

The Transformation Gap: Why Motivated District Leaders Pursue Incremental Change

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Executive Summary

In one New England district, a district-wide high school redesign is creating a wall-to-wall academy model that replaces siloed roles and classrooms with integrated academics, applied learning, and career pathways. In this model, "every teacher has to think of themselves as being a part of the student's journey," rather than as solely responsible for a single subject. Teachers are expected to connect academic content to real-world pathways, with professional learning designed to support this shift in practice through immersion in industry settings.

In another district, a years-long process has restructured academic access, dismantled tracking systems, and redesigned daily schedules to ensure high-level learning for everyone. High school students now almost universally take college-credit-bearing courses, and a daily "flex block" across all the districts' schools enables students to receive targeted interventions and specialized services without missing core instruction.

What is transformational systems change?

These examples illustrate an approach to improvement in public education that we call **transformational systems change**. Districts and their leaders pursuing this type of change reshape how students experience school by designing entirely new ways of working rather than strengthening how existing systems work. They're considering what students learn and progress, how adults work together, how resources are distributed, and how decisions are made. The ultimate goal is to ensure that every student can learn at a high level and pursue a promising pathway of their own choosing.

Transformational change is *rare* in the history of education reform, but it will be increasingly necessary. Today's school systems were *never designed* to deliver equitable outcomes at scale. They still reflect gaps in *achievement* and *engagement* that are actively widening. Under ongoing *political* and *fiscal* pressures, districts will not be able to prepare every student for a *changing workforce* in a more *fragmented society* just by making incremental changes to curriculum, programs, or budgeting. Doing more of the same, but better, is neither possible nor adequate.

No single, fully validated model exists yet for how districts should assemble necessary changes, such as more *relevant instruction*, *detracking*, and *collaborative planning time* for teachers, into a coherent system at scale. But districts' efforts to do so deserve careful, ongoing study because the positive effects of such changes on student learning, engagement, and *teacher retention* are proven. Leaving current structures in place is not a neutral choice when the evidence shows that fundamental changes, implemented well, can reverse outcome gaps, chronic absenteeism, teacher attrition, and student disengagement.

What is this report about?

This study asked: **To what extent are school district leaders pursuing transformational change in their districts, and what shapes their decisions about which changes to pursue?** With support from the Barr Foundation, we studied school districts in New England, a region that reflects many national pressures while offering a window into how local context shapes the possibility of change. This report covers the first phase of our study, focused on superintendents' perspectives. We fielded a region-wide

survey of superintendents with 307 total responses across all six states in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont). We also interviewed 47 total superintendents (representing all six states) whose districts we identified as likely pursuing an ambitious vision for change.

What did we learn?

First, the need for transformational systems change is contested among superintendents. New England superintendents believe their districts need to change, but they diverge on which long-term goals matter and whether achieving them requires fundamentally redesigning how districts work. Leaders lack a shared understanding of what transformational change entails.

We also found that transformational change efforts are rare in practice. Most change efforts focus on strengthening current systems rather than redesigning them. Where superintendents are trying to shift the purpose of schooling and redesign district systems, their efforts are often limited or in early stages.

The reasons are complex, but the study's most important insight is that the changes superintendents pursue are those they believe are feasible. The changes they choose to pursue are shaped by:

- **What they have seen:** While superintendents value their personal networks for accessing ideas and information, they did not describe frequent, systematized exposure to alternative models.
- **What they believe is the highest priority:** Even superintendents aspiring toward transformational change prioritize work to stabilize district operations and improve instructional basics, which consumes their capacity.
- **What they can make tolerable for their most influential stakeholders:** Without more politically sophisticated strategies, superintendents struggle to reconcile competing stakeholder interests, resulting in a balance that favors the status quo.

What should be done?

For education leaders, advocates, funders, and communities seeking transformational change in public education, there is reason for optimism. Superintendents report being motivated to improve their systems even under difficult conditions. Some leaders are beginning to push toward more ambitious, system-level change, supported by new perspectives and skills that have expanded what they think is feasible.

However, these findings make clear that a web of networks, incentives, talent pipelines, and governance structures influences what superintendents think is feasible. When the conditions that shape district leadership are not aligned with transformation, leaders are not choosing incrementalism so much as being steered toward it.

With support, leaders can deepen their understanding of what transformational systems change involves and build stronger skills to pursue it effectively. **This is not about asking leaders to do more, but about reshaping the conditions that enable ambitious leadership. Developing these conditions requires fundamental shifts in:**

- **How leaders are prepared:** Leadership development must systematically expose

district leaders to different models of schooling and build the political and strategic skills needed to redesign, not just manage, district systems.

- **How leaders spend their time:** School boards and state policymakers must support superintendents to radically reduce the time required by compliance, operational, and financial issues to increase the capacity for the political and adaptive leadership that transformational change requires.
- **How leaders understand their roles:** School boards and state policymakers must reshape incentives to shift the superintendent role from a politically constrained manager of competing interests to a system-level change leader, with explicit responsibility and support for redesigning core structures. School boards must also reposition themselves as active stewards of long-term transformation rather than risk mitigators.
- **How leaders build and engage support:** Funders, advocates, and community and business leaders must organize and build coalitions to deepen public understanding of the necessity for school transformation and reinforce new norms about what schools can and should be.

Without these shifts, even the most capable leaders will swim upstream when attempting to move beyond incremental improvement. Right now, most efforts to encourage school district transformation focus on individual leaders and districts. But a different future is possible: one that encourages transformation through coordinated shifts across the systems that produce and incentivize district leadership. **This requires the broader field, including policymakers, funders, intermediaries, and governance bodies, to decide whether to invest in helping more leaders swim upstream or in changing the direction of the river.**

I. Introduction: Why Transformational Systems Change?

Public school districts in the United States are under strain. Political conflict is playing out in schools and on [school boards](#), public trust is [fraying](#), and communities are contending with disruptions like [extreme weather](#), [gun violence](#), and [federal immigration interference](#). Districts face [declining enrollment](#), [tightening budgets](#), and the [expiration](#) of pandemic-era emergency funds that had temporarily expanded their capacity. The federal government's [retreat](#) from education leadership is creating [incoherent and disruptive](#) interventions in local affairs. All of these pressures are reshaping how schools operate day to day.

At the same time, school districts are expected to deliver more than ever before. Advances in artificial intelligence are [changing](#) the nature of work and [raising new questions](#) about what skills and knowledge students will need for an ever-shifting future. Social cohesion has [weakened](#), and schools must now prepare students for economic and civic participation in a more [fragmented society](#). As absenteeism [remains elevated](#) in K-12 schools and postsecondary education [feels unaffordable](#) or even [unnecessary](#) for a good life, families and students are questioning the value of traditional educational pathways.

These forces are colliding with a system that was [never designed](#) to produce equitable student learning experiences or educational outcomes at scale. From the outset, schooling was structured in ways that [produced](#) unequal experiences and outcomes across racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups. Subsequent reforms have expanded access to rigorous content and learning opportunities, but these new programs were [layered](#) on without redesigning existing district systems, such as instruction, assessment, staffing, and budgeting.

In the absence of a fundamental redesign, public education continues to [reproduce disparities](#) along race and income lines. These disparities are particularly pronounced for [students with disabilities](#) and [multilingual learners](#) who are served through parallel systems, but with persistently uneven results. And these [gaps keep widening](#), further impeding the success of historically marginalized groups. Even in high-performing states such as Massachusetts, overall success often [masks deep inequities](#) in student opportunities and outcomes. Across geographies, many students [report](#) feeling disengaged from school, disconnected from what they are learning, and unprepared for their future pathways—and feelings of unpreparedness are highest among Black, Latine, multiracial, and non-college-bound students.

The question facing public education is not whether change is needed, but how to change at the speed and depth demanded. Incremental improvements will not be enough, and adaptation at the margins risks continued erosion in student outcomes and public trust. **The alternative is what this study calls transformational systems change: when school districts redefine their purpose and operations through a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.** Some school systems attempting this degree of systemic redesign are yielding not just better test scores but more positive student experiences, stronger engagement from both families and students, more equitable academic outcomes, and stronger pathways into postsecondary education and work.

Defining Transformational Systems Change

Transformational systems change is a process of redesigning how a district’s “systems” work—how resources are allocated, how people work, how decisions are made, and how experiences are designed for students—and aligning those elements into a coherent strategy capable of delivering fundamentally different results. This process does not presume a certain approach or model, like community schools or experiential learning.

For the purposes of this study, CRPE developed the following working definition:

Transformational systems change happens when school districts redefine their purpose and operations through a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.

More than adopting new programs or policies, transformational change requires the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing) and people’s roles in classrooms, schools, and central offices, all aligned to a clear instructional vision. This often involves challenging long-held assumptions (e.g., one teacher per classroom, ability tracking), shifting mindsets (e.g., holding high expectations for every student), redistributing power (e.g., equipping students, families, and educators as decision-makers), and prioritizing equity (e.g., confronting racism and classism in policies and practices).

Transformational change is built to last, persisting through leadership transitions and reflecting a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence.

This definition of transformational systems change is inherently aspirational, but not without precedent. For specific examples of transformational systems change in school districts, see Appendix D.

District leadership is essential.

The American tradition of local control means that school districts are essential leaders of transformational systems change. Within the district, superintendents hold both the responsibility and the authority to align the district as a whole around a vision for the future. Although there has arguably never been a harder time to lead a public school system, this may be the most crucial time for school district leaders to reshape the foundations of public education in their communities. However, district-led transformation remains unevenly documented and is often more rhetorical than concrete. Understanding whether, how, and under what conditions superintendents pursue this kind of change is, therefore, essential for both research and practice.

With support from the Barr Foundation, CRPE set out to understand where and how school districts in New England are pursuing transformational systems change. We wanted to learn:

- **What district-level change efforts are underway in New England, and to what extent are those efforts aimed at transformational systems change?**
- **What shapes leaders’ decisions about which changes to pursue?**

CRPE's research has long focused on the premise that neither individual district leaders, given their “[impossible job](#),” nor individual districts alone can transform public education to deliver equitable outcomes. But given the level of local control embedded in the public school system, both individual leadership and organizational change are essential, even if they are not wholly sufficient. This is particularly true in New England, where most school districts are small, and education governance diverges sharply at the state level. Studying district leaders in this context provides a critical window into how they respond to common and distinct challenges, as well as how national and regional trends, unique state settings, and local issues shape their particular contexts.

In many ways, trends in New England reflect trends nationwide. All six states are experiencing [demographic shifts](#): parts of the region show [growing](#) (and in some cases [fluctuating](#)) immigrant populations and declining white enrollment, increasing [economic inequality](#), and [uneven resource distribution](#). Districts have also faced tensions around education policy, governance, and public trust similar to those seen across the country.

At the same time, unique aspects of the New England context shape how change unfolds. The region has a history of public education [dating back](#) to the nation's founding and strong traditions of local control where districts often maintain significant autonomy.¹ Education in the region is also characterized by a large number of small, town-based districts and, in some areas, [shared superintendents](#) across multiple districts with separate school boards. These structures distribute decision-making authority across multiple entities and make coordinated, systemwide change more complex.

New England is also notable for its dense ecosystem of school improvement efforts (including sustained philanthropic investment in student-centered reform from the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#) and [Barr Foundation](#)), a high concentration of intermediary organizations and technical assistance providers, and strong cross-district networks. The region has also historically played a leadership role in several areas of educational innovation, including portfolio-based assessment ([Vermont](#)), assessment redesign ([New Hampshire](#)), and competency-based education ([Maine](#)), helping to shape national conversations about more personalized, student-centered systems. Combined with the region's relatively [high levels](#) of educational attainment and compact geography, these conditions create the potential for ideas about change to spread quickly and for districts to access external support—though our findings show this potential is unevenly realized. New England offers a case that is both distinct and nationally relevant. It reflects many of the pressures facing districts nationally, while its history and governance structures highlight how local context can shape possibilities for change.

¹ As recent evidence that local control is a deeply held value in the region, Governor Scott's [proposal](#) in Vermont to consolidate 119 school districts into five has been met with fierce resistance and now faces no viable path forward.

II. Methods

This report, marking the halfway point in our study, presents findings from two completed data collection efforts (a regional survey and interviews) that focused on superintendent perspectives.² Focusing on superintendents gave our research team insight into how executive leaders define priorities, interpret challenges, and make decisions about the direction of their districts. As the individuals responsible for setting vision, aligning resources, and navigating complex political and organizational dynamics, superintendents play a central role in shaping whether and how change efforts take hold, and whether districts stay the course amidst competing pressures and shifting demands.

At the same time, this report's exclusive focus on superintendents limits our ability to understand districts as whole organizations. Superintendents occupy a unique, highly external-facing role and often rely on other district or school-level staff to make key decisions and lead implementation of district priorities. The data collection period from August 2025 to January 2026 was marked by significant uncertainty in the education policy environment. Debates over the federal role in education, changes to funding for technical assistance, and major state policy proposals in the region (e.g., district consolidation and funding changes in [Vermont](#) and new graduation requirements in [Massachusetts](#)) may have influenced how superintendents assessed priorities and the feasibility of pursuing change.

A third component of this study is currently underway. We are conducting case studies to investigate districts as organizations and incorporate perspectives from other central office leaders, building leaders, educators, and students. The final report, expected in 2027, will feature findings from these district case studies and build on this superintendent-focused report.

We used a [concurrent mixed-methods approach](#) by designing our regional survey and interviews with superintendents to serve different but complementary purposes. The survey provides a broad picture of how superintendents across New England are thinking about and pursuing change. The interviews offer deeper insight into how leaders interpret, make decisions about, and implement that work in practice.

We collected and analyzed survey and interview data in parallel, and most of the findings in this report draw on both. We initially formulated emerging findings from each method separately, treating them as complementary rather than directly comparable because the survey and interview samples were developed separately and not linked at the district level. Once each method had produced emerging findings, we began to discuss connections across those findings. We found a high degree of commonality, along with some divergence, between survey and interview results, which we discuss below. This concurrent mixed-methods approach allowed us to pair broad patterns with deeper insight into how and why district change efforts take shape.

² In this study, we use the term "superintendent" to refer to the leader of any school district or charter school, although charter school leaders often carry titles such as Executive Director or Chief Executive Officer.

Survey

We administered a short, anonymous survey to superintendents across all six New England states to understand their districts' long-term goals, current change efforts, and views on leadership and systems change.

The survey, administered in October 2025, included 12 questions and was developed in partnership with the University of Massachusetts-Boston's Center for Survey Research, with support from state superintendent associations to ensure broad distribution. Responses were voluntary and anonymous, and data were de-identified prior to analysis.

Rather than selecting a subset of districts, we invited all superintendents in the region to participate. In total, 307 leaders responded (34.8% response rate). The respondents were largely representative of the entire census of districts in terms of distribution by state, district size, and key student demographics. The survey sample had slight differences (less than five percentage points) in terms of urbanicity (higher proportion rural and lower proportion urban) and district type (higher proportion traditional school districts and lower proportion charter schools). On the whole, the survey provides a broad view of how district leaders across the region are thinking about change. We focused the survey analysis on region-wide trends, but also analyzed the results by key subgroups and district characteristics (e.g., district type, low-income rates, proficiency rates), reporting only when differences were consistently statistically significant. As this report is regionally focused, this report intentionally does not compare survey results by state.

Additional details on survey design and sampling can be found in Appendix A. Respondent characteristics and question-level results are available in Appendix B.

Artifact Elicitation Interviews

To better understand how leaders define and pursue change, we conducted 47 in-depth interviews with superintendents between August 2025 and January 2026 using an artifact elicitation approach. We identified districts for interviews through desk research, professional networks, and referrals, followed by a review of publicly available documents to identify districts engaged in potentially ambitious change efforts. This purposive approach meant that we deliberately prioritized districts with evidence of plans that seemed potentially transformational. Additionally, we prioritized districts with higher proportions of historically marginalized students.

In the interviews, we directly referenced district-created materials such as strategic plans and vision documents. We used these as anchors for discussion, allowing leaders to speak concretely about their goals, decisions, and implementation strategies. We asked leaders to reflect on how their visions were developed, how they are translating those visions into practice, and what factors are supporting or constraining their efforts. We analyzed interview transcripts thematically to identify patterns across districts. Additional details on interview sampling, document review, and analysis are available in Appendix C.

III. Are Districts Trying to Transform?

Our first two findings draw heavily on interview data and regional survey results about superintendents' goals for their districts, the changes they believe are needed, and what changes they are actively pursuing.

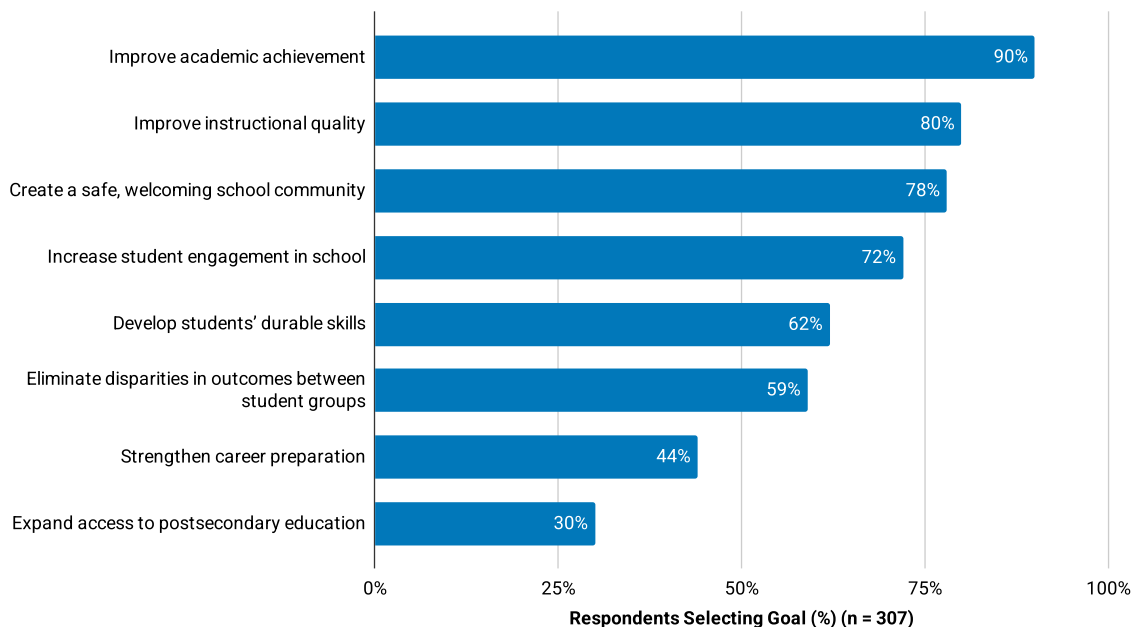
Finding 1: New England superintendents believe their districts need to change to achieve long-term goals, but there is no consensus on how much change is needed or for what purpose.

Nearly all superintendents who responded to the survey targeted well-established education priorities, but they did not universally prioritize goals that expand the purpose of schooling.

In the survey, district leaders reported pursuing about five goals on average per district. As seen in Figure 1, the most commonly selected goals were improving academic achievement, improving instructional quality, creating a safe and welcoming school community, and increasing student engagement.

Figure 1: Distribution of Leaders' Selection of Long-Term Goals

What are your district's long-term goals?



While leaders still widely prioritized district goals like developing students' durable skills and eliminating disparities in outcomes between groups, these goals were less universal. This suggests less consensus on whether districts should expand their

purpose beyond core academic outcomes to include [broader skill development](#) and equitable access to success.³

Minorities of leaders reported improving students' postsecondary opportunities (strengthening career preparation and expanding higher education access) as long-term goals.⁴ The infrequency is notable given that postsecondary access is a policy focus in several states (e.g., [early college](#) in Massachusetts and [community college access](#) in Maine).

While the survey did not ask leaders to explain their selections, the contrast between the more-frequent prioritization of traditional goals and the less-frequent prioritization of expanded outcomes suggests that leaders do not share a common mandate to broaden the purpose of schooling.

Our interviews shed light on some of the less-commonly selected goals in the survey. Because a key element of this study's definition of transformational systems change is that districts are "redefining their purpose," we deliberately selected superintendents to interview based on public evidence of redefined purpose (e.g., a Portrait of a Graduate or visionary strategic plan). We did not link the survey and interview responses, but the interviews allowed us to dig deeper with some leaders whose districts are prioritizing expanded outcomes for schooling (which the survey suggested is not universal).

In interviews, these leaders strongly signaled their belief that school districts must not only improve in their core business of educating students to have strong academic foundations but also develop new capacities to provide students with other equally important skills, mindsets, and assets.

The leaders we interviewed emphasized the importance of durable skills, especially given that individual students' career and life pathways will inevitably change over time. One leader stated that beyond teaching core content, school systems must teach "the skills and dispositions that it actually takes to ... sustain a future in this world," particularly a world that is dynamic and changing. Another superintendent, whose district is working to link learning to future career pathways for all students, described the goal of durable skills as helping students "be adaptive, mobile, and nimble enough to respond to the changing workforce," while ensuring they graduate "productive, gainfully employed, and able to enjoy the pleasures of life."

Part and parcel with durable skills was the intention to set every student up for lives full of choice—where to live, how to earn money, and what to pursue after high school—rather than funneling them toward a presumed destination such as a four-year college, a vocational training program, or a low-wage job. As one superintendent said, "All of the tracking that we do ... gets in the way [of our goals as a district] because we really

3 There were some minor patterns in how leaders' selection of district goals related to district demographics and context. For instance, leaders who selected "improve academic achievement" were slightly more likely to lead districts with lower proficiency rates on state tests than leaders who didn't select this goal. In contrast, leaders who selected "develop students' durable skills" were more likely to lead districts with higher test scores. Leaders who selected "create a safe, welcoming school community" were slightly more likely to lead more affluent, white, and suburban districts. Leaders who selected "expand access to postsecondary education" and "eliminate disparities in outcomes between student groups" were more likely to lead districts with lower proportions of white students and higher proportions of low-income students and those classified as English learners.

4 In our sample, around one fifth of districts did not include a high school. Among the group of responding districts with at least one high school, 50% selected "strengthen career preparation" and 35% selected "expand access to postsecondary education."

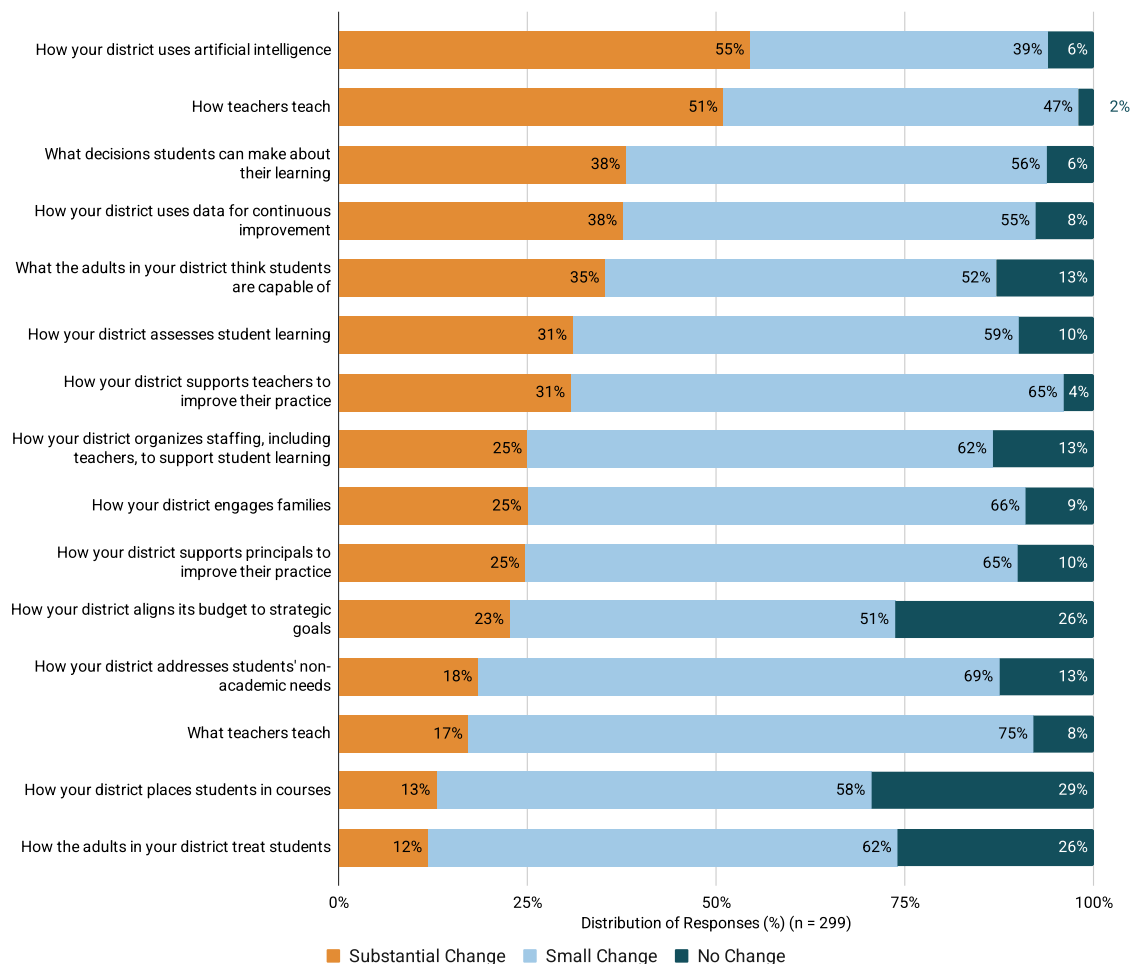
are telling some kids, we don't think that you're capable." Another said that racial disparities in academic outcomes and discipline are "just morally ... wrong." Leaders were clear that some of the major sources of these equity problems were internal to their districts. They will require intensive work to ensure high expectations where "the bar is the bar," as one leader said, no matter a student's circumstances. When the sources of equity problems were external, such as neighborhood violence, childhood trauma, and poverty, some leaders argued it's the district's responsibility to "[use] our fiscal resources" to support student well-being and mitigate those conditions.

On surveys, most leaders indicate that at least one "substantial" change is needed to achieve district goals, but most changes they call for are "small."

Survey results showed clearly that district leaders believe change is needed in their districts. For each of the 15 "domains" of district work included in the survey, the vast majority (over 70%) of leaders indicated that either small or substantial change is required to achieve their district's long-term goals (see Figure 2). Because transformational systems change involves fundamental redesign of core district systems, we were most interested in domains that leaders believe need substantial change.

Figure 2. Distribution of Level of Change Required, by Domain

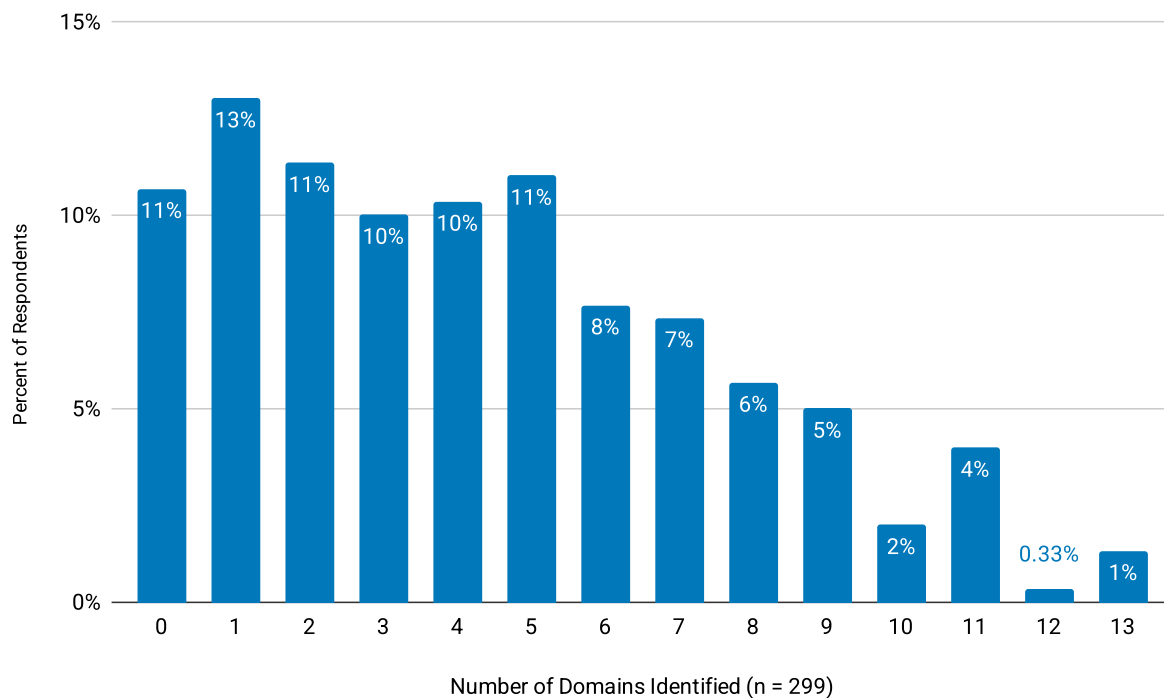
In order to achieve your district's long-term goals, how much change is needed in the following areas?



Overall, leaders reported the need for many small changes and fewer substantial ones. The only domains of district work that over half of leaders identified as requiring substantial change were “how your district uses artificial intelligence” and “how teachers teach.” In the remaining domains, the majority of leaders reported the need for small changes. In the domains related to budget process, course placement, and how adults treat students, over a quarter of leaders saw no need for change, and only 23%, 13%, and 12%, respectively, saw the need for substantial changes in those domains.

Most district leaders recognized the need for at least some substantial change: 89% of leaders reported that at least one domain required substantial change. District leaders reported, on average, that about four domains required substantial change (see Figure 3). On the other hand, 11% of leaders reported that no substantial changes were needed in any of the domains. No one reported the need for substantial changes in all 15 domains of change.

Figure 3. Distribution of the Number of Domains Identified as Needing Substantial Change



These patterns suggest that few superintendents envisioned their districts requiring the full scope of “transformational systems change” as this study defines it (in Appendix A, we discuss how we developed each of these domains in relation to our definition of transformational systems change). Of course, in some cases, leaders may feel their districts have already made certain necessary changes, therefore requiring only “small changes” or no change to achieve district goals. But even when taking this into account, it is unlikely any district has already made substantial changes in all of these domains. For instance, only 12% of leaders we surveyed reported the need for “substantial change” in how adults treat students. However, there is abundant [evidence](#) that engagement in school [waned as students age](#), and that adult behavior

and treatment of students is [key](#) to effectively [motivating and engaging](#) young people. Schools that manage to maintain high student engagement, in part through [intentional designs](#) that shift how adults treat and relate to students, remain outliers.

Additionally, district leaders' responses showed a tendency to indicate the need for change in specific components of districts, rather than across multiple related components, which transformational systems change requires. While many leaders saw substantial change needed in how teachers teach, for example, far fewer identified similar needs in curriculum ("what teachers teach") or assessment. These elements all make up the "instructional core," or the [set of relationships](#) between teacher, student, and instructional materials. Survey results suggest leaders more often diagnose problems within parts of that instructional core, but less often across it.

In contrast, a small subset of leaders diagnosed the need for substantial changes across a broad set of domains, including some of those least often identified, such as "how the adults in your district treat students." Fifty-five districts (18% of the sample) identified the need for substantial changes in more than half of the 15 domains. In these cases, leaders' responses recognize a degree and scope of change needed that align more closely with the study's definition of transformational change.

Leaders in different types of districts varied somewhat in the domains they identified as needing substantial change. Especially in districts with lower student proficiency rates and in those serving higher proportions of low-income students, superintendents were more likely to identify substantial changes needed in how teachers teach, what adults think students are capable of, and how districts engage families. For instance, districts in the lowest quartile of proficiency rates were more than twice as likely as those in the highest quartile to identify substantial change needed in how teachers teach (75% versus 36%) and nearly three times as likely to identify substantial change needed in what adults think students are capable of (55% versus 20%). There are similar trends when examining results by proportion of low-income students. Superintendents serving districts in the lowest income quartile were far more likely to identify substantial change needed in how teachers teach (55% versus 36%) and almost twice as likely to identify substantial change needed in what adults think students are capable of (39% versus 21%).

These patterns suggest that lower-performing districts and those with a higher concentration of low-income students are more likely to see instructional practice and adult mindsets about students as central levers for improving outcomes. However, for many other domains, there were no significant differences by proficiency level, including what decisions students can make about their learning (which 38% leaders identified as needing substantial change) and how districts place students in courses (which 13% leaders identified as needing substantial change).

Apart from student proficiency rates and socioeconomic status, charter status was the only other district characteristic associated with significant differences in superintendent responses across domains. Charter school leaders were less likely than traditional public district leaders to identify substantial change as needed across many domains, often reporting higher rates of "no change needed." There were few statistically significant differences in superintendent responses by district racial composition or urbanicity, and none were consistent across change domains. There are several possible explanations for these differences for charter school leaders (e.g., they have already addressed certain challenges in the design of the school, or they

view their existing approach as sufficiently effective, etc.), but the data offer no clear explanation for these differences.

We also found little clear relationship between the number of district long-term goals that leaders reported and the number of changes that they believed were needed. Both leaders who indicated that none of the domains in the survey require substantial change and leaders who said that eight to 13 domains need substantial change reported a similar number of long-term goals. When we investigated whether selecting each specific goal was associated with more substantial changes needed, we found no statistically significant relationships. In fact, leaders reporting that their districts aimed to develop students' durable skills (62%, as noted above) reported that, on average, slightly fewer substantial changes were needed to achieve the district's goals.

Lastly, superintendents' self-reported motivation was also a poor predictor of how much change leaders believe their districts need. In response to the statement "I feel personally motivated to lead transformational change in my district," superintendents almost unanimously expressed feeling motivated: 64% responded "definitely true" and another 34% "mostly true." (We deliberately did not define "transformational change" so superintendents could consider their own perspectives on the meaning of the term.) But leaders' reported motivation to lead change had little relationship to the degree of substantial change they said their districts need.⁵ In some cases, leaders may feel their districts have already made certain necessary changes and therefore require only "small changes" or no changes to achieve district goals.

However, the fact that leaders so consistently reported motivation to lead "transformational change" stands out against the variation in what they said their districts are working towards, as well as what they believed their districts must change. This suggests that superintendents likely responded to our survey questions asking about "transformational change" with very different interpretations of what that term means. Leaders do not appear to share a common understanding of transformational change, either in what it aims to accomplish or in what changes it requires districts to pursue.

Interviewed leaders' responses also varied in the degree to which they're seeking fundamental changes.

Because of the way we developed our sample of leaders to interview, we expected that leaders would communicate the need for fundamental changes across many areas of district work.

In many cases, leaders did describe the need for fundamental redesign of core structures and practices that are often taken for granted, such as tracking, age-based grading, and subject-based course organization. They pointed to the need for more systemic changes that would expand the range of options for how students learn and progress, rather than simply improve existing approaches.

In other cases, however, leaders disagreed that achieving their district's vision required this level of change. Instead, they suggested that desired outcomes could be achieved by strengthening current practices. One superintendent emphasized aligning goals to

⁵ In the survey, we also asked about leaders' confidence in their ability to lead transformational change. Similar to the question about their motivation to lead transformational change, there was no significant relationship between their confidence to lead change and the degree of change leaders believe their districts need.

“things that we already do” and focusing on more consistent implementation of existing curriculum rather than pursuing “big changes.” In this view, the changes needed were primarily about improving coherence and stability, not redesigning the system.

To maintain superintendents’ confidentiality, our study design did not link survey responses to interviewed leaders, so we did not test whether interviewees’ survey responses showed diverging patterns. But across the survey and interview results, superintendents conveyed very different views on how much and to what end their districts need to change.

The takeaway: The necessity for transformational systems change is contested.

Across the survey and interview results, we found that while most superintendents agree on a few common goals and areas for substantial change in districts, they do not share a common understanding of either the purpose or scope of that change. These differences point to two distinct interpretations of transformation: one focused on strengthening existing systems, and another focused on redesigning them. When transformation is understood as improving existing systems, leaders focus on reinforcing current practices. When it is understood as redesign, leaders are more likely to question underlying structures and pursue more fundamental change. In the next section, we explore how these distinct interpretations appear in practice by examining how superintendents describe the work their districts are undertaking.

Finding 2: In practice, most superintendents focus on changes that strengthen the established purpose of school and stabilize or improve current systems. In cases where superintendents are trying to shift the purpose of schooling and redesign district systems, their efforts are often limited or in the early stages.

Much of leaders’ current capacity is focused on strengthening districts’ existing core systems, particularly instruction.

Both survey and interview data strongly suggest that most change efforts underway in New England are focused on strengthening districts’ core systems (particularly the instructional core) as they currently operate. In the interviews, leaders frequently described foundational efforts to improve curriculum, strengthen implementation of instructional practices, and develop teachers’ capacities to address highly varied learning needs in classrooms. Leaders pointed to curriculum review cycles to ensure materials are “high quality and culturally responsive,” as well as investments in data systems and instructional shifts, such as the science of reading, to improve consistency across classrooms. These improvements are often systemic (working across multiple district systems, not simply adding a program). But they also preserve, rather than remake, the underlying structures, assumptions, or purposes of schooling.

In the survey’s one open-response question where leaders described their districts’ “most ambitious change effort this year” (referring to school year 2025-26), the predominant theme was working to improve instruction (see bolded themes in Table 1). Dozens of superintendents described curriculum changes, shifts to teacher practice, support for teachers’ professional learning, and data-driven instruction. This

underscores the near-universal agreement elsewhere in the survey that change is necessary in how teachers teach and how districts use data for improvement. One leader wrote that the district’s most ambitious current change effort is “Increasing the rigor of our Tier I instruction and strengthening MTSS systems in each of our schools. We are developing a culture of using data to inform us, but there is still some work to do to make this a stronger practice.” Another wrote, “Intensive intervention for early literacy.”

Table 1. Coded Themes From Leaders’ Change Effort Responses

What is your district’s most ambitious change effort right now?

Theme	Count
Curriculum Revamping and Alignment	58
Pedagogical Shifts	48
Other/Unspecified	40
Teacher Professional Development and Evaluation	40
Assessment and Data-Driven Instruction	39
Resource Management and Operations	36
Differentiation and Responsive Intervention	30
Strengthening Tier 1 Instruction	27
School Culture and Climate	25
Technology Integration	23
Community and Stakeholder Engagement	22
Student Engagement and Voice	20
Leader Professional Development and Evaluation	10
Postsecondary Opportunities	9
Mental Health and Well-Being	5

Responses could be coded with more than one theme. Themes related to the instructional core are bolded for emphasis. (n=290)

Interviews helped illustrate what these ambitious district efforts can achieve and where they are limited in practice. For example, one leader described tools that allow teachers to tailor instruction in real time, giving them better information to act quickly. While this represents a meaningful shift in classroom practice, it leaves core structures such as pacing, grading, and assessment largely unchanged. Others pointed to intensive work on literacy redesign, MTSS implementation, curriculum alignment, or professional learning. These efforts can drive important improvements, but they typically strengthen existing systems rather than fundamentally redesign how learning is organized or how students progress.

Common efforts to improve instruction are not consistently interconnected with other related changes.

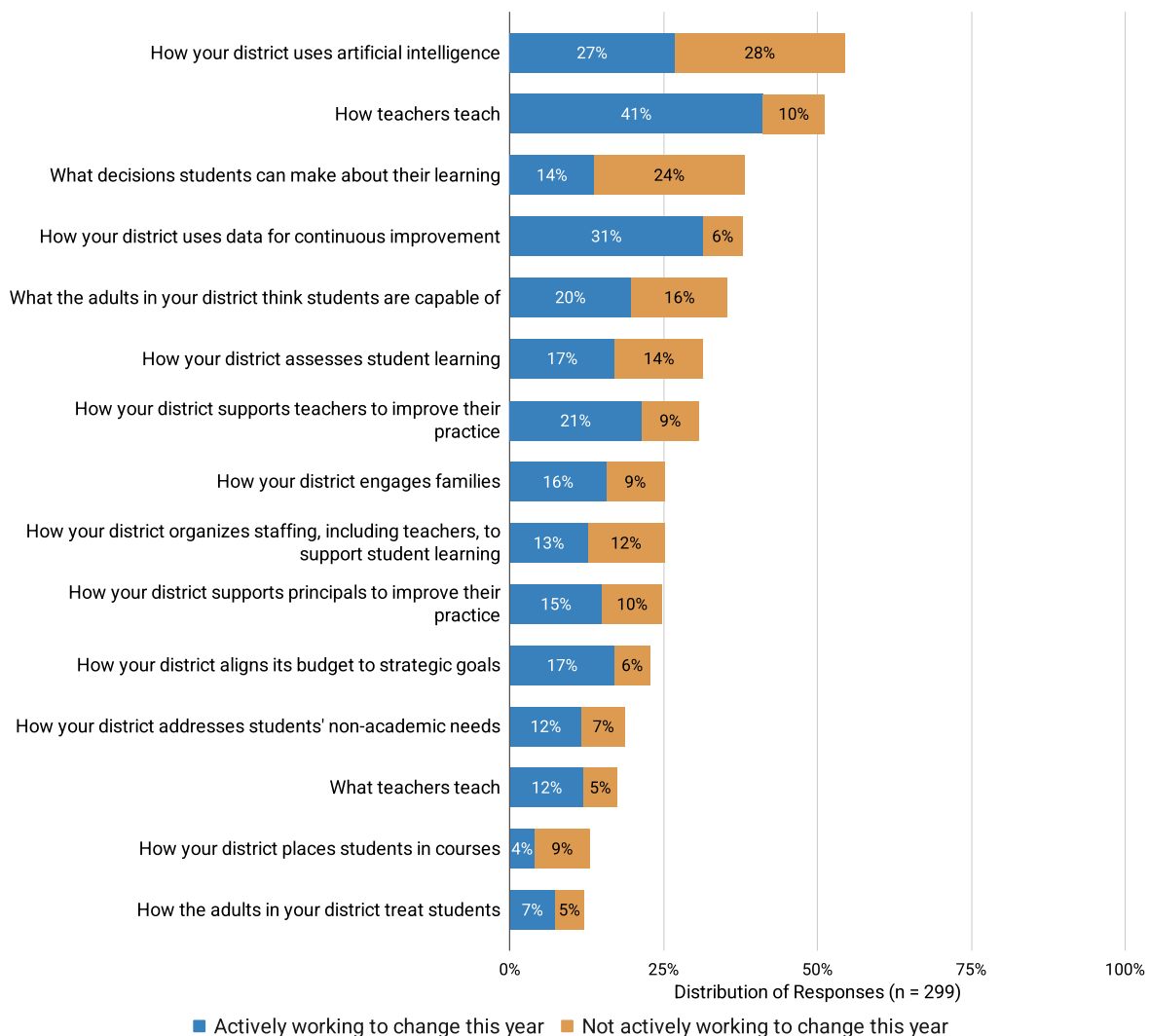
In interviews, leaders frequently described pursuing changes in both teacher practice and adult mindsets, especially regarding what adults believe students are capable of and challenging deficit narratives. They emphasized how much adult beliefs matter for

student experiences and outcomes. But they were less likely to describe pairing shifts in practice and mindset with structural changes like detracking classes or competency-based learning. In other words, most efforts focused on adult beliefs and classroom practice, rather than on reshaping how the system operates.

Survey results underscored that a focus on structural change is rare: only small minorities of superintendents reported working on substantial changes to district structures like course placement (4%), staffing (13%), student decision-making (14%), or assessment (17%). The survey also suggested that efforts to shift adult mindsets may be less universal than we heard in interviews: 20% of districts reported working to make substantial changes to what adults think students are capable of, and only 7% reported efforts to substantially change how adults treat students (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Distribution of Active Work Reported on Domains that Superintendents Rated as Needing Substantial Change

Which of the areas you rated as "substantial changes required" are you actively working to change this school year?



In this question, not every survey respondent saw every response option. Respondents were only shown the response options they previously selected as needing substantial change.

This suggests that efforts to change instruction tend to focus on classroom practice, not district-wide structures. Efforts to change classroom practice also appeared to focus primarily on instruction and data use, with less explicit attention to the learning tasks students are asked to complete or to the adult mindsets and behaviors that shape student experiences and opportunities.

Interestingly, we found strong survey evidence that when leaders do report taking on less-commonly-pursued changes, they also generally report taking on more changes overall. Districts working on less common domains (such as staffing redesign or principal development) were working on more than four additional domains, while districts working on more common domains (like how teachers teach and how districts use AI) reported working on 2.5 additional domains or fewer. This suggests that while many complex and system-level challenges remain unaddressed in the majority of districts, more complex areas of change are often pursued alongside additional efforts addressing instructional practice, teacher and principal development, assessment, staffing, and data use. About 50% of districts are simultaneously tackling at least a few (three or more) substantial change efforts, and 10% are tackling six or more substantial change efforts—which means that simultaneously attempting multiple change efforts is possible.

A small number of leaders described multi-pronged efforts to redesign districts' core ways of working.

In interviews, a subset of leaders described how they are pursuing active change efforts that introduce substantial changes across multiple aspects of district systems, aiming to shift practice, mindset, and structures to achieve a broader vision.

For instance, one superintendent described a district-wide high school redesign using a wall-to-wall academy model that replaces siloed roles and classrooms with integrated academics, applied learning, and career pathways. In this model, “every teacher has to think of themselves as being a part of the student’s journey,” rather than as solely responsible for a single subject. Teachers are expected to connect academic content to real-world pathways, with professional learning designed to immerse them in industry settings and support this shift in practice.

Another leader described a years-long process to restructure academic access, dismantle tracking systems, and redesign the daily schedule to ensure high-level learning for everyone. High school students now almost universally take college-credit-bearing courses, and a daily “flex block” across all schools enables students to receive targeted interventions and specialized services without missing core instruction. The superintendent credited the district’s success in part to an overhaul in teacher recruitment, intake, and professional learning. Teachers have daily time for collaboration in teams, along with job-embedded coaching informed by feedback from “instructional rounds” that routinely include students.

These districts’ efforts align with key aspects of the study’s definition of transformational systems change. Importantly, leaders in these districts described changes that they see altering students’ daily experiences and opportunities, such as more personalized pathways and supports, direct confrontation of equity barriers, greater opportunities for real-world and career-connected learning, and structures that give students more agency over how they learn and demonstrate mastery. Changes to core district systems, not peripheral or add-on programs, enable these experiences, as well as changes to the purpose and nature of instruction, not just its quality.

Notably, these examples highlight how a handful of leaders are working to change some of the complex, foundational issues that relatively few surveyed leaders identified as needing substantial change. These leaders are seeing problems and developing solutions where others are not, reinforcing our conclusion that leaders across New England do not share a common understanding of transformational change (see Finding 1).

However, many active efforts are early-stage and focused within bounded areas.

Districts pursuing transformational change were often in the early stages of their journeys. They were working on change in pockets, but were not yet pursuing coordinated and coherent change across the district.

Especially in districts with newer superintendents, vision outpaced concrete implementation. In one district, the new, internally promoted superintendent described a vision to redefine student success through a framework that would act as a new organizing structure for student-level data, intervention support, instructional planning, and student learning pathways. However, district leaders were still socializing the framework and building educator understanding ahead of implementation, suggesting that the district remained in an early stage of translating ambitious goals into concrete changes in practice.

Some districts report impressive progress toward deep changes in a specific area, but not yet in others. One superintendent described entering the third year of an intentional redesign effort focused on creating purposeful, relevant, and culturally responsive learning experiences district-wide. With support from a strong instructional leadership team and embedded instructional coaches, the district has aligned around an instructional vision and focused most professional development on improving instructional planning so that students engage more reliably in the cognitive effort that teachers intend. The work is progressing with strong positive feedback from students. Still, it is highly focused on what happens inside each classroom and not on how assessment, staffing, and course access are structured district-wide to support the instructional changes.

Longer-term efforts are rarely linear, often requiring course corrections and restarts.

We interviewed several district leaders whose districts had longer histories of transformational change efforts, but needed to shift course and were still rebuilding momentum. For instance, one new superintendent described a district history of innovation in the early- and mid-2010s that was derailed by a “perfect storm” of successive challenges: a leadership turnover, state policy shifts, and then the pandemic. Now, while also working to rebuild instructional rigor and staff culture after the pandemic, the leader is relaunching an effort to develop a “blueprint” for district transformation and generate buy-in for a common vision.

In another district, an ambitious effort to design a fully proficiency-based system in the 2010s underwent significant revision following leadership turnover in the central office. New leaders raised concerns that some students were graduating without strong foundational academic skills, prompting a period of reflection and course correction. As a result, much of the district’s work in the past five years has focused on improving instructional quality and coherence. District and school leaders are still working to clarify and evolve the district’s proficiency-based system a decade after it was first introduced.

Our survey and interview findings suggest that transformational systems change, as this study defines it, is possible but rare. While many leaders report their districts are actively making substantial changes, most of those changes are focused on strengthening districts as they are and improving instructional practice, not redesigning how districts operate to produce fundamentally different outcomes for students.

IV. What Shapes District Leaders' Change Efforts

In our interviews, we found that superintendents' judgments about which changes to pursue are shaped both by what they believe is needed to improve student outcomes and by what they view as feasible within their local contexts.

While some leaders argued that strengthening existing systems represented the most effective path forward to achieve their long-term goals, others expressed interest in more fundamental redesign. Exposure to what is possible in public education (Finding 3), beliefs about how change should be sequenced (Finding 4), and interpretations of what powerful stakeholders will tolerate (Finding 5) all influenced leaders' judgments. These factors influence not only how leaders assess potential solutions but also which responses they view as realistic or actionable given the challenges they face. Together, they create a strong pull toward stabilizing and strengthening district systems, rather than redesigning them.

Finding 3: Superintendents highly value relationships and partnerships to access new ideas and expand their views on what is possible, but did not describe frequent, systematized exposure to alternative models.

Across interviews, superintendents consistently emphasized the importance of relationships. They leaned on peer networks, higher education partners, nonprofit intermediaries, and national organizations to bring in new ideas. Many leaders also demonstrated genuine curiosity about what other districts are doing. However, this exposure is rarely structured or systematized.

Exposure to alternative models is largely leader-driven rather than institutionalized.

In many cases, awareness of alternative models traced back to formative experiences in an individual superintendent's own career rather than to an intentional district strategy for exploration. For example, one leader described how a fellowship reshaped their entire orientation to change: "I feel like [the fellowship] reshaped how I thought about schools and how I thought about school change ... It's changed the shape of [my district] because I've been able to do things and think in a way that can, I think, move people, get people to move."

When superintendents look beyond their districts, they most often do so through trusted networks and partnerships. Leaders referenced national and regional nonprofits and funder-backed networks as important sources of ideas and support that enable them to "get out and see other spaces." Others described partnering with external technical assistance providers, engaging in strategic planning consultancies, and adopting widely recognized instructional and equity-focused frameworks developed by national thought leaders.

Professional associations also functioned as sustaining supports. One superintendent reflected that partnerships with state and national associations are "critical for me... keeping my energy up, but also my focus where it needs to be." Our survey results underscored this perspective: superintendents reported nearly universally that peer connections, state professional associations, and external partnerships help their districts achieve long-term goals (see Appendix B).

These experiences and networks provide access to ideas, but they are often relational, informal, and leader-driven rather than embedded in district routines. Innovation often entered a district because an individual leader encountered a compelling idea elsewhere and worked to translate it locally, not because institutional processes for fostering exploration exist. Few district leaders described formal, routine processes for systematically scanning the field, analyzing alternative models, or embedding innovation exploration into organizational structures. Research on education innovation networks suggests that many primarily circulate existing practices rather than generate fundamentally new possibilities.

Several leaders explicitly named the risk of insularity, particularly in smaller New England districts. One superintendent described the need to “get outside the bubble” of their state, ensuring that students and educators experience what is happening “in the greater world.” Another noted that in education, “We get stuck in our world in our classroom and we forget there are so many resources and good stuff.”

Another leader contrasted superintendents whose experiences included state-level policy work, national networks, or roles outside traditional district settings with those whose professional experiences had been concentrated within a single local context. The leader, who said they were hired because the district was looking for someone who would “push the envelope a bit more outside of the traditional ways of thinking,” credited that diverse experience with expanding their toolkit for solving complex problems. They suggested that leaders without such exposure can become “insular.”

Overall, leaders’ understanding of what is possible is shaped more by personal experiences and relationships than by systematic, organizational exposure to alternative models. In a small number of cases, however, leaders described more intentional and collective forms of exposure that expanded their sense of what is possible.

Direct exposure to fundamentally different models in action expands imagination.

A smaller set of examples points to what it takes to meaningfully expand leaders’ sense of what is possible. Several superintendents emphasized that exposure must be tangible. It is not enough to read about innovation—leaders need to see it in action. One superintendent described bringing building leaders to visit a district in the Mountain West region. “It was transformational for them to see the work in action.” Another reflected, “You can’t really support or envision something that you just don’t really...see or can’t understand.”

In another district, a superintendent ensured that exposure extended beyond educators to political stakeholders. The superintendent brought the mayor, town council members, school board members, and skeptical teachers to visit a well-established out-of-region high school model built around career-connected learning. The result, according to the leader, was dramatic: “They came back changed, absolutely changed... They helped to spread the word... We took a few naysayers... They came back changed.”

Another leader described cultivating sustained partnerships with higher education institutions and prioritizing out-of-region site visits for educators and students. These experiences were designed to help participants “understand what’s going on in the greater world” and expand their sense of what is possible.

In these cases, leaders made it clear that direct exposure to novel ideas is most powerful when it is shared and concrete. But overall, our interviews suggested that

such approaches remain the exception rather than the rule, and even in instances of intentional, shared exposure, translating those insights into system-wide redesign remains difficult.

Even where awareness of alternative models exists, uptake is often incremental.

When district leaders look outward, they often translate what they see into discrete, recognizable components, such as instructional frameworks, pathway programs, schedule changes, or external review processes, rather than adopting more holistic redesigns. These approaches are more feasible within current systems and incentives, as they can be piloted, implemented, and layered onto existing structures without requiring wholesale transformation.

One leader articulated this tension directly, reflecting on the difference between technical and adaptive change: “We do a lot of technical stuff... I’ll buy a new curriculum... but we don’t address the adaptive... it doesn’t lead to systems or scale.” In their view, sustainability hinges less on adopting the next promising program and more on whether “people believe in continuous improvement.”

This pattern suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to drive transformational change. Leaders often described adopting discrete components of promising models while leaving surrounding structures largely intact. For example, a district might introduce a new instructional framework, career-connected learning initiative, or schedule change without simultaneously redesigning related systems such as staffing, assessment, student supports, or how students progress through learning. These adaptations may be both practical and valuable, but they tend to preserve the broader architecture of the existing system.

Internal mental models further limit what feels possible.

In several interviews, leaders reflected on how educators and staff sometimes limit their own imagination about what school could be. As one superintendent said, “People can be really self-limiting... we build the barriers, and then we’re like, oh, but there’s a barrier over there. I’m like, no, we put that there.” Another leader described how educators often hesitate even when no formal constraint exists, asking, “Do I have permission to do this?” and explaining that “they’re afraid.”

These examples point to a broader dynamic: if teachers can internalize limits that are not formally imposed, then system leaders may do the same. District leaders are often aware that some alternative models exist, from microschools to competency-based systems to AI-enabled redesigns. Yet many describe constraints that make certain options feel unrealistic or misaligned with their local context—they may view them as not possible within their mental models of what is allowed or feasible.

These constraints are not always structural. They are frequently cognitive and cultural, rooted in assumptions about what “a real district” looks like or what state policy will allow. Superintendents acknowledged that these constraints can narrow their exploration of changes to when, where, and how students learn. This could mean assuming certain reforms will be unacceptable to communities based on prior pushback or viewing opportunities such as expanding access to dual enrollment or paid internship opportunities as logistically or politically out of reach. Leaders also described weighing how post-secondary institutions, families, and other stakeholders might view departures from traditional measures and structures of schooling, which

could make more ambitious redesign efforts feel risky. Over time, these internal mental models define the boundaries of what feels possible. These mental models are shaped not only by leaders' own experiences but also by their perceptions of what their communities and stakeholders will tolerate, an issue we explore further in Finding 5.

Finding 4: Even superintendents who aspire toward transformational change are prioritizing work to stabilize district operations and improve instructional basics, which consumes their capacity.

Every interviewed superintendent was concerned about ensuring that districts were operating well and that instruction was high-quality and consistent. Yet, across interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: maintaining basic stability and instructional quality is absorbing leaders' time and attention, leaving limited capacity to pursue more ambitious, system-level change, even for leaders who express a desire for transformation.

Superintendents prioritize addressing threats to basic district functioning.

Across interviews, superintendents said much of their time and attention is consumed by the immediate work of keeping their districts functioning. Leaders described navigating constant political and operational pressures, from polarized community conflict to shifting policy signals and urgent safety concerns. Additionally, financial pressures stemming from declining enrollment, rising costs, and uncertain funding streams required their sustained focus on budgets. These pressures create ongoing uncertainty, limiting leaders' ability to plan for the long term. Survey results reinforce this picture: a large majority of leaders reported that state funding formulas, federal and state guidance, regulatory requirements, and political conditions hinder their ability to achieve their districts' long-term goals (see Appendix B).

In some districts, these external pressures are compounded by internal ones. Leaders described operational dysfunction that required urgent repair, such as payroll system breakdowns or inconsistent operational procedures that undermined trust and forced attention onto "base-level" fixes. In districts that have experienced massive administrator and teacher turnover, leaders said they've had to hit pause on much of the progress toward strategic goals. One leader said, "We're two and a half years into having the same administrative team in that school, and you can begin to see that trust return and be able to have some sustained professional development." Several leaders also spoke about how superintendent transitions had derailed strategic district work, which they were now trying to get back on track.

As one leader said, "[Students today] are coming into a system that's kind of a little broken, a little faltering, and so we all owe it to ourselves and to our students to kind of get back on track." Leaders consistently echoed this tension, expressing commitment to the work's importance while also describing stress, burnout, and the toll the role takes on their health and family life.

Leaders also prioritize improving weak instructional basics.

As Finding 2 described, most of the change efforts superintendents described focused on strengthening the instructional core. In interviews, superintendents framed these changes as addressing long-standing inequities, emphasizing that all students should have access to grade-level material, particularly where curriculum has previously varied by classroom. Many leaders described classrooms where expectations, content, and pedagogy felt unclear or uneven, particularly in foundational areas like literacy and math. These issues have existed for many years, but leaders described how the pandemic exacerbated them. One superintendent shared, “After the pandemic, I don’t know what happened to instruction. I would go into classrooms, [and] I’m like, “Can someone please tell me what we’re doing for literacy? I can’t tell.”

In some districts, these efforts were also driven by external mandates. Leaders referenced efforts to fulfill state requirements to adopt high-quality curricular materials or provide special education services in early learning.

Some leaders implied that strengthening instructional practice is a prerequisite for more ambitious change. “[Reading] is the cornerstone for me, at least in my philosophy for kids accessing so many other things,” said one leader. Leaders are looking at data on declining achievement and low engagement for subgroups of students and reaching for solutions that are more familiar than innovative, in part because superintendents see them as necessary precursors. “You’d think [in] 2025, we’d already be at standards-based instruction, but we’re really not.”

Some leaders are torn between stability and adaptation.

Leaders were divided and, in some cases, unsure about how to reconcile their district’s long-term strategic visions with the current conditions they face.

Some leaders questioned whether genuine transformation actually has to be built on a solid foundation. One leader recalled that Covid-19 had been a “window of opportunity for innovation and people’s toleration for it,” which opened briefly and has been closing since. Another leader said “adaptability is critical” for districts in light of a fast-changing society, and “being a good leader is taking a disadvantage and turning it into an advantage.” In some cases, adaptability and innovation can grow from conditions that appear unstable.

As for the need to improve instructional basics, no one questioned whether math and literacy were important, but leaders sometimes found themselves “wrestling” with a tension between solving existing core instruction problems and designing future instructional systems. One superintendent said that if students aren’t achieving proficiency over time, that means the district “dropped the ball along the way” and needs to “focus on reading, math, and thinking” to ensure strong academic foundations for every student. At the same time, the leader questioned whether that academic foundation will be enough: “What does that look like...in 2050?”

Another superintendent in a high-needs district with elevated absenteeism described the tension directly: building students’ foundational skills requires so much focus that teachers struggle to see how they’d integrate the richer learning experiences the district envisions, such as students developing products or programs that address real problems in their community. But the superintendent also sees the payoff in

making that shift: "By the same token, if you integrate those other components, the engagement increases," which the district feels would help reduce absenteeism.

These examples highlight a core tension: the same conditions that create urgency for transformation can also reinforce the need to stabilize existing systems. But pursuing a stable foundation at all costs can also thwart transformation by protecting existing systems and ways of working, running the risk of further solidifying a dysfunctional status quo.

Still, leaders are prioritizing stability first.

Some leaders shared that disruptive events and constant cycles of change can derail strategic long-term work. One leader said Covid-19 had derailed the district's instructional vision completely by forcing all its attention on solving chronic absenteeism. Another said, "I preach stability as a goal" to counteract the constant reform cycle in education. "Adults start to appreciate that you're not changing it on me all the time," the leader said, pointing out that people need a lot of time to get good at a given strategy. This emphasis on stability was reinforced by broader accountability and political incentives that prioritize risk management and short-term performance, as other research has similarly [shown](#).

Leaders' comments underscored the belief that basic operational functioning must be in place before deeper instructional change can take hold. The leader whose district payroll system collapsed said, "When people are starved or have challenges that they have to face at the [basic] level, they don't get to ... think about, 'What are our partnerships with postsecondary [institutions]?' " Another leader argued staff support and retention are essential prerequisites for systemic improvement, saying, "You can't be a high-performing school if you don't have high-quality teachers." Leaders also emphasized that psychological safety is a critical condition for change because it enables teachers and staff to learn and practice new ways of working. One leader said, "The climate that we have built is what is allowing us to have trust... And trust is what leads to people being willing to try these different things."

Achieving stability is consuming leaders' and educators' capacities.

External pressures and internal operational issues (which one leader called "adult issues") easily consume any excess time leaders have. One superintendent estimated that on a good day, just 20% of his attention can be focused on the district's strategic priorities. The rest is consumed by what he called the "whirlwind." Many leaders described themselves as a "buffer" or shield between outside pressures and the work happening in the district.

Many superintendents explicitly said they relied on other administrators, such as curriculum directors or assistant superintendents, to lead the district's long-term vision work. But some very small districts lack sufficient resources for additional central office positions to take up strategic district transformation work. In one such district, the superintendent said he was personally analyzing student survey data because no one else could.

In survey responses about districts' "most ambitious change effort," a small but notable share of leaders described efforts such as stabilizing budgets or managing school closures. The message is clear: some leaders' capacity is so captured by operational

pressures that solving them has become the district's primary and most ambitious change initiative.

The takeaway: Limited capacity goes to safe, strongly reinforced priorities.

Some leaders reported prioritizing strengthening existing district systems because they believed this will help their districts achieve long-term goals (see Finding 1). Others believed that more fundamental change would eventually be necessary, but still prioritized work to stabilize and strengthen existing systems, concluding that their districts were not yet ready for larger-scale redesign efforts. These leaders expressed an internal tension: a desire to pursue ambitious change alongside hesitation about moving too quickly in fragile systems.

These conclusions reflect a broader dynamic in which leaders are continuously assessing what their districts and their stakeholders can tolerate. Across cases, however, the work of maintaining stability absorbs leadership capacity and crowds out efforts to pursue deeper transformation.

Finding 5: Without more politically sophisticated strategies, superintendents struggle to reconcile competing stakeholder interests, resulting in a balance that favors the status quo.

Stakeholder management is an essential function of the superintendent role. Leaders must maintain alignment with school boards, educators, and vocal community members, often in politically volatile environments. In response, most superintendents in the study approached change as a process of securing broad buy-in from stakeholder groups, including reconciling competing interests among stakeholders with varying degrees of power. One superintendent expressed concisely what we heard from nearly everyone else: “[The change effort] had to be something that was owned by everyone: by staff, by administrators, school board, parents, students, taxpayers, everybody had to have an opportunity to contribute to where our public schools were heading.”

While this approach reflects a genuine effort to represent whole-community will, superintendents described how it often diluted ambitious change efforts into more cautious, incremental ones. Strategies that are effective for maintaining alignment are not always sufficient for advancing transformative change. In some cases, though, leaders demonstrated early development of more advanced political strategies with potential for breaking through entrenched stakeholder dynamics.

Leaders described scaling back and slowing down, but rarely speeding up.

Many leaders had learned, often through prior failed efforts, that moving too quickly can trigger backlash and derail change. In one district, parent demands forced the district to reinstate middle school honors classes after it had successfully detracked them. In another, union opposition and lack of community buy-in killed an initiative to launch microschools. As one superintendent put it, “You can’t just ram things down people’s throats... The next thing you know, the leader is gone, the change has been reversed.” Superintendents saw these as failures that taught them useful lessons about how carefully they must tend to stakeholder interests before proceeding with change efforts.

To avoid failure, superintendents described adjusting the scope, pace, or framing of change efforts in response to stakeholder dynamics. Leaders formed judgments about what stakeholders would tolerate and adapted accordingly: scaling back ideas, softening language, or moving more slowly to avoid backlash. These moves can build support, but they also shape the boundaries of what is considered politically feasible in the first place.

Slowing down can help changes take hold, but it can also indefinitely defer more fundamental shifts. In several cases, leaders described responding to resistance by reducing ambitious targets into “stretch goals” with no metrics, or delaying implementation timelines without clear plans to revisit them. In these cases, responsiveness to stakeholders did not just affect pacing; it altered the substance and accountability of the work itself. One leader said their district is “tiptoeing around some things” to avoid political backlash on racism and LGBTQ+ issues, but the result is that the work is “not as explicit and hard-hitting as [it] could be.” In another district, leadership is framing the district’s new Portrait of a Graduate to teachers by saying, “a lot of this is what we’re already doing.” The district’s leader said this helped “ease the tension” but has not yet resulted in substantive instructional and pedagogical shifts. In these cases, leaders reduced friction in the short term but limited strategies for converting initial buy-in into greater instructional change.

In some cases, superintendents took steps to scale back ambition for change preemptively before encountering resistance overtly. One superintendent, for example, concluded that the district wasn’t ready to attempt flexible learning pathways in the high school after a conversation with the principal suggested teachers would resist. Another said they framed ideas as “very vanilla” in central office strategic planning meetings to avoid provoking concern. Leaders conveyed a strong sense of conservatism in their willingness to test the degree and pace of change stakeholders could tolerate.

Our findings do not suggest that faster is always better. In fragile systems, leaders often have good reasons to move carefully, build trust, and sequence change. But across interviews, we observed a risk receiving far less attention: slowing down so much or scaling back so far that the path to deeper transformation became harder to visualize. The challenge, then, is finding a pace that is deliberate but forceful enough to still maintain a path toward achieving the desired vision.

Positive stakeholder relationships: condition or result?

How superintendents react (sometimes preemptively) to stakeholder pushback helps explain a seeming contradiction in our data. In surveys, superintendents generally described stakeholders such as unions, school boards, and families as more helpful than hindering in achieving their long-term goals (see Appendix B). One explanation is simply that most districts are not pursuing the kinds of changes that would strain those relationships in the first place. As Findings 1 and 2 showed, most change efforts are focused on strengthening existing systems rather than redesigning them.

A second explanation is that where leaders are pursuing more ambitious work, many have already shaped their efforts to fit within what stakeholders will tolerate—and having done so, those stakeholders appear helpful. In interviews, superintendents expressed pride in their ability to navigate powerful interests and find workable compromises, while less often describing efforts to expand or renegotiate the limits those stakeholders set. Positive stakeholder relationships, in other words, may reflect either the absence of disruption to stakeholder priorities or the successful management of that disruption, not the absence of constraints.

These stakeholder dynamics are not incidental or a product of timid or passive leadership. Many leaders we interviewed conveyed apparently strong stakeholder management skills. But the current structure of schooling reflects years of negotiated accommodations among groups with a stake in existing arrangements, such as teachers and teachers' unions, school boards, and more advantaged families. As a result, efforts to maintain alignment with these stakeholders can reinforce the very conditions that transformational change would require rethinking.

Advanced political skills and broader coalitions point a way forward.

Some leaders described a more politically sophisticated approach: actively shaping stakeholder perspectives and, in fewer cases, expanding the coalition of support for change. These leaders invested in educating and persuading key actors, used community-developed visions as political cover for redesign, and worked to distribute change ownership. For example, one superintendent brought in college admissions officers to reassure parents about grading reforms, while another cultivated a mayor as a public advocate for a new career pathway initiative. Another, as noted in Finding 3, brought a whole group of community stakeholders on a visit to another district to expand the group's collective view of what could be possible.

Literature on community organizing points to a similar distinction. Organizing is not simply about securing support for a predetermined reform. It is also about building political will, broadening participation in decision-making, and creating the conditions for more ambitious change. Successful organizing efforts often combine coalition-building, leadership development, community engagement, and strategic pressure to shift what stakeholders view as desirable, necessary, and politically feasible. This perspective suggests that coalition-building can be more than a strategy for maintaining alignment. It can also be a mechanism for expanding what stakeholders see as possible and shifting the politics around what reforms become feasible.

However, we saw far more evidence of leaders working to accommodate and manage existing stakeholders than of efforts to reshape stakeholder politics, build new demand, or broaden coalitions. The political strategies required to do so are complex and not widely developed. And as Finding 4 described, superintendents' capacity for strategic political leadership is often outpaced by increasingly polarized and fast-moving political environments. As a result, even well-intentioned community organization efforts often appeared to stop short of the kinds of changes that would fundamentally alter how districts operate.

V. Implications

This study examined how superintendents in New England are leading change at a moment when public education faces both intensifying constraints and growing demands for fundamentally different outcomes. There is reason for optimism: despite holding embattled positions, superintendents want to be change leaders. Survey respondents reported actively pursuing about 60% of the substantial changes they believe are needed, and about 50% of districts are tackling at least a few (three or more) substantial change efforts simultaneously. Interviews underscored that leaders often undertake change despite political and even personal risk, expressing curiosity and openness to learning from peers and experts.

Yet most of those efforts focus on strengthening existing school district systems through more consistent instruction, better curriculum and data use, and more differentiated student supports. Many leaders do not see a need to fundamentally reorient their district's purpose or operations, and even many of those who do still prioritize changes that reinforce existing systems.

The disagreement about what kind of change districts need is more than rhetorical; it affects action. If leaders understand transformational change as improving school districts as they are today, it makes sense that change efforts should focus on reinforcing high-yield practices that build on what districts already do. When leaders understand transformational change as requiring redesign, however, they reevaluate how the system as a whole is operating, identify where the fundamental flaws lie, and create new organizational systems that institutionalize high-yield practices in new ways of working, leaving behind what's ineffective and harmful.

A vision for equity and excellence can motivate both approaches. But the former presumes this vision can be achieved through reforms to a system originally designed to preserve status and distribute opportunity unequally, while the latter presumes that those original designs are what must shift. This study suggests that among superintendents, the question of which approach is necessary remains unsettled.

Our analysis also contributes important evidence to a growing body of research on what limits a district leader's ability to captain today's school systems into the future. Prior research has warned about the [lack of systematized opportunities](#) to see district transformation in practice, documented incentives and pressures that [reward stability](#), and found superintendents receive little preparation for the political work required to build durable support for greater change.¹ Our findings reinforce those themes while adding an important insight: external constraints are only part of the story. Leaders' judgments about what is educationally, organizationally, and politically feasible consistently shaped the changes they pursued. Expanding what leaders see as feasible is therefore as important as removing external barriers.

A call to action for superintendents: Lead beyond improvement toward redesign

Superintendents are central actors in defining what transformational leadership looks like in practice. Leading this work requires moving beyond improving discrete

¹ In a paper submitted to AERA titled "Political Leadership in the Superintendency," Jennifer P. Cheatham and Bonnie Lo analyzed a sample of leadership development programs and found that only a few explicitly taught proactive political leadership skills like political mapping and movement building. The findings will be published in a forthcoming book titled "Superintendent as Civic Leader" (Harvard Education Press).

elements of the system to orchestrating coherent redesign across instruction, staffing, time, assessment, and partnerships. Superintendents pursuing more ambitious change efforts generally did not describe waiting for ideal conditions before acting. They built support for change through exposure to new possibilities and early evidence from pilot efforts that illustrated what change looks like in practice and how it affects students. This work is inherently political: it requires sustained coalition-building that translates, rather than dilutes, clarity and resolve about the changes needed.

A call to action for advocates of transformational change: Reshape the conditions that produce today's leadership

Although our findings focus on superintendents, they show that the constraints leaders face are systemic, not just at the district level. Superintendents operate within a web of networks, incentives, leadership development pipelines, and governance structures that shape what change is possible. When those conditions are misaligned with transformation, leaders are not choosing incrementalism so much as being steered toward it.

Advancing transformational systems change will require not only ambitious individual leaders. It will require states, funders, intermediaries, and professional associations to redesign the conditions that shape leadership. This shift will require changes to:

- **How leaders are prepared:** Without sustained exposure to fundamentally different configurations of time, roles, and learning, leaders tend to iterate within familiar boundaries. Leadership development should help district leaders broaden their understanding of what is possible in public education. Not all “innovation” is worth learning from. Leadership programs can be trusted curators exposing district leaders to examples of ambitious and evidence-driven systemic redesign. Leadership development, including on-the-job coaching, can support leaders to build the political and strategic skills to redesign district systems at a pace that maintains enough momentum to avoid a slow pull back to the status quo. This requires drawing on evidence outside education about the skills required to lead systemic change and redesign, from coalition-building to planning in environments with high uncertainty.
- **How leaders spend their time:** School boards and state policymakers should explore ways to radically reduce the time superintendents spend on compliance, operational, and financial issues, whether through shared services, expanded district leadership capacity, streamlined reporting requirements, or other structural supports. While these changes are not easy to implement, our findings make clear that leaders have limited capacity for long-term redesign when day-to-day operations consume most of their attention.
- **How leaders understand their roles:** School boards, leadership associations, and state policymakers should begin reshaping incentives to shift the superintendent role from a politically constrained manager of competing interests to a system-level change leader, with explicit responsibility and support for redesigning core structures. Key steps include incorporating long-term system improvement, organizational learning, and coalition-building into leadership standards, evaluation processes, and professional learning opportunities. In turn, school board candidates and members should work to cultivate community support for repositioning the role of the school board as an active steward of long-term transformation rather than defaulting to risk mitigation.

- **How leaders build and engage support:** Reshaping the politics of change is essential, and it cannot rest solely on the shoulders of individual superintendents. Funders, advocates, intermediary organizations, and community and business leaders should partner with district leaders to take an active role in building public understanding and political demand for school transformation. This includes investing in coalition-building, leadership development, community organizing, and opportunities for stakeholders to engage directly with alternative models of schooling.

These changes are not simple or technical, and most require coordinated action across stakeholders in public education: school boards, policymakers and state leaders, funders, and community advocates. It's likely that many among these groups feel motivated by a vision for change but are limited in the action they pursue based on what they perceive as feasible in their own spheres, similar to the trends we observed among district leaders. As a result, funders especially should not underestimate the catalytic and ongoing investments that will be needed to support network-building, coordination, and evidence generation.

A provocation: Is success seeing more leaders swimming upstream, or changing the course of the river?

State leaders, funders, intermediaries, advocates, and professional associations can immediately expand support for individual leaders and districts. Existing state initiatives, grant programs, and nonprofits supporting school district transformation already offer targeted, site-based interventions and support through fellowships, technical assistance, funding, and exposure to new models. Expanding these could incrementally increase the number and ambition of district-level change efforts.

But if the primary strategy is expanding these opportunities, it preserves the same underlying dynamic our research reveals: transformational change is not well understood or justified across the field; it's pursued district by district, contingent on leaders' appetites, skills, and judgments about what's possible, and vulnerable to leadership turnover, school board dynamics, and misaligned policy environments. Incrementalism remains the default outcome, even when leaders aspire to more. Districts succeeding in fundamentally changing their systems are the result of leaders swimming upstream.

We suspect a different future is necessary: one where transformation is no longer dependent on exceptional individuals or remarkable local circumstances, but is enabled by coordinated shifts across the environments that shape district leadership. Rather than supporting districts one by one, leaders shaping public education systems should seek opportunities to redesign the surrounding infrastructure—policy, accountability, funding, governance, and leadership pipelines—to create more durable and scalable pathways to transformation, where ambitious visions translate into sustained changes in practice across many districts, not just a few. The broader field, including policymakers, funders, intermediaries, and governance bodies, must decide whether to invest in helping more leaders swim upstream or in changing the direction of the river.

Leaders and systems, together.

Ultimately, this report is about people: the leaders working inside school districts. Throughout this study, we met superintendents deeply committed to improving opportunities for students while also navigating competing demands, political pressures, and organizational constraints. Their ambition is clear.

But without changing the superintendents' role, preparation, and incentives, that ambition will continue stabilizing today's school systems, rather than leading the transformational change necessary to build tomorrow's. Progress depends on both ambitious leadership and an aligned ecosystem that develops and supports leaders to pursue a new vision for the future of public education—one with equity and excellence at its core.

Appendix A: Survey Methods

Overview and Rationale

This regional survey aimed to capture information about superintendents' views on their districts' long-term goals, current change efforts, and enabling and constraining factors, as well as their own experiences with and beliefs about change leadership.

The goal of the survey was to include districts varying in the degree of change they are pursuing, but the research team had no way to reliably sample districts for this characteristic. The assumption was that no widely accessible district or superintendent characteristics (e.g., demographics or accountability data) are reliable predictors of different degrees of district change efforts. As a result, rather than attempt to define a representative sample, the research team chose a census approach that included every current superintendent in New England as of September 2025.

CRPE researchers partnered with the University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Survey Research (CSR) to design and administer a 10-minute, 12-question online survey. The survey was distributed to superintendents' email addresses, and responses were voluntary, anonymous, and de-identified prior to analysis.

Sample Construction

The survey sample was designed to include all public school districts across the six New England states: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. A total of 930 superintendents were identified, with one contact per district. Email addresses were compiled from publicly available sources, including state education agencies and district websites. Of these, 48 cases were determined to be ineligible due to undeliverable email addresses (e.g., inactive accounts or individuals no longer in the superintendent role), resulting in a final eligible sample of 882 superintendents.

Survey Instrument Development

CRPE researchers developed the survey instrument iteratively and refined it through two rounds of cognitive testing conducted with superintendents outside of New England. CSR conducted the cognitive testing in two rounds over Zoom with participants recruited by CRPE from states outside New England. The purpose of this testing was to ensure clarity of questions, appropriate response options, and overall usability of the survey. We recruited intentionally from outside New England to collect feedback from superintendents in districts with similar characteristics to the target sample while keeping the New England sample (a census) intact.

The first round of testing included three participants in July 2025, and the second round included four participants in August 2025. Participants received a stipend of \$80 in recognition of their time and participation. Feedback from these sessions informed revisions to question wording and survey structure. The final survey included twelve questions. Nine of the questions were batteries of items, two were multiple choice, and one was an open-ended question.

The survey had four main sections: (1) long-term goals, (2) changes that leaders think are necessary, and those they are working on, to achieve districts' long-term goals (see below for more detail), (3) state policy factors, local factors, and other external factors that help/hinder leaders' work to achieve their districts' long-term

goals, and (4) a series of questions about personal beliefs, motivation, and experience. The research team developed the survey questions and response options based on a literature review of systems change, change management, personal motivation, and will for change, drawing on learning from previous CRPE research and input from key partners including district leaders across the country, technical assistance providers, researchers, and funders. The objective was to keep the survey short (about 10 minutes), so the questions are not meant to be exhaustive; instead, they provide key information on topics related to the study's research questions. Additionally, the survey was designed to be descriptive and not to create indices or scales to measure innovation, will, or motivation. Please contact the authors for a copy of the survey.

Below is the list of 15 “domains” of district work included in the survey. The survey questions that used these domains aimed to determine how much change superintendents believe is necessary in their districts, as well as what substantial changes superintendents are actively working on. In total, the two questions offered superintendents 15 response options as well as two “other” options. CRPE developed the list of response options to reflect aspects of this study's definition of transformational systems change (see Appendix D). Table A1 below maps each domain to elements of this definition.

Table A1: Domains of District Work *(continues onto next page)*

Domain	Relationship to CRPE's Definition of “Transformational Systems Change”
What teachers teach	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing).”
How teachers teach	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction , professional learning, and staffing).”
How your district assesses student learning	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment , curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing).”
How your district addresses students' non-academic needs	While not referenced explicitly in the definition, we judged this item important to include as part of “a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence” and “a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.”
How the adults in your district treat students	“...prioritizing equity (e.g., confronting racism and classism).”
What the adults in your district think students are capable of	“...shifting mindsets (e.g., holding high expectations for every student)...”
What decisions students can make about their learning	“...redistributing power (e.g., equipping students , families, and educators as decision-makers)...”
How your district places students in courses	“...challenging long-held assumptions (e.g., one teacher per classroom, ability tracking)...”
How your district supports teachers to improve their practice	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning , and staffing).”

How your district supports principals to improve their practice	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing).” “...as well as people’s roles in classrooms, schools, and central offices...”
How your district organizes staffing, including teachers, to support student learning	“...the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing).” “...as well as people’s roles in classrooms, schools, and central offices...” “...challenging long-held assumptions (e.g., one teacher per classroom, ability tracking)...”
How your district aligns its budget to strategic goals	While not referenced explicitly in the definition, we judged this item important to include as part of “a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence” and “a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.”
How your district uses data for continuous improvement	While not referenced explicitly in the definition, we judged this item important to include as part of “a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence” and “a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.”
How your district engages families	“...redistributing power (e.g., equipping students, families , and educators as decision-makers)...”
How your district uses artificial intelligence	While not referenced explicitly in the definition, we judged this item important to include given the rapid penetration of artificial intelligence in K-12 systems, and as a possible element of “a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence” and “a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.”

Data Collection

The survey was administered online between September 29 and November 3, 2025. CSR sent reminder emails periodically during this time to encourage participation. Respondents received a \$50 gift card upon completion. To help boost response rates, CRPE partnered with state-level superintendent associations in each state and regionally to support survey dissemination.

The survey took about 10 minutes on average to complete, excluding outliers that took over 60 minutes. The outliers likely completed the survey over multiple sittings; therefore, the average time is an estimate based on most responses (~90% of surveys were completed under 60 minutes, ~85% under 20 minutes, and ~68% under 11 minutes).

Response Rate

The total sample size was 930 superintendents across six New England States. We received bounce backs from 48 email addresses for a variety of reasons (the email address was incorrect, the person in question was no longer superintendent, the district’s firewall blocked emails from unknown senders, etc.) These 48 were determined ineligible, leaving a total eligible sample of 882 cases.

The overall response rate was 35% (n=307, including partial responses, out of 882 eligible cases). Excluding partial responses, the response rate was 34%.

Table A2 summarizes the response rate by state. The refused category indicates superintendents who used the opt-out link in the email. The “limits” indicate those who did not explicitly refuse but did not complete the survey. In addition to the 299 respondents who completed the full survey, there were another 8 cases that were partially completed, at least through the third survey question, which asked about the district’s long-term goals. Therefore, 307 superintendents are included as completed surveys in the final dataset.

Table A2: Survey Response Rate, by State

State	Total	Bounce Backs	Total Eligible	Refused	Limits	Completed Entire Survey	Partially Completed Survey	Response Rate	Response Rate with Partial
Connecticut	180	10	170	6	114	50	1	29%	30%
Maine	152	7	145	10	84	51	0	35%	35%
Massachusetts	345	18	327	10	216	101	4	31%	32%
New Hampshire	134	5	129	7	79	43	1	33%	34%
Rhode Island	64	8	56	2	36	18	1	32%	34%
Vermont	55	0	55	1	18	36	1	65%	67%
All	930	48	882	36	547	299	8	34%	35%

District Database

To provide context for survey responses, the research team compiled a dataset of publicly available district characteristics. These included district size, number of schools, district type (traditional district, regional district, regional CTE school, charter school), per-pupil spending, urbanicity, student demographics (race/ethnicity, low-income status, English learner status, and special education status), chronic absenteeism, and state test proficiency rates.

Because data sources vary across states, measures were standardized where possible. For example, proficiency rates were centered on each state’s average proficiency rate. These data were merged with survey responses using anonymized identifiers.

Survey Analysis

The analysis took place in several stages. First, the research team conducted descriptive analysis of survey responses, including frequency distributions, cross-tabulations,

and co-occurrence for each battery of questions (long-term goals, level of change required for key domains, key domains superintendents reported currently working on, factors that help or hinder achieving long-term goals, and personal experience and motivation to pursue change). Summary variables were also constructed, including the total number of long-term goals identified, the number of domains identified as needing substantial change (across both Q4 and Q5), and the number of domains superintendents reported currently working on. Key results from this initial descriptive analysis are included below.

Second, the research team conducted comparative analyses to examine differences in responses across district characteristics, types of long-term goals, and the scope of change identified and underway.

Finally, exploratory analyses were conducted to examine relationships between district and leader characteristics and the scope of change efforts. These analyses are descriptive in nature and were used to identify patterns rather than to make causal claims. Salient results from these analyses are discussed in the report's findings.

Appendix B: Survey Results

Basic Descriptives of Respondents' Districts (n = 307)

“Respondent Districts” refers to districts whose superintendents responded to the survey. “Non-Respondent Districts” refers to districts whose superintendents did not respond to the survey. “All Districts” refers to all New England districts invited to participate in the survey.

Table B1: Distribution of Districts by State

State	Respondent Districts	Non-Respondent Districts	All Districts
Connecticut	17%	20%	19%
Maine	34%	38%	37%
Massachusetts	17%	18%	17%
New Hampshire	14%	14%	14%
Rhode Island	6%	7%	7%
Vermont	12%	3%	6%
n	307	623	930

Table B2: Distribution of Districts by Urbanicity (NCES Categorization)

Urbanicity	Respondent Districts	Non-Respondent Districts	All Districts
Urban	9%	14%	12%
Suburban	38%	42%	41%
Town/Rural	52%	44%	47%
n	307	623	930

Table B3: Distribution of Districts by District Type

District Type	Respondent Districts	Non-Respondent Districts	All Districts
Traditional District	72%	65%	67%
Regional District	13%	12%	13%
Regional CTE	3%	4%	3%
Charter	11%	17%	15%
Other (State Agency, Regional Service Center)	1%	2%	2%
n	307	623	930

Table B4: Distribution of Districts by Grades Served

Grades Served	Respondent Districts	Non-Respondent Districts	All Districts
K-6	5%	5%	5%
K-8	13%	15%	15%
K-12	72%	65%	68%
6-8	1%	0%	1%
7-12	4%	5%	5%
9-12	6%	8%	7%
n	307	623	930

Table B5: District Characteristics

	Respondent Districts	Non-Respondent Districts	All Districts
n	307	623	930
District Size			
Enrollment (mean)	2115	2112	2113
Number of Schools (mean)	5.4	5.3	5.3
Number of High Schools (mean)	1.2	1.4	1.3
Demographics			
White (%)	72%	68%	70%
Low-Income (%)	38%	39%	39%
English Learner (%)	6%	6%	6%
Special Education (%)	19%	20%	20%

Survey Questions and Responses

Q1. What is your position in your district?

Position	n	Percent
Superintendent, ED, or CEO	304	99%
Assistant Superintendent	3	1%
Total	307	

Q2. How long [have you/has your current superintendent] been in [your/their] position?

Time in Position	n	Percent
Less than 1 year	50	16%
1-3 years	76	25%
4-6 years	76	25%
7-10 years	57	19%
More than 10 years	48	16%
Total	307	

Q3. What are your district's long-term goals? *[Check all that apply]*

Responses (n = 307)

Goal Selected	n	Percent
Improve academic achievement	275	90%
Improve instructional quality	246	80%
Create a safe, welcoming school community	238	78%
Increase student engagement in school	222	72%
Develop students' durable skills	189	62%
Eliminate disparities in outcomes between student groups	180	59%
Strengthen career preparation	134	44%
Expand access to postsecondary education	91	30%

Number of Goals Selected (Q3)

Number of Goals Selected	n	Percent
1	5	2%
2	13	4%
3	50	17%
4	64	21%
5	48	16%
6	38	13%
7	22	7%
8	59	20%

Q4. In order to achieve your district's long-term goals, how much change is needed in the following areas related to teaching, learning, and student support? *[Likert scale: No change required, Small changes required, Substantial changes required]*

Responses (n = 299)

Domain	No Change	Small Change	Substantial Change
What teachers teach	8%	75%	17%
How teachers teach	2%	47%	51%
How your district assesses student learning	10%	59%	31%
How your district addresses students' non-academic needs	13%	69%	18%
How the adults in your district treat students	26%	62%	12%
What the adults in your district think students are capable of	13%	52%	35%
What decisions students can make about their learning	6%	56%	38%
How your district places students in courses	29%	58%	13%
Other (n=22)	27%	14%	59%

Q5. In order to achieve your district’s long-term goals, how much change is needed in the following areas related to systems and structures? *[Likert scale: No Change Required, Small Changes Required, Substantial Changes Required]*

Responses (n = 299)

Domain	No Change	Small Change	Substantial Change
How your district supports teachers to improve their practice	4%	65%	31%
How your district supports principals to improve their practice	10%	65%	25%
How your district organizes staffing, including teachers, to support student learning	13%	62%	25%
How your district aligns its budget to strategic goals	26%	51%	23%
How your district uses data for continuous improvement	8%	55%	38%
How your district engages families	9%	66%	25%
How your district uses artificial intelligence	6%	39%	55%
Other (n=13)	62%	31%	8%

Number of domains that superintendents reported need “substantial change” (Q4-5)

Number of Goals Selected	Frequency	Percent
0	32	11%
1	39	13%
2	34	11%
3	30	10%
4	31	10%
5	33	11%
6	23	8%
7	22	7%
8	17	6%
9	15	5%
10	6	2%
11	12	4%
12	1	0%
13	4	1%

Q6. Which of the areas you rated as “substantial changes required” are you actively working to change this school year? *[Auto-generated checklist based on Q4-5 responses; respondents only saw the domains they previously selected as requiring substantial change]*

Responses

Change Domain	Currently Working On Domain	Percent of Respondents Who Selected “Substantial Change” in Q4 and Q5	Percent of All Respondents (n=299)
What teachers teach	36	69%	12%
How teachers teach	123	80%	41%
How your district assesses student learning	51	54%	17%
How your district addresses students’ non-academic needs	35	63%	12%
How the adults in your district treat students	22	61%	7%
What the adults in your district think students are capable of	59	56%	20%
What decisions students can make about their learning	41	36%	14%
How your district places students in courses	12	31%	4%
How your district supports teachers to improve their practice	64	70%	21%
How your district supports principals to improve their practice	45	61%	15%
How your district organizes staffing, including teachers, to support student learning	38	51%	13%
How your district aligns its budget to strategic goals	51	75%	17%
How your district uses data for continuous improvement	94	83%	31%
How your district engages families	47	63%	16%
How your district uses artificial intelligence	80	49%	27%

Number of domains superintendents reported districts are currently working on (Q6)

Number of Domains	n	Percent
0	42	14%
1	69	23%
2	44	15%
3	49	16%
4	39	13%
5	30	10%
6	10	3%
7	8	3%
8	5	2%
9	3	1%

Q7. What is your district's most ambitious change effort right now?

[Open response]

Q8. Thinking about state policy factors, how much does each of the following currently affect your work to achieve your district's long-term goals? [Likert scale: Definitely Helps, Helps More Than Hinders, Hinders More Than Helps, Definitely Hinders, Not Relevant]

Factor	Definitely Helps		Helps More Than Hinders		Hinders More Than Helps		Definitely Hinders		Not Relevant	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
State academic standards	47	16%	167	56%	46	15%	13	4%	27	9%
State accountability system	14	5%	88	29%	124	41%	64	21%	10	3%
State regulatory compliance requirements	4	1%	71	24%	118	39%	90	30%	16	5%
Policies that determine how students earn academic credit	23	8%	110	37%	72	24%	20	7%	72	24%
State funding formulas	10	3%	32	11%	82	27%	170	56%	7	2%
State graduation requirements	19	6%	123	41%	57	19%	20	7%	80	27%
State postsecondary pathway programs	68	23%	139	46%	23	8%	4	1%	67	22%
School choice policies	28	9%	67	22%	67	22%	74	25%	65	22%
State testing requirements	18	6%	103	34%	118	39%	54	18%	7	2%

Q9. Thinking about local/community factors, how much does each of the following currently affect your work to achieve your district's long-term goals?

Factor	Definitely Helps		Helps More Than Hinders		Hinders More Than Helps		Definitely Hinders		Not Relevant	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
External partnerships	93	31%	164	55%	14	5%	2	1%	27	9%
Family expectations	56	19%	167	56%	56	19%	14	5%	7	2%
Local political climate	16	5%	82	27%	107	36%	83	28%	12	4%
The amount of local public funding your district receives	59	20%	86	29%	49	16%	91	30%	15	5%
School board involvement	99	33%	133	44%	44	15%	14	5%	10	3%
Teacher-union relationship	63	21%	106	35%	58	19%	45	15%	28	9%

Q10. Thinking about other external factors, how much does each of the following currently affect your work to achieve your district's long-term goals?

Factor	Definitely Helps		Helps More Than Hinders		Hinders More Than Helps		Definitely Hinders		Not Relevant	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Guidance from the federal Department of Education	3	1%	29	10%	107	36%	120	40%	38	13%
State funding to participate in new initiatives	47	16%	128	43%	48	16%	28	9%	47	16%
Peer learning through participation in networks or consortia	91	30%	170	57%	8	3%	0	0%	31	10%
Philanthropic funding	77	26%	69	23%	10	3%	3	1%	140	47%
State political climate	10	3%	75	25%	108	36%	89	30%	14	5%
State professional associations	90	30%	151	51%	21	7%	2	1%	35	12%
Guidance from the state Department of Education	22	7%	133	45%	91	31%	40	13%	12	4%
Technical assistance providers	30	10%	177	59%	32	11%	5	2%	54	18%

Q11. Please rate the following statements about your views on the role of district leadership. For each, please rate whether it is definitely true, mostly true, mostly false, or definitely false.

Responses (n=298)

Statement	Definitely True	Mostly True	Mostly False	Definitely False
I believe my leadership positively influences outcomes for students in my district today.	49%	50%	1%	0%
I believe my leadership will positively influence outcomes for students in my district even after I retire or move on.	34%	64%	2%	0%
Addressing educational inequities is an essential part of my leadership responsibilities.	66%	31%	2%	0%
I feel enough job security to take strategic risks.	41%	44%	13%	2%
I notice a strong desire among district/central office staff to take on new challenges.	32%	55%	12%	1%

Q12. Please rate the following statements about your experience leading change. For each, please rate whether it is definitely true, mostly true, mostly false, or definitely false.

Responses (n=298)

Statement	Definitely True	Mostly True	Mostly False	Definitely False
I feel strong expectations from stakeholders to lead transformational change in my district.	24%	56%	17%	2%
I feel personally motivated to lead transformational change in my district.	64%	34%	2%	0%
I feel confident in my ability to lead transformational change in my current district.	50%	48%	2%	0%
My formal education (e.g., degree or certificate programs) prepared me to lead change efforts.	34%	49%	15%	1%
In the past, I have been part of successful change efforts in a public school or district.	66%	30%	3%	0%
In the past, I have been part of stalled or failed change efforts in a public school or district.	26%	30%	36%	8%

Appendix C: Artifact Elicitation Interview Methods

Overview and Rationale

For this study, we employed an artifact elicitation interview method to both identify districts potentially engaging in transformational systems change and probe district leaders' will and skill for such work. The artifacts at the heart of this method were publicly available vision and strategy documents (VSDs) such as strategic plans, Portraits of a Graduate, and instructional vision statements. Leaders of districts whose VSDs showed some evidence of engaging in transformational efforts were invited to participate in a 60-minute virtual interview.

The artifact elicitation method we used was adapted from prior qualitative research techniques (e.g., [photo-elicitation](#)). In this approach, participants are asked about artifacts they have created, and these artifacts are used as prompts during semi-structured interviews to generate more detailed, grounded responses than traditional verbal questioning often elicits. This method has been used in [education research](#) and other qualitative studies as a way to access participants' tacit knowledge, beliefs, and experiences by anchoring discussion in concrete materials.

This approach was particularly valuable for this study because it anchored leader reflections in publicly stated commitments, allowing us to examine connections between espoused vision and reported action and decision-making. It also helped mitigate the risk of abstract or aspirational responses by grounding discussion in concrete language districts had already put forward. This was especially important given that transformational change is often difficult to identify externally and discuss with granularity. In this context, district-created VSDs served as observable artifacts of intent, signaling districts that may be pursuing or attempting to pursue ambitious change. These documents were not evaluated for quality. Rather, they served two methodological purposes:

1. Sampling tool: to identify districts engaged in ambitious change efforts.
2. Data collection tool: to ground interviews in concrete language and commitments.

We recognize that VSDs are imperfect proxies for actual practice. Districts may articulate ambitious goals without corresponding implementation, while others may engage in meaningful change that is not fully captured in public documents. As such, VSDs were used as an entry point for inquiry rather than evidence of impact.

Sampling and District Identification

We used a purposive sampling strategy to (1) generate a broad list of potential districts to interview across New England, (2) systematically identify districts whose VSDs suggested some evidence of transformational systems change, and (3) surface districts serving a diverse set of students, including those who have been historically marginalized.

Stage 1: Generating potential districts

Districts were identified through:

- Desk research (review of publicly available VSDs)

- Recommendations from regional informants and professional networks
- Prior knowledge of districts engaged in reform initiatives
- Snowball sampling (i.e., referrals from district leaders participating in the study)

Stage 2: Document scanning and candidate identification

The purpose of scanning VSDs was not to conduct deep analysis, but to determine whether a district provided sufficient evidence of potential engagement in systems-level transformation. During scans, team members looked for elements including:

- Evidence of systems-level change (not isolated programs)
- Signals of instructional shifts
- Explicit or implicit equity commitments
- Evidence of community engagement in visioning processes
- Indicators of scope or “boldness” (transformational versus incremental change)

To support consistency, the research team developed a shared set of scanning criteria and conducted calibration exercises during the early stages of document review. Team members periodically revisited and refined these criteria to improve alignment.

We also sought to prioritize districts that serve higher proportions of historically marginalized students, though demographic data was sometimes limited or outdated.

In total, the research team scanned more than 150 district vision and strategy documents between September and December 2025. Districts meeting these criteria were designated as candidate districts, and 91 districts were contacted for participation.

Stage 3: Recruitment

Districts identified as candidates were assigned to members of the research team for email outreach using a standard but personalizable set of recruitment templates.

Throughout scanning and recruitment, we employed a dynamic purposive sampling approach, monitoring characteristics such as state, locale type, and student demographics. We revisited the sample composition during regular team discussions in fall 2025. When imbalances emerged, we adjusted outreach priorities to improve representation across these dimensions. In addition, we leveraged the project’s advisory board to connect with leaders in districts where VSDs suggested a high likelihood of innovative or ambitious efforts. Snowball sampling at the conclusion of interviews also informed ongoing district identification. Together, these strategies helped refine and strengthen the final sample.

Data Collection and Interview Design

We conducted interviews with superintendents across New England between August 2025 and January 2026. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Each session followed a semi-structured protocol designed to ensure consistency across participants while allowing for probing and follow-up questions. With participants’ verbal consent, interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for qualitative analysis. Prior to each interview, researchers reviewed the district’s VSDs and customized probes using district-specific language.

During interviews, artifacts served as starting points for conversation to discuss the origins of the district's vision, identify current changes with the greatest potential to transform student experience and outcomes, surface equity commitments, and understand how visions become aligned to district systems such as budgeting, staffing, professional development, and accountability. We designed interview questions to surface both leaders' will (e.g., motivations, beliefs about equity and transformation) and skill (e.g., strategies for aligning systems, managing constraints, and sustaining change efforts).

The structured protocol included branching logic (e.g., if a VSD was inactive or being revised) to capture variation in district trajectories. By grounding discussion in specific language from district documents, we sought to move beyond generalized narratives and toward more concrete accounts of decision-making, implementation, and constraint.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic approach aligned to the study's central research questions. Researchers created short reflective memos after each interview during the data collection process. The research team then collaboratively reviewed interview transcripts and memos and engaged in a series of structured discussions to surface salient examples and emerging insights. Research team leads formulated draft analytic statements from these early sense-making conversations, in some instances with the support of AI tools, including ChatGPT and Claude (e.g., using AI to synthesize themes from a transcript of a team discussion). The research team then reacted to these draft analytic statements through structured memos that asked researchers to highlight both corroborating and contrasting evidence from interviews, as well as to surface insights that were missing. Research team leads used these structured memos to produce a refined set of key themes from the interviews.

Next, the research team translated those themes into a set of high-inference codes and applied those codes across all interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and points of variation. Following the coding process, two researchers synthesized findings within each theme by reviewing coded excerpts to identify recurring patterns and points of variation within the theme. Findings from the interviews were integrated with survey results in the resulting report.

Participation

Ultimately, we conducted 47 artifact elicitation interviews with superintendents across New England. The final sample reflects broad geographic and demographic variation across the region, with some intentional and some emergent imbalances. Overall, the sample captures a range of district contexts while prioritizing representation of districts serving historically marginalized students.

State: The final sample reflects broad geographic variation across New England. We aimed to achieve a reasonable balance across states, which we largely did, though the sample was not designed to proportionally represent each state. Connecticut comprised 18% of the sample (19% region-wide), and Rhode Island 6% (7% region-wide), both closely aligned. Maine (13% of the sample versus 17% region-wide) and Massachusetts (21% versus 37%) were underrepresented, while New Hampshire (21% versus 14%) and Vermont (21% versus 6%) were overrepresented.

Locale: The final sample's locale distribution closely approximated region-wide patterns, with some expected variation. Urban districts comprised 19% of the sample (versus around 12% region-wide), though the sample includes relatively few of the largest urban systems. Suburban districts accounted for 38% (41% region-wide), closely aligned. Town and rural districts together made up 36% of the sample (vs. 47% region-wide), indicating modest underrepresentation but still substantial inclusion.

Student demographics: On key student indicators, the sample closely matched or exceeded regional averages. The average rate of student poverty was 39.6% (versus around 39% region-wide). The sample also served a higher proportion of students of color (45.5% versus around 30% region-wide), indicating stronger representation of racially diverse districts. Together, these figures suggest that the final sample is well-positioned to surface insights related to equity.

The composition of the sample suggests several avenues for future inquiry. Urban districts and districts serving larger proportions of students of color may face different pressures and opportunities related to transformational change than their rural or suburban counterparts. Future research could examine whether leaders in different settings vary in how they define transformation, diagnose barriers to change, and identify examples of transformed systems in practice.

Appendix D: Examples of Transformational Systems Change Efforts

For the purposes of this study, CRPE developed the following working definition:

Transformational systems change happens when school districts redefine their purpose and operations through a coherent strategy to ensure every school is a high-quality, empowering place for all students to thrive.

More than adopting new programs or policies, transformational change requires the fundamental redesign of core systems (e.g., assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and staffing) and people's roles in classrooms, schools, and central offices, all aligned to a clear instructional vision. This often involves challenging long-held assumptions (e.g., one teacher per classroom, ability tracking), shifting mindsets (e.g., holding high expectations for every student), redistributing power (e.g., equipping students, families, and educators as decision-makers), and prioritizing equity (e.g., confronting racism and classism).

Transformational change is built to last, persisting through leadership transitions and reflecting a deep, system-wide commitment to equity and excellence.

To maintain confidentiality for district leaders we interviewed in this study, we cannot give specific, named examples of districts in New England engaged in change efforts that align with this definition (several unnamed examples can be found in Finding 2). However, other examples across the country help illustrate what transformational systems change can look like in practice. The common thread in these examples is not a specific model, but disciplined alignment in the redesign of multiple elements of district systems. Each district pairs a clear instructional vision with changes to staffing, time, partnerships, and accountability, rather than layering new initiatives onto existing structures.

- In [St. Vrain Valley Schools in Colorado](#), district leaders paired instructional innovation, including [choice-based learning opportunities](#) such as real-world projects, paid work experiences, and learning that extends beyond the high school into community and industry settings, with a deliberate strategy to rebuild trust and engagement with the broader community. This work extended beyond changes in classrooms to include reshaping how the district communicates its value, cultivating community leadership, and building the conditions needed to sustain system-level change.
- In [Anaheim Union High School District](#) in California, district leaders reoriented the system away from a narrow focus on standardized testing toward a broader vision of college, career, and life readiness. They empowered teachers to lead instructional innovation, expanded real-world learning through community partnerships, and elevated student agency and well-being alongside academic achievement. District leaders reinforced these shifts by building cross-sector partnerships and aligning system priorities to support deeper learning, contributing to gains in graduation rates and postsecondary success.

- In [Northern Cass School District in North Dakota](#), district leaders redesigned schools around a personalized, competency-based model with no traditional grade bands, instead organizing learners by learning level and progression rather than age. They paired that shift with structures that give learners more voice and choice in what, how, and with whom they learn, along with internships, job shadows, college visits, and other real-world learning experiences. Student survey results in the middle school [show meaningfully more positive experiences](#) than the national benchmark, alongside above-average achievement.
- In [Ector County Independent School District in Texas](#), district leaders pursued a systemwide turnaround by anchoring their work in a clear, multi-year strategy and maintaining disciplined focus on implementation. They paired investments in foundational systems with targeted innovations such as embedding high-dosage tutoring into the school day and piloting “creative staffing” models that extend the reach of effective teachers. These efforts required redesigning core systems in tandem: restructuring the school day to include intervention blocks, redefining teacher roles through distributed leadership models, and using outcomes-based contracts and progress monitoring systems to drive continuous improvement. High-dosage tutoring was not layered onto existing structures but integrated into instruction, prompting changes to scheduling, staffing, and accountability across schools.
- In [The School District of University City in Missouri](#), the superintendent inherited a district with significant school-to-school inconsistency in instructional quality and outcomes. District leaders moved to clarify non-negotiable expectations district-wide, starting with high-quality instructional materials in ELA as a proof point before expanding to math, while differentiating autonomy for principals who demonstrated strong results. She renegotiated the union contract to create structured collaborative planning time for teachers and reorganized her own leadership structure to free capacity for meaningful instructional feedback. These shifts, sustained over nearly a decade, produced the highest student achievement growth rate in Missouri, with Black and Latine student proficiency in math tripling over three years.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. You can learn more about our work on systems transformation on our [website](https://crpe.org).

CRPE's approach to quality assurance is rooted in our commitments to evidence and impact. We write for a non-academic audience and emphasize clarity and directness, but we hold fast to high standards of rigor and excellence. Our peer review process seeks feedback on methodology and relevance to policy and practice. Peer reviews are conducted by research or policy professionals who are not members of the CRPE project team.

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