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# INTRODUCTION

## *Why Your Leadership Must Change Now*

Education must change, or potentially what we call public education may not exist in the near future. This may seem alarmist, but the signs are clear. Educators are exhausted. The best and brightest are leaving the field at overwhelming levels (Barnum, 2023). The leaders who are supposed to be motivating people to stay are weary and also looking to leave and find a better work-life balance. The public is so divided that every situation gets polarized and escalates to distract everyone from the purpose of why education exists. According to Katherine Norris and Kathryn Wiley (2023), “With low teacher pay, challenging classroom and school conditions, and long-standing underinvestment in education, coupled with the new anti-critical-race-theory and anti-anything-equity movement, teachers are under greater strain. These factors have led to a crisis in our nation’s classrooms, unlike anything we have seen in our careers”(p. 3).

The opportunity for positive change requires leaders to pivot to a new mindset to be proactive leaders. The opportunity for courageous leaders is extraordinary. Robert Jokela, executive director of the Crest Collaborative in Massachusetts, visits Finland frequently to reconnect with his family. I asked Bob one day what the Finland educators say about why they are able to succeed when the United States has struggled. What Bob hears is that they do not focus on compliance, assessment, and accountability as much, but they do learn from the U.S. education system. They say that they take many of the great ideas from the United States that have never been implemented but have proven to improve student achievement.

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*Shaping the Future: Four Leadership Pivots for Lasting Educational Impact* by Lyle Kirtman. Copyright © 2025 by Corwin Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

The goal of this book is to place the focus of education back on student achievement. To that end, the reader will find strategies and tools to help them develop a *positive results culture* that will attract a highly skilled and diverse staff. We know that student results are critical. We also know that a positive culture and high morale are needed for staff to feel satisfied that they are making a difference in student and family lives. Now we must combine both to create a positive results culture.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A POSITIVE RESULTS CULTURE

- A feeling of ownership for outcomes by staff and faculty
- Staff and faculty practicing a strong voice in setting goals
- High interdependence and communication
- Intrinsic accountability
- Continuous improvement
- Broad-based leadership, not by title
- Sustainable results
- Less impact by a change at the top
- Celebration of success

This positive results culture will help educators better prepare students for postsecondary education and life. The fact that many of our current educational strategies are not aligned with student achievement is the core disconnect in education. To become aligned we must pivot and shift our leadership. We have defined *four pivots* to make in leadership to build a positive results culture.

# Four Pivots in Leadership to Build a Positive Results Culture

## THE FOUR PIVOTS

1. Identify a clear North Star that defines what student success looks like.
2. Develop a new approach for hiring, developing, and retaining all staff.
3. Implement a system where employees self-assess their progress toward enabling student success.
4. Establish and commit to high expectations for all students and staff—all the time.

These *four pivots* in leadership mindset and practice will be discussed in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. The reader will learn how to develop actions for change with examples from leaders at all levels. This book will reach beyond our traditional hierarchy of administrative leadership to teachers, support staff, parents, and even students. We truly do need a village to educate a child.

## Book Overview

**Chapter 1: Our Findings and New Leadership Approach—It's Research Based.** The four leadership pivots are based on our research, data, and experience in building leadership capacity in districts nationally. This data can be used to add credibility for these proposed leadership pivots and to inform the strategies for implementation. I conducted a two-year research project in 2011 and 2012 with the support of Pearson Publishing and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) studying high-performing leaders and their skills and competencies. Using this data we have looked at more than 9,000 leadership assessment reports and found some clear trends for administrators' and teachers' behavior nationally. The most prominent data indicate a lack of focus on student achievement and success.

**Chapter 2: Integrate, Don't Separate—A New Leadership Mindset.** This chapter will show readers how to change silo mentality and stop the pressure to develop a myriad of stars that distract from the goal of student achievement.

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Integration will calm your environment and allow for more focus and fewer frenetic reactive actions.

**Chapter 3: Finding Your North Star.** Education has allowed its North Star to drift. The North Star is the clear definition of what success looks like for students. Education needs to step back and focus on the reason it was created: to provide an academic education, as well as a common political and social philosophy, to all young people regardless of social class.

**Chapter 4: Moving From Human Resources to Talent Management—Solving the Workforce Crisis.** The number of candidates for almost every position has decreased dramatically. Superintendent searches are lucky to have twenty candidates. Eighty-six percent of school districts reported challenges in hiring teaching positions in 2023-2024 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Other industries have changed their hiring to look at skills, experience, and who people are; education has not made that change.

**Chapter 5: Setting High Expectations for All Students and Staff.** If students and staff are treated with respect and coached to success, most people will rise to the occasion. We will outline how we can treat people like professionals. This also means classified staff. All staff can control their own narrative for performance as long as we achieve results.

**Chapter 6: Intrinsic Accountability—Student and Staff Agency.** We need to demystify this process by allowing those who are being evaluated to have a voice in the process, thus increasing buy-in and accountability. Using an intrinsic accountability system for evaluation will motivate staff to sustainable improvement.

**Chapter 7: Call to Action—Rediscover Your North Star.** The final chapter will motivate the reader to act by focusing on the four leadership pivots. Most leaders have lost their focus and the ability to ensure that the North Star is a guide through the storms of change. This chapter will bring all aspects of this book into a clear and simplified plan of action. Acting now before it's too late is essential for students, staff, parents, and the community.

## Features and Benefits

Although each chapter covers the different pivots, they are not separate strategies. You will see different topics covered in multiple chapters because they are interconnected with the strategies. We will dive deeply into many aspects of these topics using the different pivot areas and strategies.

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Each chapter will provide the following features.

- ▶ **Learning Intentions:** a summary of what the reader will take away from the chapter.
- ▶ **Statement of the Problem:** a description of the problem we are trying to solve (problems that districts and schools are facing nationally)
- ▶ **Proposed Practical Solutions:** solutions the reader can implement to solve the problems districts face
- ▶ **Suggested Steps and Strategies:** how to begin and implement the solutions
- ▶ **Vignettes and Examples:** examples of either the problem or solutions of the chapter focus
- ▶ **Chapter Summary:** key takeaways and steps the reader can use right away for real-life problems

## Why This Book Is Unique and Important

As a person who does not come from the pre-k-12 world, I have been informed by my observations, data, research, and experience that have resulted in conclusions that may be different from those in the education field. I believe in the importance of education and respect people who have chosen that path for their life's work. I know educators are frustrated with outsiders criticizing education. I have a different path. I chose to work within education based on my personal values of commitment to students and families as the basis for positive change in society. What is different in this book is that I am speaking from both theory and practice. I have worked side by side with a state commissioner, superintendents, central office leaders, teachers, parents, support staff, and educational partners in 500 school districts and 1,000 schools. I provide both an outsider and insider viewpoint developed through playing a direct role in implementation with districts across our country. I have additional experience in business, health care, government, and the nonprofit world that I integrate into my work and research.

Other people have discovered many of the same issues based on experience and expertise. However, this book will provide a framework with specific examples of how to be successful that you will not see in other leadership books. As Michael Fullan (2023) has said, often I focus on practice and am informed by the theory. The outsider-insider viewpoint allows me to see the whole system from the student to the policymakers. This book will help the readers align their day-to-day work to student achievement and stay the course without being distracted by all the noise.

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