



# (Re)Organizing for Excellence in the District Office

Presented by the District Leadership Forum

**Welcome!**  
**Introduce Yourself in the Chat!**



Share your name,  
district, and your role



Events for District Leaders

## Superintendent Research Briefings

We summarize the latest research on K-12's biggest challenges to help district leaders *get smart* and *make progress*.

“

EAB's research and information are some of the best I've seen...  
**simple, concise, easy to understand.**

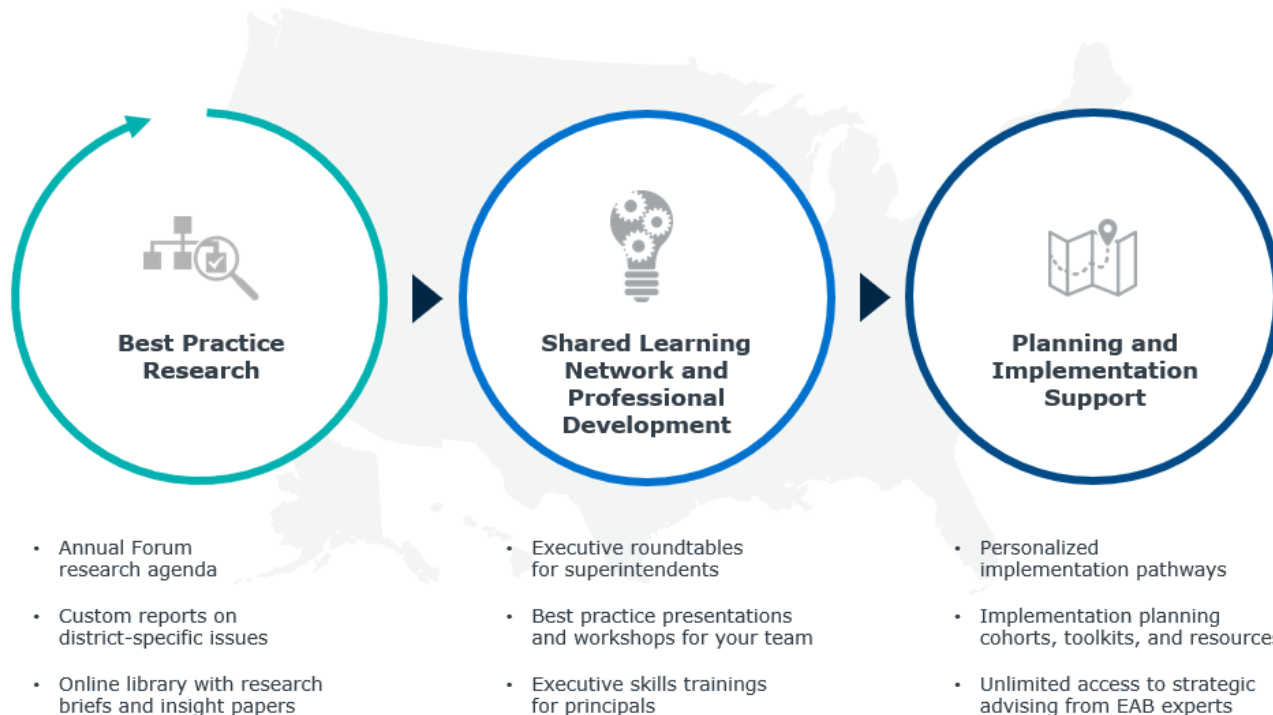
*Superintendent,  
Missouri School District*

”



# The District Leadership Forum

A Comprehensive Partnership Designed to Help District Leaders Accelerate Progress on Critical Challenges



# Working Together to Tackle Today's Most Pressing Challenges

## Where Partners Have Directed Our Research So Far...

Select examples



Raising Early Literacy Scores



Reducing Disruptive Behavior



Raising Teacher Morale



Minimizing Chronic Absenteeism



Preventing Mental Health Crises



Developing Effective Principals



Closing College Access Gaps



Integrating Career Development



Managing District Flashpoints

## What We're Working on Next

Latest requested topics of focus

### 2024 Agenda



Navigating Opportunities and Pitfalls of AI



Building a High-Performance District

### 2025 Agenda



Managing the Changing Educator Pipeline



Solving the Math Readiness Equation

100+ issues addressed in our research library

# Meet Your Presenters



**Molly O'Connor**  
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Connect with EAB

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# Feeling the Weight of an Impossible Mandate



Districts Under Pressure to Solve a Long List of Complex Challenges With Few Resources



## A Long List of Complex Challenges

*Percentage of superintendents actively working on the following in 2023*

Reading scores	<b>76%</b>
Math scores	<b>77%</b>
Disruptive behavior	<b>70%</b>
Mental health crises	<b>95%</b>
Chronic absenteeism	<b>75%</b>
Teacher morale and retention	<b>78%</b>

## Dealing With Pressure From Every Angle



### Parents

Confidence in public ed near all time low



### Board members

Feeling high expectations and scrutiny after ESSERF



### Employees

Frustrated with low pay, tough conditions

## Too Little Capacity and Time



### Team Stretched Thin

300% increase in time managing flashpoints over past 5 years



### Principals Out of Depth

79% say prep programs were out of touch with reality of the role



### Teachers Tapped Out

Reluctant to take on anything new

# EAB's Primary Job: Documenting Stories of Success



Finding and Documenting What Works



Supporting Implementation and Change

**500+**

Innovative, proven practices uncovered through our research

**250+**

District initiatives assisted through advising and implementation support



Closing equity gaps in college enrollment



Raising reading scores



Reducing disruptive behavior



Preventing mental health crises



Improving teacher morale and retention



Combating chronic absenteeism

## Superintendents Focused on Building Capacity for Change

“

I strongly believe that building district capacity is our most important work as superintendents.

*Superintendent, TX*

”

“

Without a focused approach to building systems, we will continue to do “random acts of education.”

*Superintendent, IL*

”

“

We can't just think “one problem at a time.” We need to build a district that can tackle anything.

*Superintendent, IN*

”





# EAB's Blueprint for a High-Performance District

## Shared Vision + Goals

- A set of long-term district pillars + KPIs
- Annual strategy review to establish current progress, set next change objectives
- Strict prioritization of district change objectives
- Collaboration with principals to cascade objectives into schools

## Role + Ownership Clarity

- Central office cabinet directly aligned with core district priorities
- School and district ownership of each initiative
- Contributing roles defined and documented
- Documentation of "superintendent worthy" roles

## Hardwired Accountability

- Criteria for "greenlighting" district initiatives
- Definition and ongoing tracking of leading indicators
- "Tripwires" that trigger escalation and review of the strategy
- Transparent reporting on progress at regular intervals

## Balance of Standards and Autonomy

- Criteria for what should be standardized
- Collaboration between principals to craft standardized processes
- Forums for sharing and workshopping individual practices that work

## Data-Driven Decisions

- Documentation of use-cases for data across the district
- Shared terminology for data and sources
- Identifying and breaking down data silos for each use case
- Data-literacy training for all school/district staff

## Outsized Investment in Leadership Development

- In-house training for change leadership skills
- Shared practices for effective collaboration
- Succession planning and mentoring
- Competency-based hiring processes

## Continuous Focus on Teacher Engagement

- A systematic process for tracking and raising morale
- Engagement of teachers in crafting new initiatives
- Best-practice professional development
- Support to minimize low-value tasks

## Practice of Sourcing and Sharing Innovations

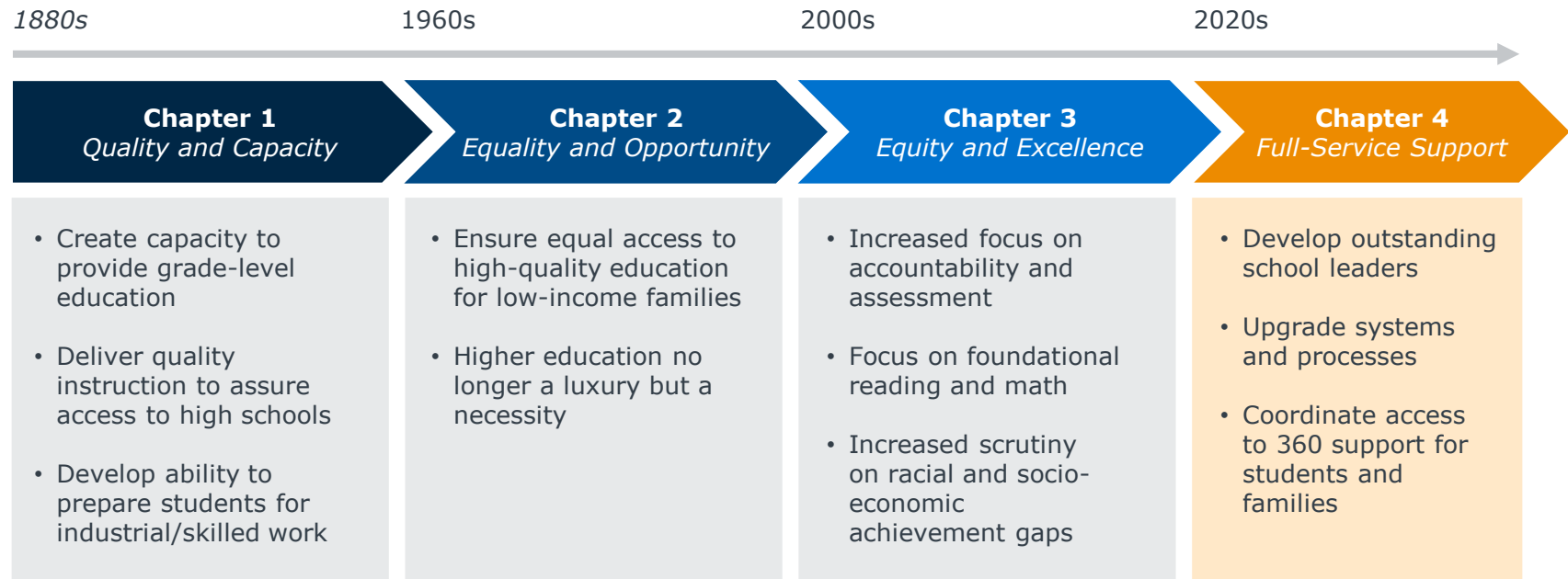
- District support for "ground up" innovation efforts
- Campaigns to focus innovation on problems
- Scanning for external ideas
- Culture of recognizing and giving credit for ideas

## Today's Agenda

- 1 Discuss why central office design is top-of-mind for many superintendents today
- 2 Share four recommendations for improving central office alignment and efficiency
- 3 Provide reflection questions to help superintendents identify opportunities for improvement

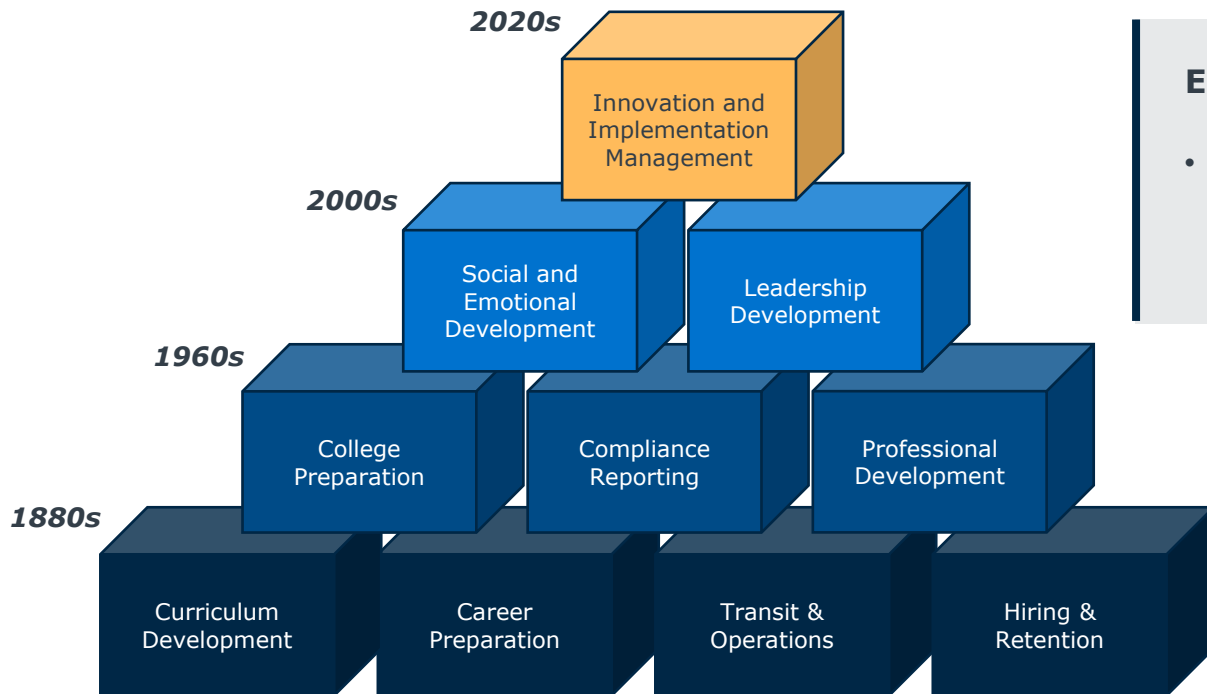
# Entering a New Chapter for Central Office Purpose and Design

## A Simplified Chronology of District Office Responsibilities



# As Focus Changes, Responsibilities Accumulate

Changes in District Expectations and Ambitions Add More Necessary Functions to The Pile



## Essential Question

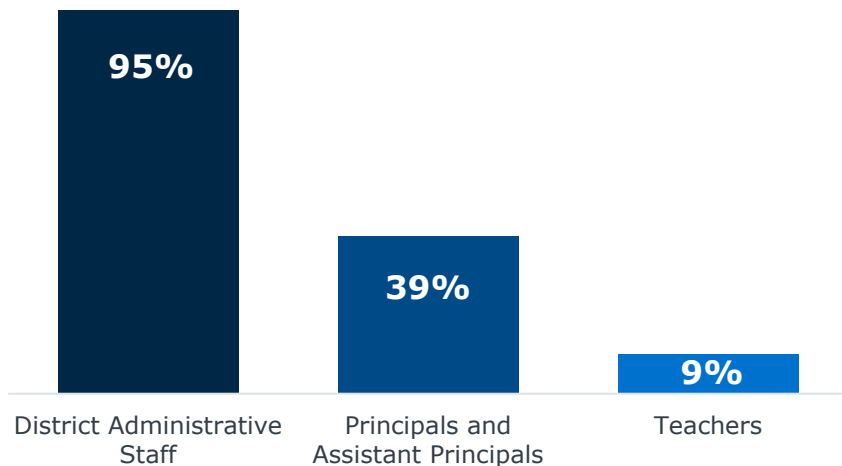
- Which of these responsibilities is getting easier?

# Many Districts Added Centralized Staff to Meet Expanding Demands



But Growth Has Been Reactive to Need Rather Designed With the Future in Mind

**Percentage increase in the number of staff by position type, 2000 – 2022 (NCES)**



## More Staff Does Not Always Equal More Capacity

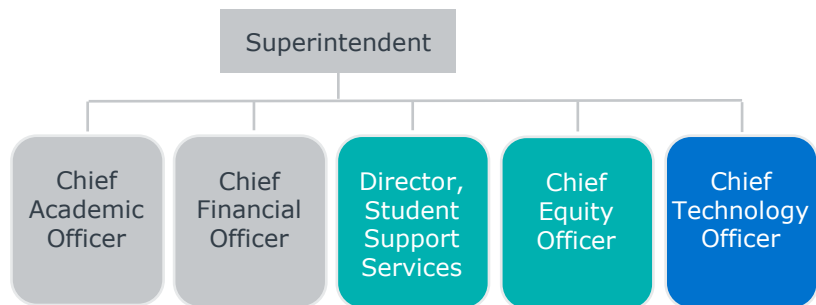
“Where growth in district leadership teams has occurred, it’s been organic or in reaction to a need, rather than by design. I think a lot of [superintendents] are starting to ask what the right structure looks like.”

~Superintendent, Southwest District

# What Does “Organic Growth” Look Like in District Offices?

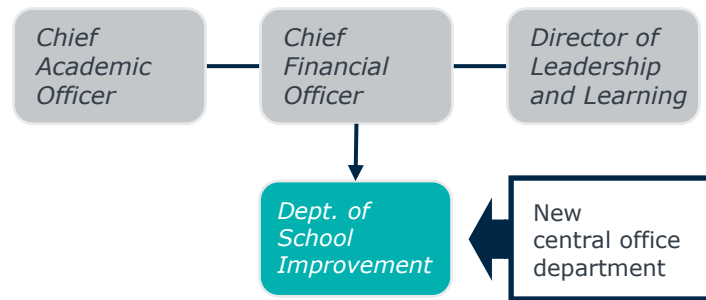
## 1. New Roles and Added Responsibilities as Needs and Priorities Expand

1880s  
 = New(er) roles     = Expanded responsibilities



## 2. Reporting Lines Assigned by Capacity Rather Than Design

Real example



## Frequently Observed Pitfalls Districts Fall Into Due Through Reactive Expansion



Overlapping job descriptions



Budget-driven title-level variation



Superintendents have up to 17 direct reports



Reporting lines don't align with cabinet roles

# Consequences of Organic Growth Felt Daily in District Work



## What You Want in a High-Performing Team

Clearly defined ownership of district priorities



Efficient decision-making and initiative management



Outsized investment of time and resources in the the most impactful initiatives and issues



Senior leaders spend most of their time on "top of license" activities



## What We See in District Offices Nationwide



Most questions go straight to the principal or superintendent



Initiatives and decisions managed by large committees with "shared ownership"



Everyone struggling with prioritization



Senior leaders spending too much time in the weeds on low value tasks

# Four Recommendations for Reclaiming Efficiency and Efficacy



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## How to Elevate Central Office Performance

**1. Define what, not who, needs a seat at the table**

2. Establish roles, not committees, for initiatives

3. Use categories, not lists, for prioritization

4. Create criteria for when to “do” and when to delegate



# 100+ Strategic Plans Show Common Priorities for Schools

Consistent Categories Reflect Community Expectations for Strong School District Today

## Where Are School Districts Focused Today?

Percent of Districts Citing the Following<sup>1</sup>  
as a Strategic Pillar/Goal (n=100)



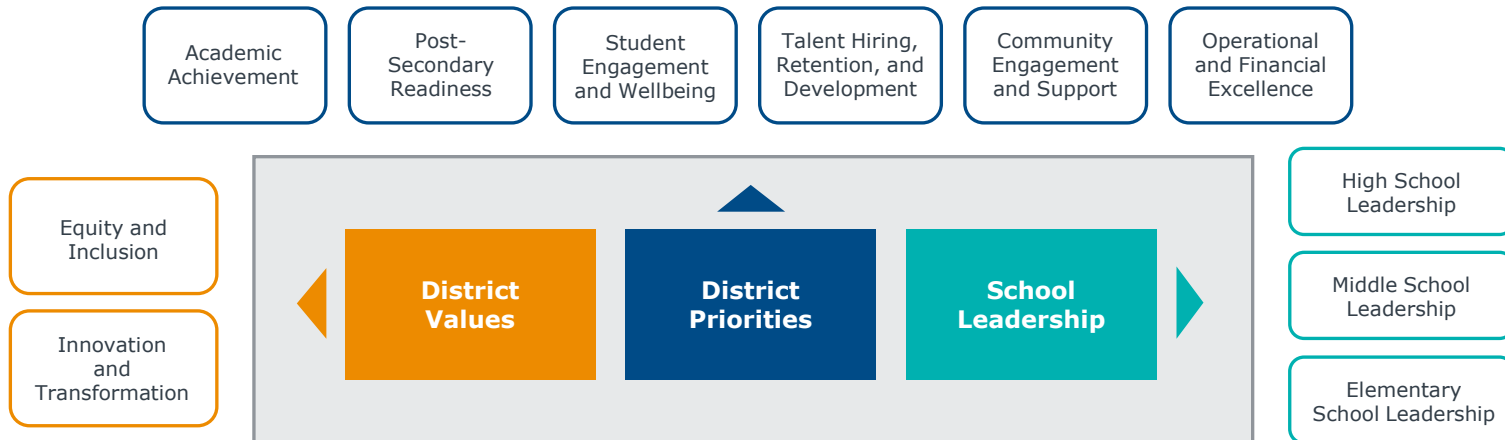
“It doesn’t matter whether you’re running a school district of 700 students or 7000 students. The expectations from your community remain the same.”

~ Superintendent, NY

# To Establish Organizational Clarity, Define Responsibilities Before Roles

## Question #1: What Needs a Seat at the Table?

*Three Categories of Responsibilities Require Visible Ownership and Representation*



## Question #2: Who is Accountable for Each Responsibility?

Large district = 10-12 Cabinet Members + Chief of Staff

Small district = 2-4 Cabinet Members + school and teacher leaders

# Reflecting on Your District's Alignment

Clearly defined ownership of district priorities

## Reflection Questions

**Do the priorities on slide 14 match those of our district?**

If not, how do they differ?

**Have we clarified executive ownership of each priority within our senior leadership team?** And do job descriptions reflect those responsibilities?

**Have we communicated executive ownership of district priorities?**

Is it easy for community members to find who is accountable for each?

**Do reporting lines for central office positions and departments align with each cabinet member's job description?**

Yes

No

Unsure

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## What We Believe

### **"Everyone deserves a seat at the table"**

Participation in planning seen as necessary to further individual or departmental agendas

### **"Every idea is a good idea"**

Culture of inclusion fosters belief that every contribution has equal merit

### **"We've got to all be on board"**

Complete consensus viewed as the only way to move ideas beyond committee meetings

## How We Operate

### **Leadership by Committee**



"We strive to create a culture of shared leadership and accountability. It's important that teachers and staff feel agency in our efforts to move the district forward."

~Superintendent, SC

## What We Get



### **False Inclusion**

The loudest voices are over-reflected in plans and actions



### **Groupthink**

Committees tend to produce the least controversial ideas



### **Slow Progress**

**+36%**

Time to completion when adding an additional "owner" to an initiative.

# How to Include the Right Voices in the Right Way

Use "RACI" Charts to Clarify Who Should Contribute to Initiatives or Tasks, and How

Four Roles to Define in Any Initiative or Task

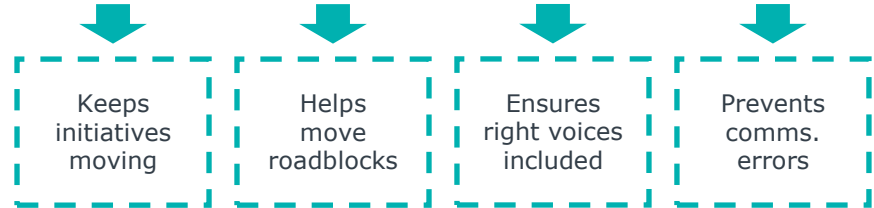
**R** Who is **responsible** for doing the work?

**A** Who is **accountable** for supplying necessary resources

**C** Who should be **consulted** on the right approach?

**I** Who needs to be kept **informed** about the work?

Initiative/Task	Responsible (Individual)	Accountable (Individual)	Consulted (Groups)	Informed (Groups)
Select or develop a K-12 SEL Curriculum	C&I Director	Chief Academic Officer	Counselors, teachers, principals, students	Cabinet, board, parents, full faculty
Establish school-based mental health services	ASI for Student Support Services	Superintendent	Counselors, local health officials, parents, CFO, District Counsel	Principals, teachers, parents, students



# Reflecting on Your District's Alignment

Efficient decision-making and initiative management

## Reflection Questions

**Do any of the problems with initiative committees align with our experience?**

Can we cite examples of the loudest voices winning, groupthink, or slow progress?

**Is there a current initiative that we could apply the RACI framework to as a test?** If so, which?

**Would we anticipate push-back when introducing this framework to our leadership team?** If so, what concerns do we expect to hear?

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# Is K-12's Biggest Problem Simply Trying to Do Too Much?



## The Problem With Prioritization is No Secret

# 90%+

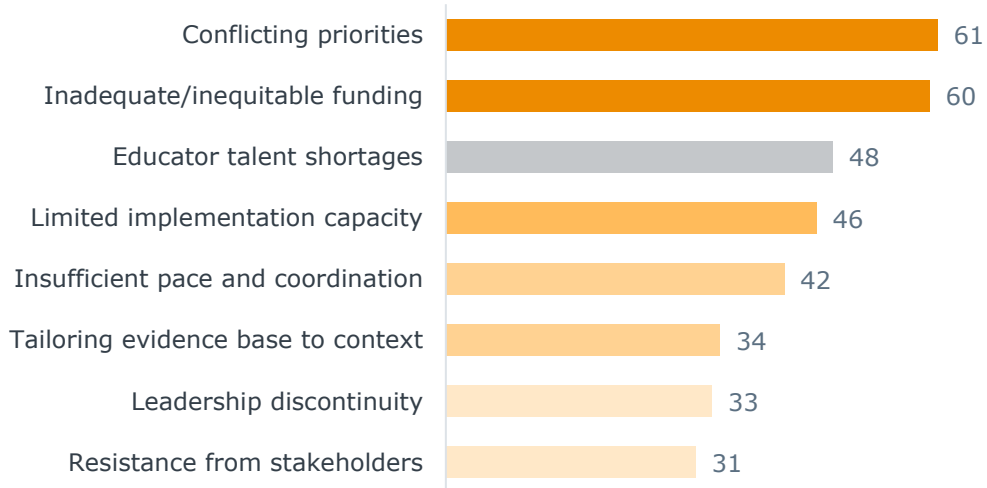
of K-12 leaders cite prioritization as a constant challenge

# >3 = X

Management of more than three initiatives increases rates of burnout and failure

## Why K-12 Transformation Efforts Fail

*% of times each issue was listed in the top 5 for all transformations (n=422)*



# Outdated Practices Fail to Protect Leaders From Distractions

Priority Lists Fall Short When Determining and Communicating How to Spend Time and Resources

## District To-Do List (How most leaders prioritize)

- Raise reading scores
- Pass bond referendum
- Get to 90% of students at 90% ADA
- Reduce teacher turnover rates
- Decrease disruptive behavior
- Strengthen principal development
- Reduce student mental health crises
- Figure out policies for A.I.

## Three Things Priority Lists Don't Do...



Direct investment of time and resources



Protect time from additional requests



Communicate what you're not going to work on (at least not yet)

# Organizing Priorities Into Categories Solves All Three Problems

*Categories for Objectives*

		Critical	Important	Desirable
<b>Variables</b>	<b>Expectations</b>	Fixed	Best we can achieve	Fixed
	<b>Resources</b>	First allocation of time and funds	Fixed	When can be spared
	<b>Timeline</b>	Fixed	Fixed	Flexible
	Number of Objectives	1	2-3	Remaining

**Rules of Engagement**

**Critical Objective**  
 First allocation of time and resources. Senior leader spends time here every day.

**Important Objective**  
 Dedicated owners assigned and given fixed resources based on available funds.

**Desirable Objective**  
 Time and resources will be allocated if and when they become available.

**What's the one thing, if achieved, that will have the greatest positive impact on everything else?**

# Reflecting on Your District's Alignment

Outsized investment of time and resources in the the most impactful initiatives and issues

## Reflection Questions

**Can you name the "critical" objective for your district this year?**

If so, do all members of your leadership team give the same answer?

**Can you name the 2-3 "important" objectives for your district this year?**

Again, do all members of your leadership team give the same answers?

**Do those 3-4 objectives align with where your team is spending the majority of their time and resources?** If not, what's getting in the way?

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# To Maximize Your Impact, Define When to Do and When to Delegate

The Most Effective Superintendents Resist the Temptation to Dive In

Delegate tasks that receive more than two "Yes" responses

## Superintendent's Dilemma

“

**I'm a "doer" to the core.**

When I first became a superintendent, I was miserable. But I've learned that my job is now to empower others and get out of their way.

I've had to train my team to make me stay out of the weeds.”

~ Superintendent, TX

## EAB's Delegation Criteria Checklist

Task: <i>Crafting a recommendation for district-wide cell phone policy</i>		
Delegation Criteria	Yes	No
Is it faster for me to delegate?	✓	
Is it an opportunity to build trust with leaders?	✓	
Is it an opportunity to develop administrators' leadership skills?	✓	
Is it an opportunity to empower other leaders?	✓	
Is another leader closer to the problem than I am?	✓	
Is it mostly straightforward but tedious?		✓
Could I simply provide oversight or feedback close to the end?		
Is it something I could teach to someone?		
Is it something at which I am not skilled?		
Is there a process or steps someone else could replicate?		

# Reflecting on Your District's Alignment

Senior leaders spend most of their time on “top of license” activities

## Reflection Questions

**Have you created criteria for what you should do, and when to delegate?**

If so, have you discussed those criteria with your team?

**Does your team have permission to tell you when you're “in the weeds?”**

If so, how have you created safety for them to raise that concern?

**Where do you find yourself wanting to get in the weeds, but shouldn't?”**

Does getting involved convey lack of trust, or provide a safe outlet to get involved?

Yes

No

Unsure

Open response

# Four Recommendations for Reclaiming Efficiency and Efficacy



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# Hardwire Your District for High-Performance

Implement the Central Office Playbook with Step-by-Step Guidance from EAB



**Dive deeper on the research at our Executive Roundtable this fall.**

Explore how to improve central office alignment and efficiency by applying best practices for organizational design



**Use EAB's Central Office Organization Audit** to

identify opportunities for improving the alignment and efficiency of your team.

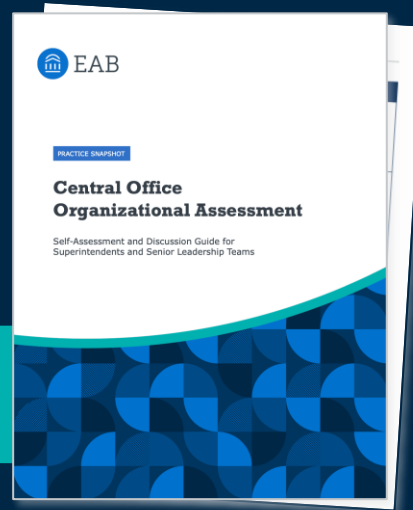


**Build a plan for change.**

EAB's experts help you engage your cabinet in direct discussion about opportunities to improve efficiency.

## Get Started This Fall

*Available to District Leadership Forum Partner Districts. Secure Your Spot by November 1.*



# Deep Discussions on Today's Top Issues

## 2024-25 Signature Events

Executive Roundtables

*Exclusively for District Leadership Forum Partner Districts*



### Central Office (Re)Design

November 7, 2024

Deep dive discussion on:

- Areas of dysfunction in central office design
- How to unlock capacity and performance



### Strategic Planning 2.0

February 5, 2025

Deep dive discussion on:

- Why traditional planning isn't strategic
- Balancing long-term vision with near-term agility



### 2025 In-Person National Meetings

Coming Spring 2025

New research on:

- Solving the Math Readiness Equation
- Managing the Changing Educator Pipeline



The best professional development I've received in 30 years as an educator."

Superintendent, Midwest District

# How Else Can We Help?



I'd like to speak with someone further to...

- 1 Learn how to access the Central Office Organizational Audit
- 2 Save a seat for an upcoming Executive Roundtable event
- 3 Learn more about the District Leadership Forum
- 4 Something else? Choose this option and we will follow up with you

## A Quick Ask



We value your feedback.

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Please take a few minutes to **complete the short survey** in your web browser.

Thank you!



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