Taking Flight:
Impact Learning by Empowering Learner Agency

Kara Vandas
Brilliance Project
The Core Collaborative

Jeanette Westfall
The Core Collaborative
Success Ready Students Network

Jodie Mills
Boise School District

Ashley Duvall
Liberty Public Schools

Empowering learners through agency addresses modern educational challenges. This article examines its implementation in two diverse school districts, highlighting student voice from thousands of interviews and its impact on engagement and outcomes. It defines learner agency, outlines seven enabling conditions for supportive environments, and introduces the Sustaining Innovation Model to sustain efforts. Three core practices—clarity, feedback, and proving learning—foster agency. The article emphasizes efficacy in cultivating a culture that sustains learner agency, offering practical insights for educators to enhance student-driven learning and equity.

Keywords: learner agency, sustaining innovation, clarity, feedback, agency, competency, evergreen practices, student voice, authentic assessment, proving learning, transformative learning, efficacy, equity, learner-centered, personalized, enabling conditions, learning intentions, success criteria, beliefs, structures, tools, graduate profile, collective efficacy, authentic learning, learning alignment, student empowerment, self-directed learning, personalized learning and agency, student choice, educational transformation, learner driven

INTRODUCTION

So often when reading about the topic of empowering learners, the current literature is focused on theory, not practice. This journal describes the practical work done by two districts in different states with different needs and populations, providing evidence that it's not about where a school or system is located as much as it is about how beliefs and practices, grounded in research, drive the work of educators and

students. In addition, engagement continues to be a primary area of concern for educators so determining practices that authentically engage learners is essential to the future success of education systems. As a core component of the work, thousands of students have been interviewed about their experience, concepts of themselves as learners, as well as the shifts they have experienced as a result of the practices that have been employed, sharing critical information to educators about their progress and the needs of learners. In summary, student voice has been essential to the transformation for both school districts.

DEFINING LEARNER AGENCY

What is meant by empowering learners? While learner agency has a wide variety of definitions, put together they provide context and understanding of what it means to have agency. For that reason, we have chosen four to include that stitch meaning together:

- "Agency is by definition the power to act, but this doesn't have to be misconstrued as a free-for-all (Martin, 2018)."
- The word agency is shorthand for our perceived ability to shape our lives day to day. As "agents," we know we can make things happen (or stop them from happening), and we take responsibility for moving toward our goals. Over time, we develop our ability to motivate ourselves; we build our capacity for persistence and long-term effort. Agency makes us authors of our lives (Lopez, 2013, p. 25)."
- Learner Agency involves the availability of meaningful choice and the learner's wherewithal for exercising that choice, such that they develop into responsible owners of their own learning (Education Reimagined, 2018, p. 6)."

In the book, *Learner Agency: A Field Guide for Taking Flight* (2023, p. 26), the authors of this journal summarized learner agency as the power to take flight, meaning a learner has all the necessary components to soar toward worthy goals.

WHY LEARNER AGENCY?

In the current education climate, engagement or disengagement of students is a pervasive issue facing educators serving all grade levels as well as higher education. Case in point, the Walton Family Foundation-Gallup Voices of Gen Z Study (2024) reported that while nearly eight in 10 Gen Zers (79%) agree they have a great future ahead of them, about half (51%) agree that they feel prepared for that future. One reason that bubbles to the surface is that traditional education models focus on compliance and achievement, failing to equip students with the skills and mindset needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. For example, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2021) defined competencies for a career-ready workforce, which included:

- Career & Self-Development - Proactively develop oneself and one's career through continual personal and professional learning, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, navigation of career opportunities, and networking to build relationships within and without one's organization.
- Communication - Clearly and effectively exchange information, ideas, facts, and perspectives with persons inside and outside of an organization.
- Critical Thinking - Identify and respond to needs based upon an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information.
- Equity & Inclusion - Demonstrate the awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills required to equitably engage and include people from different local and global cultures. Engage in anti-racist practices that actively challenge the systems, structures, and policies of racism.
- Leadership - Recognize and capitalize on personal and team strengths to achieve organizational goals.
- Professionalism - Knowing work environments differ greatly, understand and demonstrate effective work habits, and act in the interest of the larger community and workplace.

- Teamwork - Build and maintain collaborative relationships to work effectively toward common goals, while appreciating diverse viewpoints and shared responsibilities.
- Technology - Understand and leverage technologies ethically to enhance efficiencies, complete tasks, and accomplish goals.

Therefore, the question is, "How are schools preparing students with such competencies when current legislative requirements limit what schools are asked to report and promote, making sweeping changes seem out-of-reach?" At the same time, innovations *are* happening in schools, even with such restrictions, but the pervasive question remains: How can learners be empowered with agency?

This paper provides a how-to framework involving seven enabling conditions, the Sustaining Innovation Model, the collection of student voice evidence, and three "evergreen" core practices, for moving forward with meaningful, research-based innovation. Each essential for success.

ENABLING CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE LEARNER AGENCY

Learner agency is the power to ask or take flight in a system whose beliefs and practices align and propel one forward - adults and children alike (Vandas, Westfall, & Duvall, 2023, p. 23). Therefore, how our systems act is of critical importance, and every school system is different with unique strengths and challenges, making a cookie cutter approach impossible. For this reason, enabling conditions provide focus for empowering learners, as they can apply to any school or system. As Donohoo (2017, p. 28) explained, enabling conditions do not cause things to happen, they increase the likelihood that things will turn out as expected.

Throughout innovating around agency, seven enabling conditions provided the needed areas of focus and consistency to realize change:

1. Vision - Identify a Vision for Learner Agency
2. Relationships - Build Relationships Grounded in Learner Agency
3. Clarity - Develop Clarity: Align Vision, Goals, and Learning
4. Learn - Model and Engage in Learning at All Levels
5. Collaborate - Use Authentic Collaboration to Foster Innovation
6. Support - Build Capacity in Learners Through Embedded Support
7. Efficacy - Build a Culture That Promotes Efficacy

Some of the conditions may seem benign or commonplace; however, through the lens of agency, distinct differences exist that elevate each to powerful catalysts for change. Consider, the related success criteria for the enabling conditions:

TABLE 1
ENABLING CONDITIONS & SUCCESS CRITERIA

LEARNER AGENCY
Enabling Conditions & Success Criteria
1. Craft a Vision for Learner agency
2. Build Relationships Grounded in Learner Agency
3. Develop Clarity; Align Visions, Goals, and Learning
☐ I have a clarified definition of learner agency that I can claim and share why it matters.
☐ I can articulate a vision for inspiring agency in all learners.
☐ I intentionally partner with others for the purpose of learning how to foster agency.
☐ I will gather evidence to establish strengths and entry points that exist in my classroom, school, or district.

LEARNER AGENCY
Enabling Conditions & Success Criteria

4.   Model and Engage in Learning at all Levels
5.   Use Authentic Collaboration to Foster Innovation
    ☐ I have explored models of success and determined how they might be used to inspire next steps in learning for adults and students.
    ☐ I have considered ways to provide authentic learning experiences for adults in order to provide them agency and choice.
    ☐ I have considered how learning happens and how to develop a culture of agency for learners at all levels, including elements such as productive struggle and clarity of learning expectations
    ☐ I will identify collaborative structures that exist in my work and begin to collect evidence examples.

6.   Build Capacity Learners Through Embedded Support
7.   Build a Culture that Promotes Efficacy
    ☐ I use the core practices, aligned to research and our shared vision, to promote agency as foundation for my decision-making.
    ☐ I align my time and effort around the core-business of learning.
    ☐ I focus on efficacy-building factors for all learners.

PUTTING ENABLING CONDITIONS INTO ACTION

**Enabling Condition 1: Identify a Vision for the Learner Agency**

Starting with the first enabling condition, *Vision: Identify a vision for learner agency*, the work began authentically in both school districts with a small group of committed adults. Conversations began at the district level in both Liberty, MO, and Boise, ID. What did they discuss, related to vision? What does establishing a shared vision include?

- What is expected of learners?
- What do all learners require to be successful in the ever-changing world?
- How should learning look, be visible, and proven by students?
- What professional learning and collaboration is needed?
- What models of success exist?
- What leadership is required?
- What is similar and different compared to our current system?

In addition to the questions, The Sustaining Innovation Model provided a reflective tool that framed conversation and decision making from the launch of the work and throughout the entire process of transformation. What is it?

FIGURE 1
**SUSTAINING INNOVATION TRIANGLE**
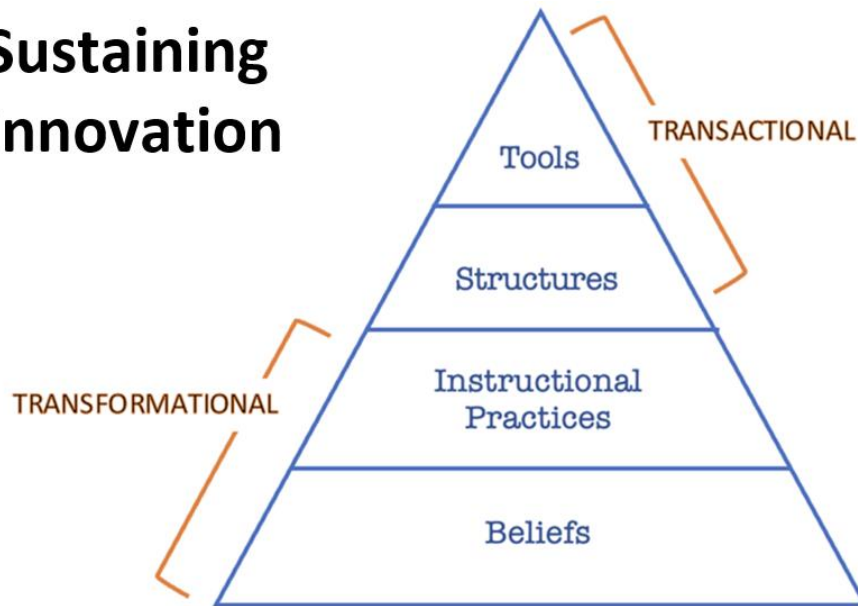
Learning Agency: A Field Guide for Taking Flight, 2003, p.37

Often changes are made in school systems, related to buying tools (technology, curriculum resources, etc.) for learning or by making changes to structures (class schedules, passing periods, collaboration time, etc). Without discussion of the beliefs such changes are rooted in, paired with effective instructional practices, the changes often fall dreadfully short and are transactional in nature. One example was the push to provide one-to-one technology for students. The technology itself was a tool, which could have been used for meaningful learning or to waste time, potentially impacting learning but not necessarily. However, if the technology purchase and tools were rooted in shared beliefs and practices, aligned to support the beliefs about the use of technology, the change would have been sustainable, meaningful, and transformational. For example, if a system holds a shared belief that effective feedback moves learning forward, then they would provide professional learning about proven practices to use technology to provide effective feedback. Next, time, collaboration, student voice, models of success and other learning opportunities, providing learning for adults and students about how to best use the tool effectively to deepen learning through feedback, would have a much greater chance of being transformational.

Therefore, the Sustaining Innovation Model is built on the concept that transformational change is rooted in beliefs and related practices, it establishes a way of thinking and approaching innovation. As each district considered their vision for the work with a small group of people, they began by determining their shared beliefs.

In Liberty, MO, the superintendent led discussions first with district administrators, establishing shared beliefs that eventually led to a Graduate Profile outlining what students who attended Liberty Public Schools would gain from their experience.

FIGURE 2
GRADUATE PROFILE, LIBERTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, LIBERTY, MO
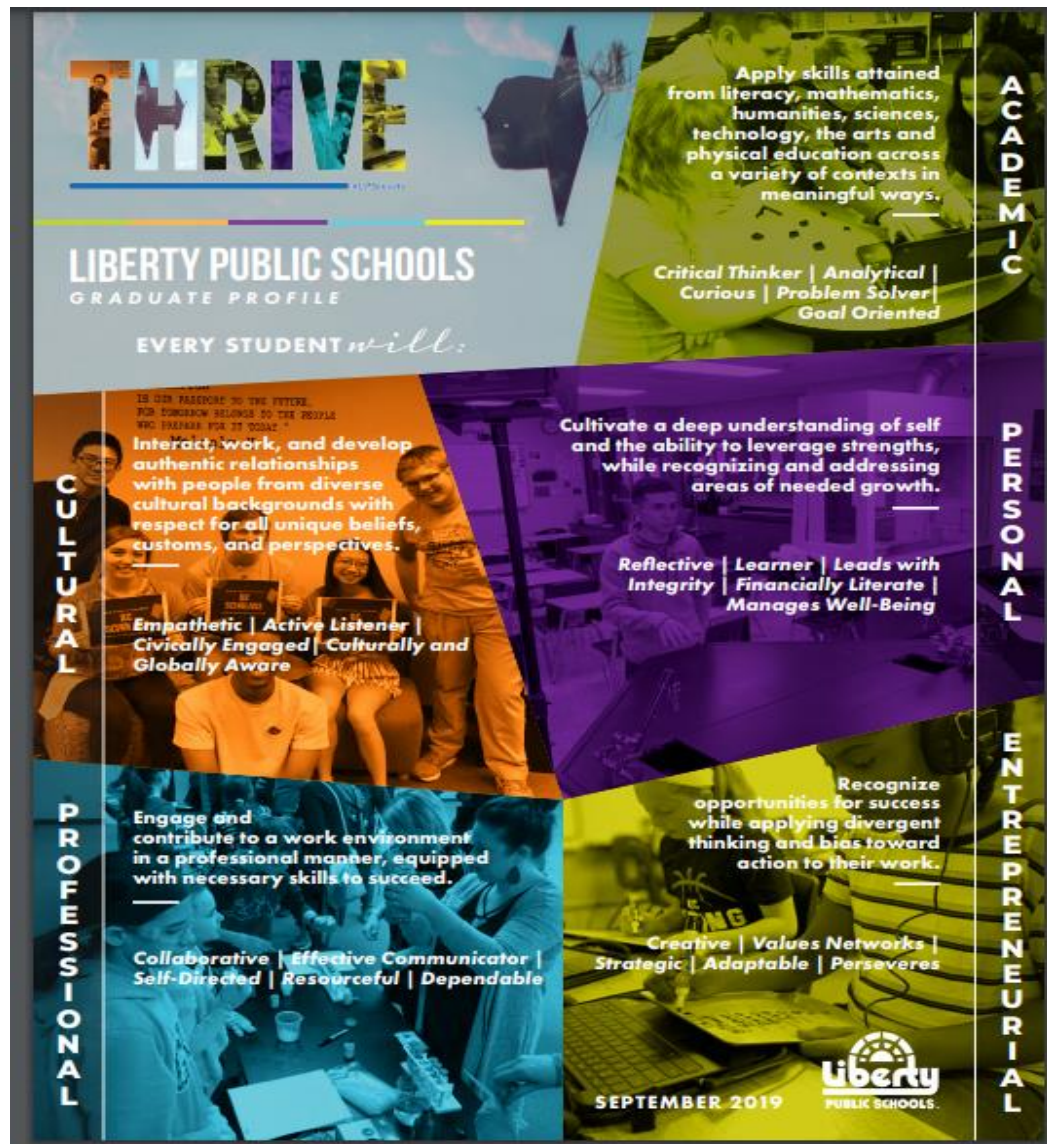
In Boise, ID, the district developed a North Star, rooted in beliefs that guide all the work they collectively do to educate students.
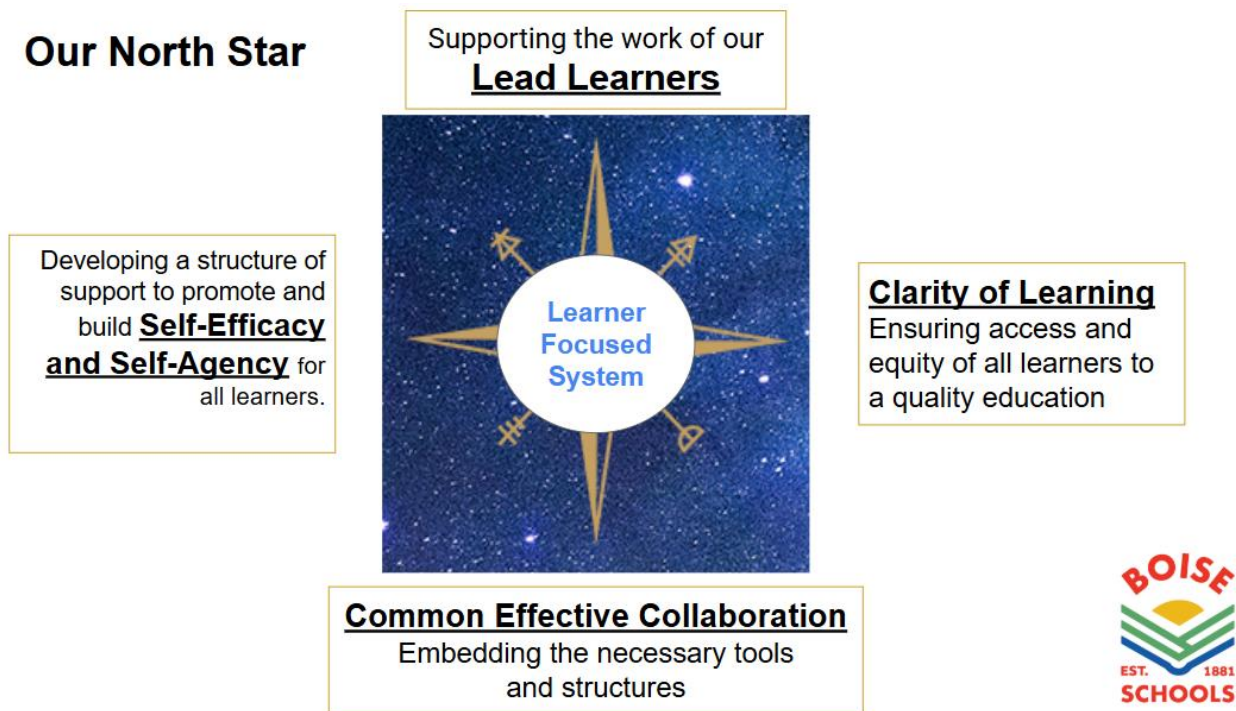
Both descriptions of shared beliefs are ever present in their districts from professional learning to classrooms, grounding the work being done in the vision. In addition to being present, the shared beliefs of each district provide a framework for making decisions about how time, money and effort will or will not be spent. It is commonplace to hear questions in discussions like, "How does this align to our graduate profile or North Star?" When new materials, professional learning, or other decisions present themselves, the clarity both districts have established around their beliefs, allows them to align, adjust, and rethink their work regularly, ensuring they stay focused on the vision.

Enabling Conditions 2 & 5 – Build Relationships Grounded in Learner Agency & Authentic Collaboration to Foster Innovation

"Libraries and bookstores are full of books on the topic of relationships. But when we consider relationships to empower learners, we suggest purposefully digging into this notion and thinking differently about how we support, interact, and challenge one another. What would relationships built around teacher and learner agency look like (Vandas, Westfall, & Duvall, 2023, p. 45)?"

Just as students with agency have the power to act, so must educators, and developing relationships grounded in agency requires that educators make choices, set meaningful goals, make meaning in their own classrooms and schools, challenge the status quo, innovate and more. In Boise Public Schools this concept is referred to as connected autonomy, meaning the vision and the instructional practices connect them, but they are also autonomous within that framework to do what is needed or desired. Case in point, Daniel Pink explains Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so to serve some greater objective can achieve even more. The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves (Pink, 2009, p. 131).

So, what might relationships grounded in agency, allowing for autonomy look like? First, it should be clear that educators have voice and choice in their own learning. That doesn't mean that an expectation for being a learner doesn't exist or that it is a free-for-all; rather, it looks like meaningful learning opportunities,

connected to the vision, are provided, and educators are empowered to make choices about how they engage in learning. In addition, it means that feedback about what is desired or needed for next-level learning is gathered and listened to so that educators can engage in the type of learning experiences they require to further the work of empowering learners. Notice in the following sample list that multiple learning opportunities exist.

- Authentic Collaborative Learning Cycles – educators collaborating around shared interest, practices, or purposes.
- Innovation teams – Teams collaborating around a desired innovation.
- Cohort Model – Groups of educators that have opted into an ongoing learning experience about instructional practices over time with support from leaders and coaches, sharing their learning with one another to continue to deepen practices.
- Pilot Groups – Educators piloting an innovative practice or structure that connects to the vision.
- Lead Learner Summits/Series – Educators opting into summer learning experiences, based on interest.
- Visiting Other Districts – Visiting other districts and schools for the purpose of exploring models of success to determine desired innovations they may implement as a result.
- Teacher-driven Curriculum Work – Teachers working in partnership with district administrators to shape, provide perspective, and develop expectations for learning and curriculum resources.

To provide some concrete examples of what the list of sample collaboration and learning experiences that promote relationships grounded in agency might look like, two examples follow that happened as part of the journey, one in each district.

In Liberty, MO, a group of second-grade teachers from several schools chose to work with a coach to explore how to provide students with a way to set goals, track their progress and determine their next steps in learning math.

In Boise, ID, a group of over 50 high school teachers transformed their grading practices so that students could prove their learning with evidence and their grades reflected their learning. Both examples show how educators engaged together in meaningful ways, with choice, voice, and support. In addition, as they worked through the messy process of innovating, their feedback and needs have not been listened to but acted upon in order to support them over time in accomplishing their goals.

One additional practice that relates to developing relationships grounded in agency has been to facilitate educators in determining a shared goal and success criteria, supporting them to collaboratively determine what success would look like. To do so, educators have been asked to discuss what change would occur in what students and teachers do, feel and act upon if the goal was realized. Why? If a shared understanding of what a successful outcome would look like is established, each individual can make their own way toward the goal, doing what is most effective for them. For example, if the success criteria for the high school teachers transforming their grading is that students can articulate their learning goals; their strengths and areas for growth, based on the success criteria; celebrate small wins; and plan their next steps in learning, then each teacher, whether teaching calculus, chemistry, or physical education, has the autonomy to determine what that looks like in their own classroom. Then, when collaborating, the teachers can share different ideas without feeling like someone has "done it wrong" or is doing the work differently so their own approach must be wrong. Instead, everyone has the agency to determine how to best reach the common goal and success criteria that the group of teachers collectively established.

This practice has been found to decrease conflict and increase innovation in both Liberty, MO, and Boise, ID.

Enabling Condition 3 - Develop Clarity: Align Vision, Goals, and Learning
"A clear understanding of the vision is critical, but shifting our practice requires small steps. Each tweak teaches us more and allows for a continuous evolution of our practice. Changing how students learn in the classroom is more about a series of small tweaks rather than one dramatic shift (Martin, 2018, p. 205)."

Therefore, using the Sustaining Innovation Model previously discussed under Enabling Condition One, once the vision is established through shared beliefs, the next layer of transformation involves implementing proven instructional practices that align with the vision and make the desired impact. Based on the Visible Learning Research and years of implementation in multiple districts, three categories of practices are suggested in order to shift toward learner agency: Clarity, Feedback, and Proving Learning.

Why these three? First, all three are proven practices that have a higher-than-average effect size or impact on learning, according to the Visible Learning research. For example, clarity has a current effect size of $d = 0.85$, meaning it can more than double students' learning rate.

In addition, once clarity is in place, meaning both students and teachers have a shared understanding of what the goals for learning are and what success looks like, students can be metacognitive and are able to take greater ownership of their learning. Thus, having clarity in the classroom leads to greater opportunity for agency for learners.

In addition, once students are learning, feedback about their progress becomes paramount, deepening learning and providing information about next steps in learning. Finally, as students do meaningful work, they can determine which work best meets the learning goal and success criteria. Thus, proving learning with a body of evidence about their learning. This practice involves students evaluating work, organizing it, aligning it to success criteria, and defending which work proves their learning. Students can then report what they have learned and how their grade has been earned, a paradigm shift from grades that may or may not reflect the learning that took place. Teachers can determine which pieces of evidence they will accept for proof ahead of time, which may include traditional tests and quizzes but may also involve classwork, projects, performances, etc.

In addition student voice evidence can be taken before, during and after learning to determine how the practices work for students to deepen learning and opportunities for agency. Common clarity questions that are asked may include:

- What are we learning?
- Why?
- Who am I as a learner? What do skillful learners do?
- What is the Success Criteria and how can I be successful?
- What are my strengths and areas for improvement related to the Success Criteria?
- What tools support my learning?
- What progress have I made?
- What can I do to get stuck and unstuck when learning?
- What feedback do I need and who should I talk to about my learning?
- What is the next step or my goal in learning?
- How can I prove my learning?
- How can I contribute to the learning of others?

One example of a student response from Liberty, MO, once clarity, feedback, and proving learning were established in his middle school, is captured below:

> "I've been more positive about school and less stressed about grades. I know I can always
> go back and fix my work. I'm actually liking school more this semester." 6th Grade Student.

This is just one response, but it indicates the types of responses students give when they have experienced the shift in practices in their own classroom. In fact, according to Michael Absolum, author of Clarity in the Classroom, "When we are clear, research shows that there are important shifts for the students. Their motivation improves, they stay on-task, their behavior improves, and they are more apt to engage in self-regulation. In other words, they take more responsibility for their learning (p. 81)."

Enabling Conditions 4 & 6 – Modeling and Engaging in Learning at All Levels and Build Capacity in Learners Through Embedded Support

Building prepared learners involves learners' beliefs, dispositions and mindset, skills and knowledge, and the opportunity to regularly and collaboratively apply them to real world situations. Such learners can take on new challenges from the ever-changing, ever-advancing world. Developing and growing learner agency involves possessing such traits as adult learners, making them essential for both students and adults in the school system. Therefore, all are learners, from district administrators to classroom students, board members, teachers, and community members.

In Boise, the North Star (their vision) includes lead learners in the system that will champion the work forward. How does a district develop lead learners at all levels? One model, named Grow the Top, developed by Jodie Mills, Assistant Superintendent of Boise Schools, does just that by addressing the first learners in transformational change, the current leaders. This group may consist of district administrators, principals, learning coaches, and lead teachers. The Grow the Top model involves allowing the lead learners in a system six months to a year to learn together to understand both the vision and the practices that will be implemented moving forward.

The idea is to ensure that those leading the work deeply understand what success looks like before they are asked to lead the work with others. Why? Three main reasons exist: 1) Leaders are able to be learners themselves, without building the plane while flying it. 2) Leaders can offer important insights, questions, and aid in planning for effective learning for others. 3) Leaders learn how to recognize, coach, inspire, support and clarify the work aligned to the vision over time.

In Boise, Grow the Top involved professional learning, traveling to observe models of success in other districts, including Liberty, MO, and collaborating as leaders to provide guidance and feedback. Once this was accomplished, more educators and board members, teachers, paraprofessionals and students were invited to join in learning. Such a model provided a clear pathway to modeling and engaging in learning at all levels and was an essential component of four focus areas for developing agency in the district.

FIGURE 4
LEARNER AGENCY STRUCTURES AND SUPPORT, BOISE SCHOOL DISTRICT, BOISE, ID

In addition, clarity and coaching were the first areas of focus for leaders to learn more about to transform the system into one of greater agency. Clarity for Learning: 5 Essential Practices that Empower Students and Teachers by John Almarode and Kara Vandas as well as The Essential Guide for Student-Centered Coaching: What Every K-12 Coach and School Leader Needs to Know by Dianne Sweeney and Leanna Harris were the essential texts and content provided that created the instructional practices as well as the support structure for developing learner agency.

Learning coaches became an essential part of the process in both Liberty, MO, and Boise, ID, providing teachers and leaders with coaches, focused on student learning. Coaches supported teachers by collaborating with them during professional learning; engaging in coaching cycles related to the professional learning; collaborating with other coaches across the district to provide models of success to be observed in coaching labs; and working with school leaders to further the work. In this way, coaching has become essential to building capacity in all learners through embedded support.

Enabling Condition 7 - Build a Culture That Promotes Efficacy

Enabling Condition seven may be the most impactful of them all, as it supports each of the other conditions and provides practical ways to get each individual and the collective on an upward spiral. Using the sources of efficacy to grow the belief that agency is possible and the evidence that it is growing and flourishing has become an essential practice in Liberty, MO, and Boise, ID. The sources of efficacy include celebrating mastery moments, having vicarious mastery moments, feedback and social persuasion and psychological safety (Vandas, Westfall, & Duvall, 2023, p. 250). When each happens regularly for individuals, their efficacy grows, putting them on an upward spiral. Learning experiences within both districts for adults and students alike began to celebrate progress more, share what was working, and build a culture of sharing. One way this was accomplished was again beginning with the lead learners, asking them to determine how to practically grow efficacy with others. What follows in an example of ways to grow agency, used by Kara Vandas in professional learning with educators.

TABLE 2
THINKING PROMPTS FOR BUILDING EFFICACY

Source of Efficacy	Self	Others
Recognize Mastery Moments	How? Share with partner once a week	How? Start each meeting with MMs
Vicarious Mastery Moments	How? Visit other schools	How? Capture and share within school
Feedback	How? Ask trusted people for feedback	How? Be present in moments, look for moments to share meaningful feedback
Psychological Safety	How? Determine a peer and meet regularly to share highs and lows	How? Establish beliefs and Mindsets about sharing best practices with colleagues

One example of intentionally and practically building efficacy that has been implemented in both Liberty, MO, and Boise, ID, is to celebrate a mastery moment before new learning takes place. The purpose is to start from a place of strength and impact, rather than a deficiency mindset when learning something new, meaning focusing on what is already going well and considering how to level-up, rather than to change everything. This and other practices that intentionally build efficacy have been transformational in honoring educators' and students' learning, professionalism and work.

A LEARNER AGENCY BLUEPRINT

Learner Agency & Efficacy = Core Ways of Being and Doing + Core Practices + Embedded Support

As learner agency develops over time, the enabling conditions transform into the core ways of doing and being as a system. Paired with the evergreen core practices (clarity, feedback and proving learning) and fueled by the embedded support structures, the core ways of being and doing become commonplace. Thus, the transformation is evident; the way people think, do, interact, and feel about learning has forever shifted. In other words, they possess both efficacy and agency.

REFERENCES

Absolum, M. (2010). *Clarity in the classroom: Using formative assessment for building learner-focused relationships*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press.

Almarode, J., & Vandas, K. (2018). *Clarity for learning: Five essential practices that empower students and teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Education Reimagined. (2018). *Practitioner's lexicon: What is meant by key terminology.* Retrieved from https://education-reimagined.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Revised-Lexicon_Jan2018_DOWNLOAD.pdf

Hattie, J. (2021). *Visible learning metaX.* Retrieved from https://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/

Lopez, S. (2013). *Making hope happen: Create the future you want for yourself and others*. Atria Paperback.

Martin, K. (2018, November 10). *6 questions that promote learner agency*. Retrieved from https://katielmartin.com/2018/11/10/6-questions-that-promote-learner-agency/

Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* Riverhead Books.

Sweeney, D., & Harris, L.S. (2020). *The essential guide for student-centered coaching: What every K-12 coach and school leader needs to know.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Vandas, K., Westfall, J., & Duvall, A. (2023). *Learner agency: A field guide for taking flight*. Mimi & Todd Press.