold onto

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as you continue to read this chapter. These central ideas address the fundamental questions related to the following: What are our more pressing challenges as educators, and what are the conditions that exist in our educational landscape today? And how can understanding and employing a developmental approach help us meet these challenges? How can caring for the development of adults living, leading, teaching, and learning within the conditions that exist in our schools and districts domestically and internationally help us to lead, teach, learn, and adapt in our schools, districts, and communities today? Put simply, in this chapter, I have tried to paint a picture of our educational landscape and highlight why helping others—and ourselves—to develop and grow matters and how it will help us in meeting the implicit and explicit demands of our educational context today. So, what are these foundational ideas?

- Each of us makes meaning in different ways, and those differences shape how we experience our roles as teachers, leaders, and learners.
- Development takes place when our ways of knowing—our meaning-making systems—are stretched and expanded.
- When supporting adult development, just as we do when supporting adolescent and children's development—we need to *differentiate* the *kinds* of supports and challenges that we offer. Both supports and stretching are needed to support development.
- Differentiation: So what does this mean in the case of adults? What are the different kinds of meaning-making systems in adulthood? I also refer to them as ways of knowing. For example, some adults make sense of the world in more concrete, rule-bound ways (what developmental theorists and I call an **instrumental way of knowing**); others orient primarily to valued relationships and expectations (*socializing*); still others author their *own* values, standards, and philosophies (*self-authoring*); and some can hold multiple perspectives in a deeply interconnected way (*self-transforming*). Given this, we need to consider the developmentally appropriate supports and challenges adults with these different meaning-making systems need to help them build their internal capacities. By *internal capacity,* I mean their cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that help us to better manage the complexities of leading, teaching, learning, and living in today's world.
- Importantly, it is not that one stage of development is better than another. Rather, what matters is the "goodness of fit" between the demands we face and the internal capacities we have available to meet them. This is why creating holding environments—safe and challenging spaces that both support and stretch us—is so vital.
- Adults, like students, need places to care for their own growth, because how we grow influences how we are able to care for others.

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- And when we engage in the four pillar practices—teaming, offering leadership roles, mentoring, and collegial inquiry—with developmental intentionality, we create spaces that build the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities needed to meet today's challenges with courage and care. These pillar practices, which I've seen and studied in schools and systems around the world, emerged from decades of my individual and collaborative research and partnerships with educators and leaders. I call them "pillar practices" because they stand as foundational supports for adult growth.

I will describe each one in more depth later, but I am previewing them here because they are essential to the developmental approach this book is about.

How Developmental Capacity Helps Us Meet Current Challenges in Education

> *"Don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own*."
>
> —Michelle Obama

If there's one thing we know for sure, it's that our world—and the world of education today—is more complex and demanding than ever before. Scholars and practitioners are increasingly using the term *polycrisis* to describe this moment (Lorenzen & Vöpel, 2025). Edgar Morin, the French philosopher and sociologist who first introduced the concept in 1993, explained that a polycrisis occurs when multiple crises intersect in ways that amplify one another, creating situations that are more difficult to manage than any one crisis alone. In education, this convergence is powerfully evident. We are experiencing teacher and substitute shortages, declining enrollment in preservice and master's-level teacher preparation programs, the disruptive effects of climate change, economic instability, and political tensions—all of which combine to form a complex and challenging environment for educators, leaders, students, families, and communities (Lorenzen & Vöpel, 2025).

Educators now need even more on the inside—*what I call developmental capacity*—to meet these combined external challenges and help others do the same. From the lingering effects of a global pandemic to systemic inequities that challenge the very foundation of our schools, today's pressures test not only our skills but also our hearts, minds, and spirits. We need courage, strength, and compassion. We need each other—we need to join hearts, minds, and hands to step forward with grace together. And we need each other especially to grow so that we can meet the challenges of today and those on the horizon.

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This is where adult development comes in. While not a panacea, it is a hopeful and promising way forward. Many of the challenges educators face call for more than technical solutions—they demand a focus on growth and development *within* the adults who lead and teach in our schools and districts. Through the lens of adult development, leaders can explore how educators grow cognitively, emotionally, and relationally to meet unprecedented demands and lead transformational change. Not only can we deepen our understanding of adult development, but we can also support others in their growth—and better support ourselves so that we can continue in this work of the heart.

Leadership in education has always been about more than achieving quantifiable outcomes. It is about relationships, growth, and transformation. To meet the complex demands of today, educators must confront **adaptive challenges** that require new ways of thinking, relating, and leading. Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of how adults grow and thrive, particularly in environments where they feel stretched thin and in need of greater support to teach and lead well. In these moments of uncertainty and change, fostering adult development has become an urgent and practical pathway to sustainable, meaningful change and an essential element to sustaining those who teach, learn, and give in schools, districts, and systems.

In this chapter and throughout this book, I explore why adult development matters—not just for leaders but for entire school communities—and how it can equip educators to lead with courage and compassion in these complex times.

A REFLECTIVE INVITATION

I invite you to pause and consider a few questions as an internal check-in. Often it can be helpful to first reflect privately about one or several of these questions—either by freewriting or free thinking—then share whatever you feel comfortable sharing with a partner or your team.

1. What brings you to this work at this moment in your journey?
2. What is one of your greatest challenges—or hopes for learning—as an educator or leader?

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

The challenges you may have just named for yourself—whether a personal hope or a pressing difficulty—are not happening in isolation. They are part of the broader, complex landscape in which educators and leaders work today. Perhaps the challenge you identified in your response to the reflective prompt has a

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straightforward or technical solution, but likely it also has adaptive dimensions—deeper issues that require growth in ourselves and our communities. Such growth ultimately prepares us to address future challenges that we can't even foresee from our current vantage points.

As educators face the many complex challenges and new demands described in this chapter, many I talk with have described a need to "reset"—to revisit norms, expectations, and priorities within their teams and communities. This reflective process has pushed educators to grow—not only in how they care for others but also in how they care for *themselves*. The events of recent years have also brought new focus to wellness, self-care, and the internal capacities of adults. Across the globe, there is increasing recognition that sustainable growth and effective leadership begin with addressing the emotional and relational needs of educators. Intentional professional learning spaces that address these deeper needs are essential for fostering resilience and capacity in educators.

Our current educational landscape, characterized by complex problems and systemic issues that require adaptive, rather than technical, solutions (Barakat, 2025; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2020; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023), challenges us to rethink how we prepare leaders and teachers for the future. Addressing these challenges and preparing effective leaders calls for *capacity-building initiatives* that support educators at all levels—individual, team, school, district, and system—and prioritize sustainable, reflective leadership practices. This is where a focus on adult development and the pillar practices for growth described in the coming chapters can help us.

Not all challenges are created equal. Some are technical—clear problems with clear solutions. Technical problems can often be resolved by experts or with protocols and procedures, established processes or expertise (like fixing a technology issue or creating a professional learning schedule for teachers in different grade levels). But many of the issues educators face today are adaptive challenges—those without clear-cut solutions or straightforward answers. These kinds of challenges increased during the pandemic and continue to be on the rise globally (Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025; Towns, 2025). While both kinds of challenges are important, adaptive challenges demand something deeper: growth in cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, 2017). They require leaders and educators to rethink deeply held **assumptions**, develop new skills, and embrace the ambiguity of working toward solutions that may not yet exist. This might mean cultural changes—and for individuals, leaders, themselves to change. Some challenges are mixed, meaning that they contain components of both technical and adaptive challenges.

In Table 1.1, I highlight the different characteristics of technical, adaptive, and mixed challenges according to the criteria originally developed by leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz and refined over time by Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz et al., 2009).

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Table 1.1 • Characteristics of Adaptive, Technical, and Mixed Challenges

	Technical Challenge	Adaptive Challenge	Mixed Challenge
Leader's role	Define problem and solution	Identify challenge and key questions/ issues	Identify challenge and key questions/ issues
Problem definition	Clear problem definition	Murky, uncertain problem definition	Aspects of problems can be clear and identifiable—other aspects are not
Clarity of solution	Solutions exist, are available	No clear solution	No clear solution
Change in roles	Individuals' roles are stable	Individuals' roles change	Individuals' roles change
Change in norms	Norms do not change	Norms may change	Norms might change

Source: Adapted from Drago-Severson et al. (2014), Heifetz (1994), and Heifetz et al. (2009).

For instance, teacher retention is often approached as a technical problem—solved with pay raises or workload adjustments. But the deeper causes—burnout, lack of support, limited growth opportunities, and systemic inequities—require adaptive solutions that build trust, collaboration, and reflective practices (Barakat, 2025; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025). One urban, veteran principal reflected privately to me, "During the pandemic, I had no time to think adaptively even though I wanted to do so. The technical challenges of moving my school and my teachers online took over." This candid statement underscores how technical demands often dominate leaders' time and energy—yet adaptive leadership is what enables schools to respond to the deeper, systemic challenges they face (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Towns, 2025; Wagner, 2021).

As today's educators navigate challenges like burnout and retention issues that defy simple, procedural fixes, they need external supports. Yet research emphasizes that the capacity to work through adaptive challenges lies not just in external supports but in fostering adult growth within schools themselves. This is where developmental capacity—and the pillar practices that strengthen it—becomes essential for helping educators thrive amid complexity.

Traditionally, educators and educational leaders discuss two related but different kinds of capacity, both of which are essential for improving student achievement: *organizational capacity*—the ability of a school or system to function effectively (Guskey, 2021, 2025; Spillane, 2017; Spillane & Louis, 2002)—and *instructional capacity*—teachers' ability to provide strong instruction (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Hoerr, 2008; Yalçın & Ereş, 2018).

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In the chapters that follow, we will consider a third kind of capacity that is also needed: **developmental capacity**. Developmental capacity matters because it equips educators to not just cope with demands but to grow through them. It concerns the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to better manage the demands of leadership, teaching, learning, and life.

The new mental demands placed on educators across the system often exceed our developmental capacities (Drago-Severson, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Helsing, 2023; Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Kegan et al., 2016). In this book, we will explore why a developmental concept that I call *ways of knowing* matters and how we can use practices and strategies connected to ways of knowing to support educators' growth *on the inside* so that, individually and collectively, they can better manage the complex demands they face in schools and districts.

Acknowledging Developmental Diversity

In addition to the various forms of diversity—such as race, ethnicity, years of experience, religion, and sexuality—leaders also need to attend to what I call *developmental diversity.* Because today's challenges require adaptive solutions, recognizing developmental diversity helps leaders tailor the right supports and stretches for adults in their care. Caring for and attending to developmental diversity means being mindful of the qualitatively different ways in which we, as adults, make sense of our life experiences (what my colleagues and I refer to as our *ways of knowing*). Research suggests that it's likely that the adults in any school, team, or group will make sense of their experiences in developmentally different ways. Because people take in and experience their realities in very different ways, they need different types of supports and stretches to grow, and leaders must use practices that will support and stretch each adult in their care in the most effective way. This book is about how we can do just that.

Leaders who've learned about developmental diversity in capacity building have found it's "a game changer." One urban principal told me, "Learning about adult development and the pillar practices for growth was life changing. It totally changed my practice. I use it every day in my work with teachers, staff, paraeducators and parents—as well as my board." Similarly, a teacher-leader commented, "Learning about and acknowledging development, ways of knowing, and developmental diversity has helped me to understand the teachers in my department and their needs. I feel better able to support them in their practice, and in turn, this helps support student learning in our high school. I hold very near to my heart the possibility of helping adults grow into this profession of servicing kids and providing students with opportunities to achieve and attain success."

Although adult learning theories can be powerful tools for understanding how to support adult development in K–12 schools, they are underutilized. For example, a key concept in developmental learning is that people have qualitatively different ways of making sense—or making meaning—of their

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experiences. As I wrote in my first book, *Helping Teachers Learn: Principal Leadership for Adult Growth and Development* (2004b), a way of knowing is a person's meaning-making system through which all experience is filtered and understood; it is often referred to as a developmental level or stage. A person's way of knowing dictates how they will make sense of reality. It is the filter through which people interpret their experiences, largely determining their capacities for perspective taking on self, other, and the relationship between the two. As such, it determines how learning experiences (and all life experiences) will be taken in, managed, understood, and used. A person's way of knowing is not connected to gender, age, or life phase, but there is a progression of increasing complexity from one way of knowing to the next.

Our ways of knowing shape how we understand our roles and responsibilities as teachers, leaders, and learners. It also informs how we think about what makes a good leader, what constitutes effective leadership practice, and the supports and challenges we need to grow from various forms of adult collaboration. In addition, research also suggests that a way of knowing influences teachers and other leaders' orientations to and understandings of belonging and how they think about leadership for social justice (Drago-Severson et al., 2023).

Of the six primary ways of knowing (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000), the first two (Stage 0 and Stage 1) are prevalent in infancy and childhood. Three more ways of knowing—the *instrumental, socializing,* and *self-authoring* ways of knowing—are most common in adulthood. While less common, a sixth, which I call the **self-transforming way of knowing**, has become more prevalent today, given the complex challenges of living, learning, teaching, and leading (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Garvey Berger, 2024). Our way of knowing or the meaning-making system influences how adults—regardless of their roles—make sense of and orient to themselves, others, the relationship between oneself and another, and the world. I'll introduce the central characteristics of each way of knowing here, but we'll explore them in greater depth in the next chapter.

Most importantly, each way of knowing has both strengths and areas for growth. All adults bring developmental gifts to their work as well as their growing edges. More specifically, adults who make meaning with an instrumental way of knowing have concrete orientations to relationships, teaming, and the world. They view things as distinctly right or wrong and orient primarily to following the rules to get things right. Importantly, they view things through the prism of inherited worldviews and seek to fulfill their professional and personal needs. While they can be very kind and loving, they express their kindness and love in concrete terms. Instrumental knowers have not yet developed the internal capacity to *stand in another person's shoes*—so to speak. In other words, they do not yet have the internal capacity to take on another person's perspectives.

Adults with a **socializing way of knowing** *have* grown capacities—*on the inside*—to have this capacity. In fact, they primarily orient to valued others'—loved ones,

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supervisors, coaches, team leaders, and society's—opinions and assessments of them. Valued others' judgments of them and their expectations for them become *their own.* When a person grows to have the internal capacities and characteristics associated with a **self-authoring way of knowing**, they have the capacities to not be *made up by others' opinions and judgments of them*—and rather can take those in and reflect on them. Self-authoring knowers have developed an internal bench of judgment. They author their own values and generate their own standards. In addition, they have the capacity to engage in difficult conversations and engage necessary conflict.

Like self-authoring adults, self-transforming knowers have developed personal philosophies about how the world works, and they, too, have an internally generated value system. However, they are no longer *run* by these in the psychological sense. Instead, they can reflect on them. These knowers seek to open their thinking to themselves and others. Interconnection and mutuality are vital to them. Self-transforming knowers have the capacity to understand their inner selves more deeply by seeing *into* and *through* their multiple self-systems. In other words, they have a desire to look continually into themselves in novel ways and to recognize, grow, and challenge those parts of their being that are not as well developed. Considering this, self-transforming knowers are less invested in their *own I—dentities* and have the internal capacity to be more genuinely open to others' perspectives, belief systems, and ideologies, even those that feel directly opposite to their own. Self-transforming knowers are preoccupied with (in a growth-enhancing manner) learning from each other and growing aspects of themselves that are less well developed.

When we cultivate an awareness of our own and others' ways of knowing and **developmental diversity**, we are better equipped to support our own and each other's growth in ways that help us meet the complex demands and wonderful opportunities of teaching, learning, leading, and living in our world today. Table 1.2 provides a brief example of how adults with different developmental orientations (ways of knowing) tend to communicate and collaborate with others.

Table 1.2 • Adults' Different Experiences of Communication and Collaboration by Ways of Knowing (WOK)

Leader (WOK)	Orientation Toward Communicating	Orientation Toward Collaborating
Fran (Instrumental)	• Emphasizes rules for communication; orients toward facts, right way to do things, and concrete goals.	• Everyone in the school or team needs to do their work the "right" way (there is one right way—very few gray areas). • Achieving concrete goals is most important—and a primary concern.

(Continued)

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(Continued)

Leader (WOK)	Orientation Toward Communicating	Orientation Toward Collaborating
Mel (Socializing)	• Emphasizes their own and other people's feelings. • Communicates feelings and personal experiences (internal sense of self—orients to one's own internal world of feelings). • Orients toward making sure all are in agreement.	• Needs the school, group, or team to agree on a shared goal that they work toward. Conflict and/or difficult conversations feel threatening to relationships.
Daye (Self-Authoring)	• Emphasizes ideology, philosophy, and feelings when presenting their perspective to others. • Seeks to understand diversity across similarities and differences in perspectives.	• Understands and appreciates that adults will bring different perspectives, values, and experiences that enrich collaboration. • Values coming together for a common purpose. Feels supported when there are opportunities to design and critique proposals and initiatives.
Pat (Self-Transforming)	• Seeks to negotiate multiple boundaries of diverse stakeholders who bring different needs, gifts, and experiences to a school. • Orients toward stretching their own capacity to support interpersonal and organizational processes. Values communicating where team members explore contradictions and paradoxes in teams, schools, and systems.	• Values a collaborative spirit of accountability in the group so that each person can work to capacity and share responsibility for leading, teaching, and learning, while being flexible so each person can rely on the group. • Values structure and process when they are based on collaboration and what each person brings to and needs from the group. • Appreciates when space is created where each person's gifts and abilities can come forth. Considers it important for groups to be able to balance the personal circumstances of their members with achieving the tasks and/or goals for the group.

Source: Adapted from Drago-Severson (2009, Table 1.1, p. 10).

Because of their differing ways of knowing, the adults presented in Table 1.2 make sense of communicating and working collaboratively in qualitatively different ways, which means they need different supports and stretches (developmental

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challenges) to grow on the inside—meaning to increase their cognitive, emotional, interpersonal (the way they relate to others), and intrapersonal (how deeply they can see inside themselves and take responsibility for themselves) abilities.

A REFLECTIVE INVITATION

- Are there people you find particularly easy to work and collaborate with? Are there others that you find more challenging? How, if at all, might constructive-developmental theory shed new light on your preferences?
- How might an awareness of developmental diversity shape the way you think about collaboration in your school, district, or team?

INTRODUCING THE FOUR PILLAR PRACTICES

So how can we draw on developmental theory to build capacity in each other, ourselves, and our teams, schools, districts, and systems? The pillar practices—teaming, offering, and providing adults with leadership roles, engaging in collegial inquiry, and developmental mentoring—offer a lifeline. These developmental structures and strategies provide the scaffolding through which educators and leaders can work together in meaningful and transformative ways. They foster the kind of shared leadership that enables teams, schools, and districts to engage in difficult conversations, make progress on equity and inclusion efforts, and create spaces where adults and children thrive together (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023). Collegial inquiry, for example, has been shown to foster trust and deeper collaboration among teams (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016), especially in polarized environments where educators face pressure to align with competing community expectations (Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023). These practices may even help with postpandemic challenges like learning loss: Research by Tintore et al. (2020) and Joswick-O'Connor (2020) highlights that while traditional academic interventions focus on content recovery, the application of pillar practices like teaming and collegial inquiry creates environments that nurture both educators' and students' growth. And research confirms that schools that intentionally use teaming and mentoring report higher levels of teacher engagement and retention, even in the face of external stressors (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023).

These practices have been shown to bring educators together in ways that not only strengthen leadership but also promote a sense of community and purpose (Barakat, 2025; Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Espinal, 2023; Joswick-O'Connor, 2020).

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One superintendent shared how the introduction of the pillar practices in their district led to breakthroughs in collaboration and problem-solving: "The protocols and frameworks helped us shift from simply reacting to problems to collectively identifying root causes and rethinking strategies as a team. By coming together to engage in collegial inquiry and share leadership, we've created an environment where our teachers feel heard, supported, and equipped to take on the challenges they face." This aligns with findings from Foster (2023), which emphasize the importance of distributed leadership models in fostering resilience and reducing teacher attrition. The power of the pillar practices lies in their *developmental intentionality*. They are not just tools for collaboration or leadership—they are frameworks and structures for professional and personal growth. Equally important, these practices create spaces of care—what I call *holding environments*—where adults feel supported enough to reflect and stretched enough to grow.

Caring Is the Heart of Our Work

> *The desire to reach for the stars is ambitious. The desire to reach hearts is wise.*
>
> —Dr. Maya Angelou

The pillar practices balance support and challenge—critical ingredients for adult development—and can be differentiated to meet adults where they are developmentally, much as we differentiate learning for children.

In today's educational context, the need for such differentiation has never been greater. So too is the need for care. If there is one lesson I have learned in decades of working with educators, it is this: *Caring for adults is not optional. It is essential. When we prioritize the growth and well-being of adult educators, we create the conditions for them to bring their best, fullest selves to their work—whether that's teaching in the classroom, mentoring a colleague, or leading a district through change.* As Dr. Christy Joswick-O'Connor and I found in our recent research (2023), care is not just an emotional support mechanism; it is a powerful and heartfelt investment in building organizational resilience and fostering adaptive leadership. It is this care that enables adults to build the relationships that strengthen their leadership and also their connections with students, families, and communities.

Together, in this book, we will dive deeply into how we can create "holding environments" for adults—spaces where they feel safe enough to share their vulnerabilities and brave enough to grow. The pillar practices provide the foundation or bedrock for these holding environments—and such environments have never been more critical. As one principal shared with me, "I'm still healing from the pandemic, from everything we've had to carry. I've been pouring into others for so long, but I need space to refill myself, too." These words reflect what so many leaders and educators feel but struggle to articulate—the need for systems and structures that prioritize care, connection, and growth for those leading our schools.

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THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR THIS BOOK

This book builds on decades of research in adult development, leadership, and professional learning—foundations that remain as relevant today as they were when *Leading Adult Learning* was first published in 2009. However, as the world has changed, so too has the research base informing how we support educators' growth and leadership.

Drawing from the work of scholars in adult development theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Mezirow, 2000), transformational learning (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023; Kegan & Lahey, 2016), and leadership development (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017), this book describes evidence-based practices that build adult capacity to navigate complex, adaptive challenges.

Additionally, this book is informed by research on professional learning communities, Learning Forward's (2023) Standards for Professional Learning (see also Bouffard, 2024b), and leadership models (Spillane & Camburn, 2006; Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Yadav et al., 2025), all of which emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and collective problem-solving. Studies show that when educators engage in collegial inquiry and mentoring relationships (two of the pillar practices), they not only strengthen their leadership but also foster trust, connection, and adaptive capacity across teams (Apsey, 2023; Maloch et al., 2025; Wagner et al., 2006).

This book is also based on research with leaders on teams, in schools, and in districts conducted, both independently and with colleagues (please see online Research Appendix at https://companion.corwin.com/courses/LeadingAdultLearning2e). For nearly two decades, Dr. Pat Maslin-Ostrowski, Dr. Jessica Blum-DeStefano, and I have conducted research with leaders to understand their most pressing challenges and how they manage them. With Dr. Jessica Blum-DeStefano, I have examined leaders' learnings from our developmental institutes and longer-term programs. With Dr. Christy Joswick-O'Connor and others, I have learned from teacher-leaders, assistant principals, principals, and district-level leaders who have participated in our longitudinal developmental institutes since 2012. With Dr. Jessica Blum-DeStefano and Dr. Deborah Brooks, I also conducted a large-scale developmental study to understand how leaders with different ways of knowing lead for social justice and the kinds of practices they use to bring communities together. This work also informs this book and is covered in detail in the online Research Appendix that can be found on the companion website for this book. I have been privileged to learn from the wisdom of leaders I've had the honor of accompanying as their developmental coach and teacher. The insights, struggles, and joys they shared are gifts—and they form the heart of what I offer in this book.

Finally, this book reflects new research on well-being and resilience as essential components of leadership. As previously noted, educator burnout remains one of the most pressing challenges in education today. By prioritizing wellness and fostering "holding environments" (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2021; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023; Kegan, 1982),

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schools can create the conditions for sustainable, reflective leadership growth, teacher well-being, and greater retention.

In short, this book is grounded in a robust research base while offering updated insights and tools to meet the challenges of our time. At the heart of this work is constructive-developmental theory, which provides the foundation for the learning-oriented model I describe next.

Developmental Underpinnings of the Model

As mentioned previously, Robert Kegan's (1982, 1994, 2000) **constructive-developmental theory** continues to provide a vital foundation for my learning-oriented model. This hopeful theory gives us a language to discuss development—and how we make meaning of our experiences in life. Making meaning, as Kegan emphasized in his original book (1982), is the motion of life. This theory highlights the hopefulness of growth. Our meaning-making systems can become more complex—get bigger and hold more—throughout our lives—IF we can benefit from appropriate supports and stretches. This theory and my extensions of it help us to *see* that we can build our internal capacities, and they offer principles to help us help ourselves and others to do so.

Over the years, I have built upon this model and extended it to teachers and other leaders in schools, districts, and systems. Put simply—and profoundly—this work reminds us that adults make meaning of their experiences in qualitatively different ways, shaped by their developmental capacities—their cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal abilities. These capacities influence how we feel and act, as well as what we need to grow.

We know that to face adaptive challenges, today's educators need opportunities to develop their capacities in ways that enable them to think differently, act with intentionality, and lead more effectively. The developmental principles that inform this book—and the pillar practices—show how we can foster transformational learning or growth—powerful shifts in the ways adults understand themselves, their work, and their relationships with others.

THE TURBULENT CONTEXT OF EDUCATION TODAY

In recent years, many educators have shared that education has felt like a "whirlwind of disruption and transformation." The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the landscape—magnifying preexisting inequities, revealing unexpected opportunities, and introducing new challenges. All of these continue to shape the experiences of educators, students, parents and caregivers, and leaders. Schools have become not just places of learning but also frontline institutions for addressing societal crises, from health emergencies to mental health challenges. As Dr. Lori Desautels, neuroscientist and professor, emphasized at the fall 2024 NCTE conference, "Educator fatigue and burnout are at an all-time high. Students are carrying their mental and emotional exhaustion into the classroom."

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Beyond the pandemic, macro-level forces such as technological advancements, economic instability, political polarization, and climate change have added layers of complexity to an already demanding system. These pressures strain resources, test resilience, and challenge the traditional ways schools, districts, and systems operate. Leaders and educators are expected to navigate these complexities while fostering environments where students and colleagues alike can thrive.

At the heart of these challenges is the human toll for teachers and administrators—burnout, disillusionment, and retention crises that threaten the stability of schools and districts. Teachers and principals are leaving the profession at alarming rates, citing "unsustainable workloads," "emotional exhaustion," and a lack of individual and systemic "support." Burnout and retention challenges are not isolated issues; they are deeply interconnected with the broader context of education today.

There are many ways to address these pressures, but promoting adult development is undoubtedly one of the most effective. While supporting adult development is not a "quick fix," it serves to build and sustain our internal capacities that will help us address adaptive and systemic challenges. By prioritizing the growth and well-being of the adults within schools, we can begin to build and rebuild resilience, sustainability, and adaptability in the face of complexity. I've witnessed this kind of evolution—and the difference it makes. It is an honor to share this work with you.

In the following sections, we will explore some of the more pressing issues present in the context of education today and discuss how a developmental lens and the pillar practices can help us manage the pressing challenges we face. I will begin by highlighting the twin crises of teacher retention and burnout, as well as the critical role of principal leadership, to show how adult development can serve as the foundation for thriving educational systems.

Teachers: Retention, Burnout, and Well-Being

> *Deciding to leave any job can be hard, but for teachers, exiting the classroom can be downright heartbreaking. Teaching is, in its essence, about relationships—understanding students' needs, fostering their passions, figuring out what makes them tick. To give up that work, for many, would be a deep loss.*
>
> —Liana Loewus of *Education Week*, "Why Teachers Leave—or Don't: A Look at the Numbers"

When asked in a recent survey why they stay in teaching, most teachers said they stay because "they love their students" (Loewus, 2021). And yet, teacher retention is one of the most pressing issues in education today. Recent data reveal stark trends: 44% of U.S. public schools report teaching vacancies—especially in special education and elementary roles (Learning Forward, 2023). At the same time, a 2022 Merrimack

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College survey found that 44% of teachers were contemplating leaving the profession, with 20% "very likely" to leave (Foster, 2023). These figures underscore a grim reality: The education system faces a critical shortage of experienced educators. This is a global issue and challenge.

The consequences of teacher attrition extend far beyond workforce numbers. High teacher turnover rates disrupt school culture and climate, diminish student outcomes, and increase the financial burden on districts due to the costs of recruitment, onboarding, and training (Foster, 2023). Missouri provides a case study in the compounding nature of these challenges: Teacher retirements have risen nearly 23% over 2 years, while certification program completions have declined by 30% over the past decade (Katnik, 2023). While teacher retention was a challenge before COVID-19, it has been amplified by the pandemic. Early-career teachers are particularly vulnerable: Some studies suggest as many as 50% leaving by their third year and 60% by their fifth year (Katnik, 2023). In a recent survey that asked teachers what would help them to stay, two of the many areas mentioned were "increasing salaries" and "making teachers' mental health a priority" (Loewus, 2021).

Several factors contribute to teacher attrition, including low morale, insufficient support, and declining job satisfaction (Foster, 2023). I recently talked with a high school teacher in New York City who had left her position. She said that doing so was really "difficult" and that it took her months to decide to do it, because "I loved the students so much and I didn't want to leave them." She continued, "But in the end, I knew I had to take care of my own health. It was all too much every day. I was holding each one of my 110 students, and no one was holding me."

Teachers of color face additional challenges, such as less favorable working conditions and a lack of support, leading to higher attrition rates among this group (Lachlan-Haché et al., 2023). This trend is particularly concerning given the evidence that a race match between teachers and students positively impacts student outcomes (Gershenson et al., 2018).

So how can we better support teachers? How can we better hold them in the psychological sense so that they feel equipped to do the work they love? And what are some comprehensive strategies that will address the professional, emotional, and social needs of educators? Research has highlighted several approaches to improving teacher retention. One approach is to provide high-quality professional learning: Thoughtfully designed, sustained, job-embedded professional development increases teacher satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness (Bouffard, 2025; Foster, 2025; Katnik, 2023). Studies from North Carolina have shown that professional learning aligned with school improvement plans and reflective practices predicts higher retention rates, particularly in high-poverty schools (Berry et al., 2019). One strategy is targeted PD models such as Worcester Public Schools' "one, some, all" model, which was developed to meet the diverse needs of educators and address staff shortages (Ganias, 2023). An exchange I heard recently while leading a professional learning program reflects the importance of good PD. A superintendent

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of a large urban district asked, "How can we find time to offer effective professional learning when everyone has so much on their overflowing plates?" Another urban superintendent quickly replied, "How can we not?"

Another approach is creating collaborative environments. Retention improves in schools that foster collaboration, mentorship, and shared decision-making (Brown, 2023; Ceballos et al., 2025). In Missouri and other places around the globe, professional learning guidelines emphasize mentoring, teacher residencies, and coaching as critical components of retention strategies (Ceballos et al., 2025; Katnik, 2023).

Taken together, these are fruitful ways forward that will help us support and retain teachers. When we are successful in creating conditions where teachers feel well held, in the psychological sense—cared for, listened to, and able to build their internal capacities so they can manage the complexity of teaching—teacher well-being and (by extension) retention are bound to improve.

Burnout and Work–Life Balance: A Persistent Struggle

> *I've been pouring so much into everyone—my tank is on empty. Normally, I can balance—but it feels like too much these days.*
>
> —High school principal, 2025

During and after the pandemic, teachers, school leaders, and district-level leaders told me repeatedly that they felt that they were devoting a large amount of their time to what they referred to as "pastoral care" for the adults in their schools and districts. At the height of the pandemic, an experienced superintendent confided in me that he felt he was suffering from "emotional fatigue." Jolene Hanson (2024) of the Mayo Clinic defines emotional fatigue as "a state of feeling emotionally worn out and drained" that occurs when adverse or challenging events in life occur continually. This kind of exhaustion builds up over time and can include emotional, physical, and performance symptoms. It's what many educators and educational leaders experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic—and some still are experiencing it.

The emotional toll of the pressing challenges on educators and educational leaders is profound. Nearly 75% of teachers report experiencing high stress, a dramatic rise from prepandemic levels (Foster, 2023). Travers and Cooper (2024) found similar results from their large-scale survey focused on teachers in the United Kingdom. Burnout—characterized by emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and a diminished sense of accomplishment—has reached critical levels domestically and globally (Menon et al., 2024; Musson Rose & Loomis, 2025; Thomas & Reyes, 2024; Travers & Cooper, 2024). As one principal shared, "The exhaustion we feel isn't just about logistics—it's about our hearts. We need spaces to heal."

Substitute shortages, reliance on paraprofessionals, and escalating teacher absences have compounded these challenges, creating a sense of dysfunction in many schools (Butler, 2025; Foster, 2023). Principals, in particular, have faced unique

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burdens during and since the pandemic, stepping into roles as crisis managers and community caretakers. This dual responsibility, compounded with other responsibilities (e.g., high-stakes testing, managing budgets, maintaining positive school climates and cultures), has taken a significant toll on their mental and emotional well-being (Downey, 2023; Hitchcock, 2023; Lindsay, 2023; Pollock et al., 2025; Tamadoni et al., 2024). Many people concerned with K–12 education ask not only who is taking care of the teachers but also who is taking care of the principals and district-level leaders.

Addressing burnout requires more than technical solutions. Research underscores the importance of cultural shifts toward fostering resilience and prioritizing wellness for educators across levels (Rice & Williams, 2022). Effective and ongoing professional learning opportunities are one effective path to preventing burnout among principals, teachers, and district-level leaders and supporting these leaders (Dansby-Clark, 2024; Downey, 2023; Knight, 2024; Rice & Williams, 2022). And paying attention to wellness is more vital than ever before. Mindfulness, resilience building, and self-care programs have been shown to reduce stress and improve emotional regulation for educators across levels (Bauer & Curry, 2023; Doyle Fosco et al., 2025; Hayes et al., 2022). Holistic models like the Whole Teacher Framework (Chen & McCray, 2012) and the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2010, 2015) emphasize attending to individuals' physical, emotional, and professional needs, highlighting how intentional support can foster well-being, motivation, and sustained engagement in their work. Additional strategies may include engaging in physical activity, seeking personal counseling, cultivating a sense of purpose, and maintaining professional and personal relationships and support systems (Rice & Williams, 2022).

The pillar practice of collegial inquiry can also help ease burnout. Ongoing collegial inquiry groups—in which educators and leaders across the system can engage in dialogue about their experiences, challenges, problems of practice, or triumphs and problem-solve together—help decrease isolation and increase well-being (Barakat, 2025; Bauer, 2021; Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023; Hayes et al., 2022; Rice & Williams, 2022).

Social-Emotional Learning Can Help Retain Teachers

> *The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.*
>
> —Nelson Mandela

The pandemic also underscored the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) for both students and educators—and building educators' SEL may be one key to keeping more of them engaged and fulfilled in the profession. As Nelson Mandela reminds us, "rising every time we fall" takes courage and perseverance—qualities many educators named as essential during and after the pandemic. SEL nurtures

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those very qualities. It also fosters motivation and empowerment—both critical for navigating life's technical and adaptive challenges—and helps build resilience, self-belief, internal capacity, and a positive mindset.

Historically, SEL initiatives have focused on students, but recent research emphasizes the need to extend these practices to educators (Geesa et al., 2022). In fact, training in SEL improves educators' and educational leaders' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, enabling them to build stronger connections with students and colleagues (Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Zieher et al., 2021). Training in SEL for individuals, schools, and districts is now at the forefront, since such training is vital not only to personal development but also to each individual's well-being and to the educator–student relationship (Gimbert et al., 2023; Nappa & Hsieh, 2025). Organizations like CASEL advocate for systemic SEL approaches that integrate these practices into every level of a school's culture. Such approaches foster emotional awareness, resilience, and collaboration, contributing to healthier and more cohesive educational environments (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2021). Supporting educators in their social-emotional growth also empowers them to embed SEL practices in their classrooms, creating a ripple effect that benefits the entire school community.

Supporting Teacher Well-Being: A Systemic Imperative

Supporting teacher well-being is not only foundational to retention but also a profound act of care and respect for the educators who shape the future. As Bell (2023) emphasizes, schools must intentionally foster healing-centered environments that affirm educators' identities and provide spaces for emotional restoration. True well-being encompasses physical, emotional, social, and occupational dimensions—and requires systemic strategies that promote balance and sustainable practices (Summers, 2023).

Meaningful initiatives that support educators' well-being include the following:

- Regular "stay interviews" (in contrast to exit interviews) with school leaders, which allow teachers to voice their needs, share their concerns, and engage in collaborative problem-solving, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and trust (Perret, 2023)
- Trauma-informed care practices, such as counseling, mindfulness, and flexible scheduling, to address the chronic stress and emotional toll educators often experience (McGuire, 2024)
- Boundary-setting policies—like limiting after-hours email and encouraging regular breaks—that help educators reclaim work–life balance and reduce burnout, reinforcing their capacity to thrive both personally and professionally (Summers, 2023)

These research-informed strategies underscore a vital truth: Supporting educator well-being is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a continuous, systemic

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commitment to educators' health, happiness, and sense of purpose. A longer-term approach, in which caring for educators infiltrates the fabric of schools and systems, is needed to truly support well-being. One workshop won't do it for anyone. By fostering environments that prioritize professional growth, emotional restoration, and social connection, schools can address the challenges of teacher retention, burnout, and well-being with courage and care. Transforming our approach to educator support is not merely a response to an urgent problem—it is a commitment to building schools and districts where teachers and students thrive together. I truly believe we can do this—together.

Expanding Roles and Rising Demands Drive Principal Attrition

The role of a principal has always been demanding, but the challenges have intensified in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities in the education system, placing immense pressure on school leaders. Principals are pivotal in shaping school culture, supporting teachers, and fostering student success. Yet, they themselves often lack the systemic support necessary to thrive (Beausaert et al., 2023; Wang, 2024, 2025).

Principals play a major role in mitigating the effects of staffing shortages. Research consistently highlights that principals not only are central to school improvement but also significantly influence teacher retention, student achievement, and overall school morale (Bartanen et al., 2019; Shell et al., 2023; Steiner et al., 2022; Wang, 2025). The turnover of principals themselves, however, remains alarmingly high; 20% of principals leave their schools annually, and 35% stay in their roles for less than 2 years, creating a cycle of instability that hinders school improvement efforts, diminishes staff morale, and ultimately disrupts student achievement (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Cornelius et al., 2024; Richard, 2024). This leadership exodus stems from a constellation of challenges, including overwhelming workloads, restricted autonomy, inadequate compensation, and counterproductive accountability measures.

Burnout is another causal factor in the high turnover rates among principals who are increasingly tasked with addressing complex, adaptive challenges that demand more than technical fixes. They must navigate competing demands, manage crises, and lead their communities through change—all while sustaining their own well-being and balance. As Kaul et al. (2020) observe, this was especially true during the pandemic, when principals became "first responders in tragedy." This dual role—as crisis manager and instructional leader—has taken a significant toll on principals' mental and emotional health. Many describe feelings of burnout, isolation, and overwhelm (Barakat, 2025). As one principal noted, "I pour myself into others all day long. I need the system to care for me just a little bit so that I can keep on giving" (Drago-Severson et al., 2023). The high turnover rate among principals is both alarming and deeply consequential for schools, district, and their communities. We know that turnover destabilizes school communities, disrupts instructional

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improvement, and contributes to teacher attrition (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Richard, 2024). The effects of this instability are especially profound in high-poverty schools, where turnover rates are even higher, further compounding systemic inequities (Cornelius et al., 2024; Kuzmanic et al., 2025; Levin & Bradley, 2019a).

Supporting Principals for Long-Term Retention

While principals can play a key role in improving teacher retention and morale (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Golubtchik, 2024), addressing these challenges also requires systemic support for principals themselves. High-quality professional learning tailored to the unique needs of school leaders, as well as transparent districtwide succession and development plans, can play a crucial role in sustaining effective leadership (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025; Tracy, 2024). Principals thrive when they operate within supportive ecosystems that prioritize their well-being and professional growth. As Espinal (2023) argues, superintendents and district leaders must ground principal learning in adult developmental theory and allocate resources strategically to foster long-term success.

Levin and Bradley (2019b) offer a thoughtful framework of solutions to confront the crisis in principal retention: improving working conditions, increasing principals' decision-making autonomy, ensuring equitable and sufficient compensation, reducing harmful accountability practices, and providing meaningful, high-quality professional learning. These strategies—as well as others discussed earlier in this chapter—should be part of reimagining how we support principals and other leaders across the system, recognizing that their well-being and stability are essential to creating thriving, equitable educational environments for all. It is my hope that this book offers the kind of support principals need to address challenges like retention—and to lead with developmental intentionality, building internal capacities that promote both individual and systemic well-being.

A Foundational Strategy: Building Supportive Networks and Fostering Collaboration

The intersection of staffing shortages, equity work, and the immense demands of principal leadership necessitates immediate attention. Principals in today's schools are frequently faced with painful moral dilemmas when they face barriers to leading the charge on racial justice, addressing socioeconomic disparities, creating communities of belonging, and fostering inclusive practices within their schools—core mandates for creating equitable learning environments. Yet, these leaders cannot shoulder the responsibility alone. Districts can play a critical role in supporting principals by cultivating networks of peer dialogue, embedding resilience-building practices, and equipping them to engage in the courageous conversations that drive systemic change (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Farag, 2024; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025).

Building supportive networks is a foundational strategy for retaining and empowering principals. Peer dialogue and collaborative networks provide principals

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with safe spaces to share challenges, exchange innovative ideas, and find emotional support. These connections bolster confidence, enhance problem-solving abilities, and enable principals to navigate the complexities of their roles with resilience and clarity (Farag, 2024; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025). By fostering relationships rooted in trust and mutual understanding, districts can create environments where principals feel connected and supported in their leadership journeys.

Equally important is providing tailored professional learning opportunities grounded in adult developmental theory. Principals thrive when given high-quality professional development that addresses their unique needs and aspirations. Superintendents play a pivotal role in creating these learning experiences, understanding principals as individual learners, and strategically allocating time and resources to foster growth (Espinal, 2023; Meyers et al., 2024). Such intentional efforts ensure that principals are not only equipped with the tools to lead effectively but also empowered to grow as reflective and adaptive leaders.

Thriving principals also often operate within a collaborative and aligned district ecosystem. When districts establish clear values, align their actions to those values, and actively involve principals in decision-making processes, they create a cohesive framework that enhances leadership effectiveness (Barakat, 2025; Farag, 2024). This collaborative approach not only strengthens principals' connection to the district's mission but also fosters a shared sense of purpose and accountability.

Addressing emotional resilience is another critical component of systemic support. Schools must create "holding environments" where principals feel safe, valued, and supported. Practices such as mindfulness, resilience building, and trauma-informed care offer pathways to managing stress and sustaining well-being (Barakat, 2025; Bauer & Curry, 2023; Hayes et al., 2022; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025). These practices affirm the humanity of school leaders, helping them to care for themselves as they care for their communities.

Finally, reimagining principal evaluation systems is essential for fostering trust and professional growth. In the best cases, evaluation processes should be collaborative, reflective, and growth-oriented. For example, South Summit School District has piloted innovative evaluation frameworks that emphasize inquiry, reflection, and individualized learning, creating a meaningful and supportive process for principal development (Halverson & Maughan, 2024). By shifting from punitive models to trust-centered approaches, districts can inspire principals to engage deeply with their own development and leadership.

By supporting principals through these systemic strategies, districts affirm their commitment to the long-term success of schools and the communities they serve. Systems that address both the technical and emotional dimensions of leadership create the conditions for principals to thrive, persist, and lead transformative change.

The retention and well-being of principals are not just individual concerns—they are systemic priorities, similar to the retention of teachers, staff, and district-level leaders. By investing in the development and support of school leaders, districts can

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create conditions where principals not only stay in their jobs but also thrive. This, in turn, strengthens the entire school community, fostering stability, growth, and success for educators and students alike. As Jimerson and Jones (2024) remind us, effective leadership amid change requires resilience, collaboration, and a shared commitment to navigating challenges together. Supporting principals is essential for sustaining the heart and health of our schools.

Contemporary Issues in Education and the World

Schools and school systems do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within larger social, political, and economic systems that exert powerful influences on curriculum, instruction, leadership, and policy. The following section of this chapter identifies and discusses these key influences. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) observed, human development unfolds within nested systems that shape and are shaped by one another. Likewise, schools and school systems do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within larger social, political, and economic systems that profoundly influence curriculum, instruction, leadership, and policy.

Key Factors Influencing Our Postpandemic Context

While the challenges of burnout and retention among educators and leaders remain pressing, they are deeply intertwined with broader forces that have reshaped the educational landscape. Today, we continue to navigate what many refer to as a perfect storm of challenges—a polycrisis indeed, each one testing educators' and leaders' resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted schools, driving teacher satisfaction to a 25-year low and accelerating already declining morale (Foster, 2023, p. 18; Lavery & Dahill-Brown, 2024). Beyond the widely recognized learning loss, the pandemic revealed systemic inequities and deepened disparities in access to resources and opportunities (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Lavery & Dahill-Brown, 2024). During the height of the pandemic, many school leaders shared their dismay that families were without Internet access, which disrupted and, in many cases, prevented online learning. The long-term impacts of these disruptions persist, leaving many teachers and leaders expressing an urgent need for professional renewal and personal healing.

Educators across the system have shared with sadness how the pandemic disrupted the cultural fabric of schools, leaving many educators feeling isolated, disconnected, and unsupported. One principal reflected, "The pandemic left us in survival mode, navigating constant change, virtual learning, and the mental health toll on our teams" (Foster, 2023). Another confided that they feel like they are "still doing triage." These descriptions underscore the need for systemic renewal—not just of instructional practices but of the emotional and relational bonds that hold school communities together.

At the same time, the ongoing racial reckoning has magnified longstanding injustices in education, including in educators' work lives (Castrejon, 2025). Black

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educators, for example, report experiencing heavier workloads and greater stress than their white and Hispanic peers and often feel unsupported in their efforts to champion equity and inclusion (Foster, 2023, p. 18). The heightened visibility of these inequities demands systemic changes that genuinely value and amplify diverse voices.

The "New Normal" as a Catalyst for Change

The urgency of this work is undeniable. It requires us to confront these external pressures with intention and purpose, centering equity, healing, belonging, and resilience as foundational elements of a renewed educational system. The moment calls for bold, systemic solutions that not only address immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for meaningful, lasting change.

The "new normal" in education has fundamentally redefined what it means to lead, teach, and learn. Addressing these pressures will require adaptive leadership—leadership that not only responds to challenges but also anticipates them and innovates within them. It will also require a commitment to developing the internal capacity of educators and leaders to thrive amid complexity.

Developing educators' internal capacity must be done with care because postpandemic realities—such as heightened burnout across roles and levels, staffing shortages, and systemic inequities—continue to weigh heavily on educators at every level. As Foster (2023) notes, only 12% of teachers now report feeling "very satisfied" in their roles—a startling 25-year low (p. 18). Lin et al. (2024) conducted an online survey of 2,531 U.S. public K–12 teachers in the fall of 2023 and emphasized these kinds of troubling statistics as well. The numbers, however, tell only part of the story. In my work with educators, I've witnessed firsthand how the emotional and cognitive demands of navigating this complex landscape have left many feeling stretched to their limits.

Yet, while the "new normal" presents undeniable challenges, it also offers a profound opportunity to reimagine how we lead, teach, and grow together. I have seen educators and leaders in schools and districts, despite immense obstacles, embrace this moment as a chance to build stronger and more equitable systems. Such people, schools, and districts remind us that our focus must remain on capacity building—whether at the individual, team, school, or system level—so educators can approach these complexities with resilience and a renewed sense of purpose. By leaning into this work with intention, while placing equity at the forefront, we can transform these challenges into a catalyst for lasting change. We can do this—and we need each other to do this. Together, we can create and sustain the conditions required to support this kind of capacity building and improved systems.

Targeted strategies such as collegial inquiry, developmental mentoring, and structured professional learning spaces have been particularly effective in rebuilding trust and cohesion while building capacity. These approaches create holding environments where educators feel safe to reflect, share, and grow together, fostering both resilience and collaboration (Drago-Severson & Joswick-O'Connor, 2023; Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Nelmes-Stoughton, 2025). By prioritizing

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emotional and relational renewal, leaders can establish spaces where educators reconnect with their sense of purpose and find strength in community. These efforts will lay the foundation for navigating the complexities of education today with courage and hope.

Social Justice in Education: A Call to Action

Social justice in education is a dynamic and evolving concept that addresses inequities across social, economic, and political dimensions. As noted by Behr (2020), the concept of social justice was originally introduced by Luigi Taparelli in 1840 to advocate for local authority and community support. Since then, the term has expanded to include various facets of equity—including race, gender, and class—that contemporary scholars argue require context-specific definitions to resolve today's multifaceted challenges (Behr, 2020).

Over time, the understanding of social justice has evolved to reflect broader systemic transformations. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, frameworks shifted toward building "a just society" (Heft, 2006) and championing structural, "rights-based initiatives" (Reisch, 2014). Today, contemporary definitions go even further, viewing social justice as the "cornerstone of peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies" (International Labour Organization, 2025). Such definitions underline a critical shift from reactive solutions to proactive, transformative approaches, including within education. This transformative shift is further deepened by the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), which reminds educators that social justice is not a singular path. In the classroom, this means recognizing that students' experiences of inequity are shaped by the overlapping of race, gender, ability, and class.

For educators and leaders, social justice is therefore not just a theory—it's a call to act. It's an imperative. In response, many have developed pedagogies that center equity and weave social justice into both classroom practice and the broader culture of schools. For example, Germán (2021) introduced "Textured Teaching," a culturally sustaining pedagogy that integrates flexibility, interdisciplinary design, experiential learning, and student-driven approaches to inspire activism in the classroom. This model reframes the role of educators as *change agents* who empower students to engage critically with societal structures and advocate for equity.

Education organizations such as the California Teachers Association (CTA) have underscored the collective responsibility of educators to address structural biases such as racism, classism, and ableism. For instance, the CTA calls for actionable practices like restorative justice and inclusive curriculum design to dismantle systemic oppression and promote fairness in educational environments (California Teachers Association, n.d.). These practices remind us that meaningful social justice work requires sustained effort, reflection, and collaboration.

Approaching leadership and capacity building through a developmental lens is a key part of working for social justice in education. A developmental lens—as I will discuss further in Chapter 2— can be employed alongside other lenses to help

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educators understand that our internal capacities matter in terms of how we engage in difficult and sensitive conversations, how we think about and act on behalf of social justice, and the kinds of practices we employ to build cultures of equity and belonging. I will discuss more throughout this book why attending to adult development matters in terms of meeting current challenges and working for social justice.

A Word About Social Justice in Education and Budget Cuts. Various factors make working for social justice more difficult for educators. For instance, financial realities in education—exacerbated by the pandemic—are part of the landscape of education and educational leadership in today's world. Over 60% of U.S. public schools reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their students' academic progress, while nearly half faced significant staffing and budgetary constraints (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). These constraints disproportionately affect low-income communities, widening opportunity gaps and placing additional strain on educators. Teachers in underfunded districts frequently report feeling unsupported, contributing to burnout and attrition. Innovative resource allocation strategies can mitigate some of the adverse effects of budget cuts and resource shortages. Districts that prioritize professional learning communities and the sharing of leadership have demonstrated resilience, fostering collaboration and enhancing accountability even within constrained budgets (Abbasov, 2025; Drago-Severson et al., 2023). These approaches emphasize the power of collective expertise and shared resources in advancing equity.

Political Polarization. Our current sociopolitical environment has had a profound impact on programs and initiatives aimed at promoting social justice—particularly diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)–focused efforts. In many communities, rising political polarization has become a significant barrier to enacting and sustaining these initiatives (similar to the obstacles created by budget cuts). This tension places additional burdens on leaders and teachers who are simply trying to act on behalf of the children and communities they serve (Berner, 2024; Mitchell, 2025). Addressing this tension productively—and continuing to support educators' and schools' abilities and capacities—remains essential to fulfilling the fundamental task of preparing our next generation and our future.

Moving Forward: A Collective Responsibility. The work of social justice in education is ongoing and demands a collective commitment. It requires the kind of "beloved community" that former congressman and beloved leader John Lewis dedicated his life to forming. From dismantling systemic barriers to cultivating inclusive and empowering learning environments, to practicing restorative justice,

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educators and leaders must continue to engage in courageous conversations and equity-focused practices.

Education can become a powerful force for societal transformation if we work for systemic change through courageous leadership and collective action. As educators and leaders, we must continually center social justice in our work, ensuring that equity and inclusion remain at the forefront of our efforts to build a better future.

Using a developmental approach can help our collective efforts toward social justice. An adult developmental framework and approach to strengthening teams, inviting educators into leadership roles, engaging in developmental mentoring, and collegial inquiry (the "pillar practices" explored in this book) can help us understand that we do not all have the same internal capacities—and that because of this, we need different kinds of support and stretching to grow. And it can help us to understand that we have different entry points and capacities for helping to build a beloved community and engage in social justice. Understanding this can help us join hands, hearts, and minds as we work together to build a better future for all.

Technology and AI: Navigating the Future of Education

As we deepen our commitment to social justice in education, it becomes clear that equity cannot be fully realized without addressing the transformative role of technology in shaping the future of teaching and learning. Just as systemic change requires leadership and collective action, navigating the complexities of the digital age demands intentionality, equity-driven strategies, and a willingness to embrace innovation. The integration of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly as educators strive to foster equitable access and ethical use of these tools.

AI and AI literacy education are changing the world. AI—especially generative AI tools like ChatGPT—warrants a special mention. Tools like ChatGPT present both opportunities and challenges for education. On one hand, AI can enhance learning by providing personalized support and automating routine tasks. On the other hand, educators must carefully navigate its use to prevent issues like plagiarism and overreliance on technology (Bouffard, 2024c). As learning scientist Justin Reich (2023) notes, understanding how AI functions is essential for empowering educators and demystifying its role in the classroom. Dr. Suzanne Bouffard (2024a) of Learning Forward maintains that such understanding can help educators rethink assignments, incorporate AI intentionally, and focus on higher-order thinking skills (Bouffard, 2024a).

In this rapidly evolving landscape, we must consider not only the promises of technology but also the societal and systemic barriers that influence its implementation. Issues such as the digital divide, inequities in access to professional learning, and the ethical implications of AI intersect directly with the work of teaching and learning in schools and with educators' efforts toward advancing social justice (Yim & Su, 2025). As schools and districts grapple with these overlapping challenges, they are called to reimagine what it means to lead and learn in a world

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increasingly shaped by digital transformation. Many school and district leaders across the system are grappling with this and working to support teachers who are doing the same.

In effect, technology has transformed every aspect of modern life, fundamentally altering the way we communicate, live, work, and learn. Children today are growing up with technology at their fingertips; from iPads to smartphones, their interaction with technology begins early. Meanwhile, educators and leaders face the challenge of navigating an increasingly digital world. Remote meetings and online professional development have become permanent fixtures in the post-COVID landscape, raising critical questions about how these shifts influence cognitive, psychological, and developmental experiences, such as, What does a holding environment look like in a remote context? How can educators foster meaningful connections in virtual spaces?

The digital divide is no longer solely about access to devices or the Internet (Yim & Su, 2025). It's also about educators' capacity to use technology effectively for critical thinking and active learning, rather than for what Chase (2024) refers to as passive task completion. Addressing this divide requires professional learning that is collaborative, sustained, and deeply embedded in educators' daily work and that goes well beyond basic software training. All of this will take time, space, and resources, and educators will need collaborative spaces to explore how digital tools can support critical thinking and student engagement.

The 2024 National Educational Technology Plan highlights the importance of equity in professional learning (Chase, 2024). Specific recommendations include developing processes to evaluate digital tools before adoption, providing ongoing training for new and experienced educators, and aligning professional learning with the Universal Design for Learning framework to ensure inclusivity. Understanding individuals' internal capacities and a developmental approach can help us understand that educators have different entry points and will need different kinds of supports and developmental stretching.

Leadership will also play a crucial role in guiding educators through the complexities of technology and AI integration (Yim & Su, 2025). Leaders must foster environments where digital literacy is prioritized, equity is addressed, and innovation thrives. This involves encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, supporting teacher-driven initiatives, and creating opportunities for educators to explore new technologies in meaningful ways.

Moreover, leaders today are being called to address broader societal challenges, such as the digital divide and inequities in access to technology. As Zac Chase (2024) observes, closing these gaps will require a systemic reimagining of professional learning that prepares educators to meet the demands of the 21st century (Filiz et al., 2025). As technology continues to evolve, educators and leaders are being called on to remain adaptable, curious, and committed to equity. The integration of AI and other digital tools offers immense potential to transform education—*if* we implement them thoughtfully and strategically. By prioritizing professional learning,

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fostering digital literacy, and addressing systemic inequities, schools can harness the power of technology to create more equitable and engaging learning environments for all students.

How can we create teams, schools, and systems that meet adults and children where they are with respect to AI? Building holding environments that meet adults where they are—and stretch them to grow in relationship to AI—matters just as it does for other initiatives, demands, complexities, and challenges. It is vital. I hope this book helps us with caring for this work. As many note, although AI holds great promise for the future of education, there are certain aspects of human experience that it simply cannot—and will never—effectively replace, especially those that are rooted in relationship. In the best of all possible worlds, AI will free us from the logistical challenges that take us away from the human side of teaching, learning, and leadership. In the worst-case scenario, however, overreliance on AI has the potential to drive us further apart (Gouseti et al., 2025; Yim & Su, 2025).

Broader Societal and Environmental Challenges

Other forces, like climate change and economic instability, add layers of complexity to working and leading in schools today. Schools in areas prone to disasters that are caused or exacerbated by climate change face infrastructure challenges, while economic disparities exacerbate inequities in student outcomes, teacher retention, and overall school culture (Drago-Severson et al., 2023). These forces remind us that schools and districts are more than places of learning—they are ecosystems shaped by external pressures. Overlaying these forces is the increasingly polarized political landscape. Yet even in this fraught environment, I've seen courageous leaders foster collaboration and create inclusive spaces where professional growth and dialogue across differences can happen. It's not easy work, but it's essential.

What We Know: Professional Learning Is Like Oxygen for Educators and Leaders Across the System

I'd like to say a bit more about why professional learning matters for EVERYONE as schools and districts try to face current challenges and build capacity. Just as we all need oxygen to breathe, we all need opportunities to learn—to not just survive but thrive. And professional learning has become more important since COVID-19 (Katnik, 2023; Mouta et al., 2025; Mercado & Shin, 2025). Meaningful professional learning entails job-embedded, ongoing, safe opportunities (rather than single-shot or "drive-by" experiences) and engagement in meaningful dialogue about the work and its inherent challenges (Blanchet, 2024; Brown, 2023; Guskey, 2021; Mercado & Shin, 2025; Teitel, 2003).

The primary way to support teachers, staff, assistant principals, principals, and superintendents in their personal and professional growth is to provide them with access to professional learning programs. To ensure learning is meaningful and effective, several professional development standards have been established

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to guide professional learning quality (Brown, 2023; Foster, 2023; Guskey, 2025; Learning Forward, 2023), which I will discuss more in the next section.

The literature emphasizes a critical need for more time to be devoted to supporting professional learning programs (Brown, 2023; Guskey, 2025; Murrow & Leis, 2023), for time to be intentionally used (Brown, 2023; Foster, 2023), and for professional learning to have practical relevance and not overload teachers (Guskey, 2025; Learning Forward, 2023). In addition, a teacher survey conducted on X and LinkedIn found that 26% of educators skip professional learning days when they don't see them as relevant, 51% of educators skip when they perceive them as a waste of time, and 29% teachers skip when they are overloaded (Learning Forward, 2023, p. 41). Considering this reality, some schools have started to experiment with diverse methods to secure more professional learning time, such as reducing staff meetings (Justis & Reina, 2023), decreasing administrative tasks (Murrow & Leis, 2023), adjusting traditional requirements (Brown, 2023; Murrow & Leis, 2023), and restructuring and shortening professional learning sessions (Hensley, 2025; Murrow & Leis, 2023, p. 37). As Murrow and Leis (2023) say, such changes have "reduced the time it took for a participant to implement professional learning, eased the reporting process, and made job-enhancing, just-in-time learning accessible to educators" (p. 35).

Research continues to show that supporting learning for educators and educational leaders across the systems—regardless of role—decreases an individual's sense of isolation, making it possible to influence student achievement positively (Davoodi, 2025; Guskey, 2010, 2021, 2025; Leithwood et al., 2004). Unfortunately, professionals in many classrooms, teams, schools, and systems have traditionally carried out their work and practices on their own, without the benefit of a supportive yet critically thoughtful observer. Thus, many times, their good work is not replicated, built upon, examined, or celebrated. In addition, many issues with which educators need help remain undiscovered.

Learning Forward's (2022) Professional Learning Standards and Environments for Professional Learning. Professional learning is undergoing a significant transformation to meet the evolving needs of educators in today's educational landscape (Guskey, 2025). As we know, many forms of collaborative learning have transformed the professional learning experience for educators, such as professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2008), learning labs in math and other areas (City et al., 2009), group conference learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), and leveraging video (Knight, 2014; Mercado & Shin, 2025).

At the heart of these changes are Learning Forward's revised (2022) Professional Learning Standards, which have become critical tools for improving teacher retention, satisfaction, and effectiveness. When leaders embed principles such as equity and professional expertise into how they use these standards, the standards create environments that support sustained professional growth. For example, Clayton School District in Missouri places high-quality, equity-focused professional

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learning at the core of its strategic plan, using tools like the Standards Assessment Inventory from the Standards of Professional Learning (2022) to track progress and identify areas for growth in relation to the standards. These practices foster a culture of belonging and shared ownership, driving both teacher retention and effectiveness (Crews, 2024; Foster, 2023; Guskey, 2025).

One major shift that has occurred in professional learning is the move away from structured, traditional formats toward more flexible, responsive approaches (Hensely, 2025; Murrow & Leis, 2023). Increasing the frequency of professional learning sessions while reducing their length allows for more focused, just-in-time support that aligns with educators' needs. This model, adopted by districts such as Orange County Public Schools in Florida, acknowledges the demands on teachers' time and provides opportunities for learning that feel relevant and manageable (Murrow & Leis, 2023). Additionally, there is growing emphasis on skills-based professional development, prioritizing creativity, agency, and the practical application of knowledge (Blanchet, 2024; Mouta et al., 2025). Workshops are shifting from content-heavy lectures to interactive, hands-on formats that empower teachers to innovate and implement new strategies in real time (Blanchet, 2024; Hensley, 2025).

Innovative formats are also reshaping professional learning to promote greater autonomy and collaboration. Learning labs, for example, allow teachers to observe peers and instructional coaches in live, interactive environments, providing actionable strategies to improve classroom practices while fostering a culture of collaboration (Caballero, 2024; Yadav et al., 2025). Similarly, schools like Florida Virtual School have embraced asynchronous video resources and flipped professional learning models, offering teachers flexibility to tailor their learning paths. This approach has contributed to higher teacher retention rates, as it respects educators' time and supports their professional agency (Florida Virtual School, 2024).

The four pillar practices for growth—teaming, leadership development, collegial inquiry, and mentoring—have been employed domestically and globally to assist educators, schools, and districts with using developmental intentionality when designing effective professional learning. This book is dedicated to exploring these practices and offering systems and structures to help adults with different internal capacities engage in them, and I will say much more about each practice in Part II of this book.

Finally, professional learning is increasingly addressing emotional intelligence (EQ) and wellness, recognizing their importance for both individual growth and a healthy school culture. Schools are adopting strategies such as reflective discussions, active listening, and staff surveys to enhance communication, collaboration, learning, and growth (Rehman et al., 2025; Ruiz, 2024). Leaders recognize that creating healing-centered, holding environments—environments that affirm teachers' identities and cultures—is essential for fostering resilience and reducing burnout. In addition, building these kinds of holding environments—those that hold people well in the psychological sense and offer stretching to help them grow—can

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serve as a powerful foundation for building internal capacity in all of us, and in our teams, schools, and systems. Put simply, this is a powerful way forward.

As professional learning continues to evolve, its focus on equity, adaptability, and innovation positions it as a cornerstone of effective modern educational leadership. By embracing these new trends, schools can empower educators to navigate the complexities of teaching in today's world.

Collaborative learning communities provide a promising path forward. Effective mentoring relationships and structures—what I call "genuine mentoring communities"—offer educators opportunities to challenge and support each other's growth. These collaborative environments not only strengthen teaching but also build trust, resilience, and adaptive capacity across school systems (Apsey, 2023; Wagner, 2021). Mizell (2010) shared the timeless truth that "the more often educators are engaged with their peers in effective professional learning, the more they will learn, and the more likely it is their practice will improve" (p. 2).

Furthermore, research highlights the connection between teacher well-being and the overall health of school communities (Guskey, 2025; Hensley, 2025). Like others, Apsey (2023) emphasizes that one way to support teacher wellness is to "prioritize collaboration on instruction and learning" (p. 15).

Schools and districts must become places where adults, as well as children, can grow—places that embrace collaborative learning, mentoring, and ongoing reflection. Building developmental leadership capacity will help that come about.

A REFLECTIVE INVITATION

I invite you to pause here and consider a few questions related to your most pressing challenges now. You may want to first reflect privately about these questions and then share whatever you feel comfortable sharing with a partner, several partners, or your team.

- What is top of mind for you at this moment?
- What is one of your more pressing challenges?
- Do you think it is a technical, adaptive, or mixed challenge?
- What kinds of supports would help you to better manage it? What is something you'd like to think more about?

New Roles for Leaders Demand a Developmental Approach

A study by O'Connor (2022) found that interventions grounded in developmental intentionality—such as developmental mentoring and or collegial inquiry—can significantly reduce stress and increase leaders' sense of efficacy. These findings

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align with earlier research from Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2021), which emphasized the importance of fostering "holding environments" that allow leaders to grow emotionally and interpersonally in the face of uncertainty. As today's education leaders navigate an increasingly complex landscape and challenges, they need practices and frameworks that support transformational growth—not just as individuals but across teams, schools, and systems.

Consider the evolving role of principals. No longer just instructional leaders, they must now wear multiple hats—managing buildings, cultivating teacher capacity, and supporting the well-being of students and staff in environments that are more demanding than ever. Principals now spend over 60% of their time on noninstructional tasks, such as addressing student mental health crises or managing logistical challenges exacerbated by staffing shortages (Foster, 2023; Pietsch et al., 2025). At the same time, they are called to engage in difficult conversations about equity, inclusion, and justice, fostering collaboration across diverse and sometimes competing perspectives. And they must address the challenge of new technologies like AI. Managing *all* of this? It's an extraordinary burden to bear.

One principal shared their frustration with me: "I pour myself into others all day long. I need the system to care for me just a little bit so that I can keep on giving." These words reflect the feelings of countless other principals who find themselves stretched too thin, emotionally depleted, and in desperate need of support.

These new demands require adaptive leadership—leadership that doesn't shy away from complexity but leans into it with courage and care. They demand a kind of leadership that understands the interconnectedness of these challenges and approaches them with both innovation and empathy.

In Chinese, the word for "crisis" is famously represented by two characters: one for danger and the other for opportunity, reminding us that even in the most daunting circumstances, there is room for growth and transformation. The adaptive challenges we face today, while difficult, offer us a chance to reimagine leadership, learning, and collaboration—to grow in ways we never thought possible.

We saw this happen during the pandemic. One district superintendent shared with me how the crisis forced their team to rethink everything—from instructional strategies to emotional support for teachers: "At first, it felt impossible. But we realized that we couldn't go back to the way things were. We had to build something better." Through trial and error, their team developed practices that not only addressed immediate challenges but also strengthened trust and collaboration across their schools and within their district team. Another teacher reflected on how these changes created a deeper sense of connection: "For the first time, I felt like we were all on the same page—working *together* to solve problems instead of just reacting to them."

As leaders, our task is to create spaces that empower educators to thrive, share their struggles, and build the resilience needed to navigate complexities. It's about fostering environments where challenges are not just obstacles to overcome but opportunities to create something new. By embracing this mindset, we can turn moments of crisis into moments of possibility.

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The Power of Transformational Learning Across the System

Educators and leaders play pivotal roles in creating environments that foster adult learning and leadership development. When I say this—I mean everyone—principals, assistant principals, teachers, staff, superintendents, district-level leaders—yes, indeed, everyone. As demands on educators become increasingly complex, educators must not only support students' growth but also prioritize their own development and that of their teams. Principals, for instance, are being asked to lead instructional improvement while also acting as *primary adult developers* and architects of collaborative learning communities. To succeed in these roles, they must find ways to support teachers with differing needs, developmental orientations, and experiences.

The work of superintendents has similarly evolved. No longer are they solely responsible for *running* school systems; they are now tasked with *transforming* them to respond to unprecedented challenges (Donaldson et al., 2021; Hutchings & Brown, 2021; Liljenberg et al., 2024; Von Dohlen et al., 2025). Yet many superintendents enter these roles unprepared for this transformational responsibility, underscoring the urgent need for leadership development practices that build internal capacity across the system.

This work requires a clear distinction between **informational learning** and **transformational learning.** Informational learning focuses on increasing knowledge and skills, while transformational learning enables leaders to develop the cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities needed to address adaptive challenges (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Kegan et al., 2016).

By engaging in transformational learning practices—such as mentoring, collaboration, and professional inquiry—leaders build the internal capacities needed to thrive in today's educational landscape. Supporting adult learning across the system is essential for navigating these adaptive challenges and creating the conditions for both educators and students to grow.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

> *Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.*
>
> —Desmond Tutu, South African bishop and theologian

Desmon Tutu's words echo with hope—and I hope you will find that this book also echoes with hope. YOU are hope.

In this chapter, I've highlighted key aspects of today's complex, challenging educational landscape. Yes—as you know, we *do* face challenges—many of them profound, interconnected, and deeply human. But educator burnout, teacher and principal turnover, systemic inequities, and the rapid evolution of technology are not simply problems to be solved; they are reminders that the strength of our educational systems lies in the growth and resilience of the adults within them.

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To navigate these complexities, we need a shift in focus—from merely addressing surface-level symptoms to fostering the internal capacities that allow educators and leaders to thrive amid uncertainty and change.

I've highlighted the need to prioritize adult development as one important cornerstone of sustainable educational transformation. Research and practice show us that when we create spaces for educators to reflect, collaborate, and grow, we cultivate environments where resilience, creativity, and connection can flourish. The practices we explored here briefly and will examine in depth throughout the pages that follow—teaming, developmental mentoring, collegial inquiry, and leadership roles—are not just strategies for managing the present. They are pathways for building the future, equipping adults to meet adaptive challenges with both courage and care. These practices are based in *adult development theory,* a framework that illuminates how individuals make meaning of their experiences and how their growth impacts the systems around them.

In the next chapter, we will explore the foundational theories and principles of adult development, offering insights into how educators and leaders grow over time and offering practices and strategies for helping each other grow over time. We will delve into the stages and capacities that shape adult development, the importance of developmental intentionality, and the ways in which teams, schools, districts, and systems within them can become "holding environments" for growth. By connecting the challenges of today with the developmental needs of adults, we can begin to reimagine leadership and learning as acts of transformation—both for individuals and for the systems they serve.

As we move forward, let's carry with us the central idea that caring for adults is not just a response to the pressures of the moment; it is an investment in the future of education. The work of fostering adult development is not merely about solving problems—it is about creating schools and systems where people grow, connect, and thrive together.

In the words of Plato, "What is honored in a country is cultivated there." If we honor the growth and well-being of the adults in our educational settings and systems, we will cultivate a future where educators and students alike flourish. The next step in this journey is understanding the developmental principles that make such growth possible.

Reflective Questions

Please take a moment to reflect on these questions. They are intended to help you consider the ideas in this chapter through internal reflection and partner or team discussion.

- What, if anything, is resonating with you?
- What ingredients or conditions do you feel are needed to help yourself and those adults in your care to grow?

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- What do you consider to be the most important features of a professional learning community? Why? If you have been working to build such a community, what challenges have you experienced? If you have not yet done this work, what do you anticipate in terms of challenges?
- In what ways does this chapter help you think about the challenges you face as a school leader? What, if anything, connects with your own experience?
- What is something you want to think more about? And/or use in your collaborative work? In your practice?
- Before reading Chapter 2, consider your current ideas about what growth in adulthood means. How do you think growth is supported?

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