

Leveraging the Power of Adaptive Leadership in K-12 Schools

A primer to tackle your most entrenched challenges, while propelling students and staff to exceed their potential.

Center for Model Schools™

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RocketPD & Center for Model Schools, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

If you're a school leader, you're more than a little used to the ground shifting beneath your feet.

Post-pandemic your priority list is long and growing longer:

- Close learning gaps
- Retain teachers & staff
- Manage stress & mental-health concerns
- Navigate politics & disappearing budgets
- End chronic absenteeism
- Ensure safer schools & learning environments

The kicker (as if you needed one): None of these problems features an easy or straightforward solution. There is no manual that tells you, step by step, how to engage a student who doesn't show up for class, or support a teacher who's so overworked that they hardly have time to write a lesson plan, much less deliver personalized and differentiated instruction in the classroom.

While some of these challenges are familiar, others are entirely new. In either case, they are complex, often systemic, and require a different way of thinking and set of skills to fundamentally alter the way that school organizations function to rise to the diverse and ever-changing needs of students and communities at large.

The delta on this thinking reveals itself in the difference between technical leadership, in which we ask our teams to solve known problems using a set of time-honored tactics, and adaptive leadership, in which we use things like context and innovation to solve problems with previously unknown solutions, more in line with the world in which we find ourselves today.

In a [recent editorial](#) in Education Week, Joshua P. Starr, former school district superintendent and Managing Partner of the Center of Model Schools, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, put it this way. "Technical leadership is required to solve an immediate problem that's reasonably straightforward. Adaptive leadership is about resolving deep issues and retooling the system so it sticks."

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Dr. Joshua P. Starr
Managing Partner,
Center for Models,
a division of
Houghton Mifflin
Harcourt

This guide on adaptive leadership features insights from the likes of Starr and other school leaders and researchers. We created it to help you and your team navigate the difference between technical and adaptive leadership, excavate a foundation to eventually change the mindset across your school organization and give you access to resources, ideas and practical strategies that you can use to light that spark today.

Read-on to consider:

- 1 Adaptive leadership in a school context
- 2 A framework for adaptive leadership
- 3 How to adopt adaptive leadership in your schools

Ready to get started? Let's get into it.

1 Adaptive Leadership in a School Context

In his work, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, and in the followup, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, featuring co-authors Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky, Harvard leadership expert Ronald A. Heifetz serves up perhaps the most well-known and effective differentiator between technical and adaptive leadership.

The authors suggest that organizations face two primary types of challenges (paraphrased).

1. Those that can be solved with existing knowledge and processes
2. Those that have no known solution and can only be solved through experimentation

Writing [for ASCD](#), Arundel High School (Md.) Principal Gina Davenport describes it this way: “Technical problems are identifiable and have achievable solutions, such as educating teachers about a new reading program so their students can meet with success. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are not as clear-cut or easy to identify and cannot be solved by the leader alone.”

While technical leadership is something many schools have learned to do reasonably well, adaptive leadership is seen as an evolution in thinking. Most problems in schools are objectively not straightforward, which is why a straightforward approach often does not produce the desired results.

“School leaders have honed their skills in technical leadership, efficiently resolving straightforward problems using existing resources,” explains Starr. “However, in a dynamic educational landscape where the needs of students and educators

continually evolve, this approach, while valuable, should be multifaceted.”

Chronic absenteeism is one example. Though absenteeism has been an issue in schools to some degree for years, the problem all but exploded post-pandemic, from a reported 25% to more than 66% in school-year 2021-22, [according to research](#) cited by Eliot Ransom, Co-CEO of UChicago Impact. This has created unprecedented challenges for educators and families.

In a [recent podcast](#) with EdWeb and the Center for Model Schools hosted by Starr, Dr. Joe Gothard, the 2024 National Superintendent of the Year, who recently transitioned as superintendent of the St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) in Minnesota to the superintendent of the Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin, said that SPPS made an adaptive choice to stop looking at absenteeism through a district lens in favor of a more nuanced, localized approach.

“We had to support each school and allow each school to personalize their approach to connecting with families.”

Dr. Joe Gothard, superintendent, Madison Metropolitan School District



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT (CONT'D)

"We had to support each school and allow each school to personalize their approach to connecting with families," said Gothard. "It might look very different in terms of who the makeup of the students are and some of the challenges of needs that their families have." Depending on what school or neighborhood you're in, this might include things like language initiatives, adding support staff or forming strategic partnerships.

The underlying idea is that school leaders had to shift from a deficit mindset: "You're in trouble because your absenteeism rates are high" to an asset mindset: "How can we target the problem in your local community and collaborate on a meaningful solution?"



4 skills of highly adaptive leaders

In [an article](#) in Harvard Business Review that first ran during the pandemic, researchers Ben Ramalingam, David Nabarro, Arkebe Oqubay, Dame Ruth Carnall, and Leni Wild articulated four qualities of adaptive leadership.

1 Anticipation.

Essentially, every organization must find a way to forecast future "needs, trends and options."

2 Articulation.

Once needs have been identified, create buy-in and build support for action.

3 Adaptation.

Create opportunities for ongoing learning and be open to making changes.

4 Accountability.

Be transparent and invite both "challenges and feedback" from your stakeholders.

Source: [Harvard Business Review](#), Sept. 11, 2020

2 A Framework for Adaptive Leadership

Returning to *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow, talk about the need to see the whole field, or, as they put it: To “get on the balcony.”

The foundational principle is clear: As a leader, your ability to adapt hinges on your capacity to perceive challenges from diverse viewpoints. By doing so, you unlock the potential for fresh perspectives, paving the way for innovative solutions tailored to a particular set of circumstances.

Writing for [Harvard Business Review](#), Heifetz uses the example of Magic Johnson. As a player, Johnson was on the floor with everyone else. But his style of play – the way he dished to his teammates

and glided to the bucket, always seemingly a step ahead – revolutionized the point-guard position. Heifetz says, it was as if Johnson “stood in a press box or on a balcony above the field of play.”

You might say that this sounds great, but schools don’t always have that luxury. Your teams are busy, maybe more so now than at any point in history. You hardly have a second to lift your head, let alone do a fly-over of your entire school district.

So, what can be done? With the chaos unfolding daily around us, how can schools take their traditionally technical approach to leadership down to the studs and build it back with a more adaptive mindset at its core?

The Center for Model Schools suggests that transformational school leaders group their priorities into three key domains or buckets. Within each of these three key domains exist three leadership priorities.

1



Vision & strategy

Forge a transformative vision and strategy that ensures equity, academic success, and well-being for all children.

2



Culture

Develop a framework of shared values among internal and external stakeholders and ensure transparent decision-making.

3



Teaching & learning

Take charge of a teaching and learning agenda with system wide, relationship-based activities exemplifying excellence.

Source: [Center for Model Schools](#), HMH

“Transformation starts with leaders identifying the problem they’re trying to solve and then organizing processes that will lead to change in adult practice intended to improve student achievement,” writes Starr in his 2022 book, *Equity-Based Leadership: Leveraging Complexity to Transform School Systems*.



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Starr, *Equity-Based Leadership*, 2022.

What follows is an example framework for creating a mindset for adaptive leadership in your schools. We inserted the three domains next to several of the bulleted action items, so you can visualize how those domains might be applied, in accordance with the Center for Model Schools protocol.

Model Framework for Adaptive Leadership in K-12 Schools

1. Proactively gather insight & feedback

- Create context for transformational leadership
- Develop a system and a process for community feedback
- Use multiple sources of district and school data to address critical needs

2. Launching change-based initiatives

- Vision & strategy: Craft ‘the story’ of your vision
- Culture: Foster buy-in and relationships through reflective practices
- Teaching & learning: cultivate a focus on the classroom

3. Monitoring and adjusting your approach

- Vision & strategy: Assess progress toward your vision
- Culture: Measure the impact of key relationships
- Teaching & learning: Gauge the impact of your instruction

4. Scale your success

- Vision & strategy: Establish systems to accelerate change
- Culture: Sustain transformational relationships
- Teaching & learning: Build a high-performing instructional leadership team

5. Leadership development in a world of constant change

- The power of transformational leadership networks
- Launching your principal’s academy
- Launching an aspiring leaders academy

Source: Joshua P. Starr, Center for Model Schools

READS & RESOURCES:

3 How to adopt adaptive leadership in your schools

Looking for new perspectives to solve complex challenges in your school community? We've assembled the following resources to help you and your team take the next step toward an adaptive leadership approach.

3 must-reads on Adaptive Leadership



1. The Work of Leadership

By Ronald Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, [Harvard Business Review](#), Dec. 2001

WHY WE LIKE IT? Heifetz is considered the father of adaptive leadership. Here Heifetz and Laurie strip the practice down to its core, employing compelling metaphors to illustrate their point.



2. Are We Thinking About Absenteeism Wrong? What It Takes to Keep Kids in School.

By Joshua P. Starr, [Education Week](#), Feb. 7, 2024

WHY WE LIKE IT? Dr. Starr's work appears often in this guide. Here Starr shares a personal story and questions what we need to do to get kids back to school and keep them there.



3. Adaptive School District Leadership

By Jenny Grant Rankin, [Psychology Today](#), Aug. 2023

WHY WE LIKE IT? Grant Rankin highlights research from a public school district in Texas to demonstrate how adaptive leadership can be applied to meet the needs of employees and staff.

Ready to get to work?

Join former school superintendent and Managing Partner at the Center for Model Schools Dr. Joshua P. Starr and Model School colleagues from across the country for a five-session virtual cohort experience – live, over Zoom.

Bring your leadership team, as Dr. Starr walks you, step by step, through a process to gather feedback, initiate change, monitor and adjust your approach, scale your successes, and develop future leaders to sustain your vision.



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