

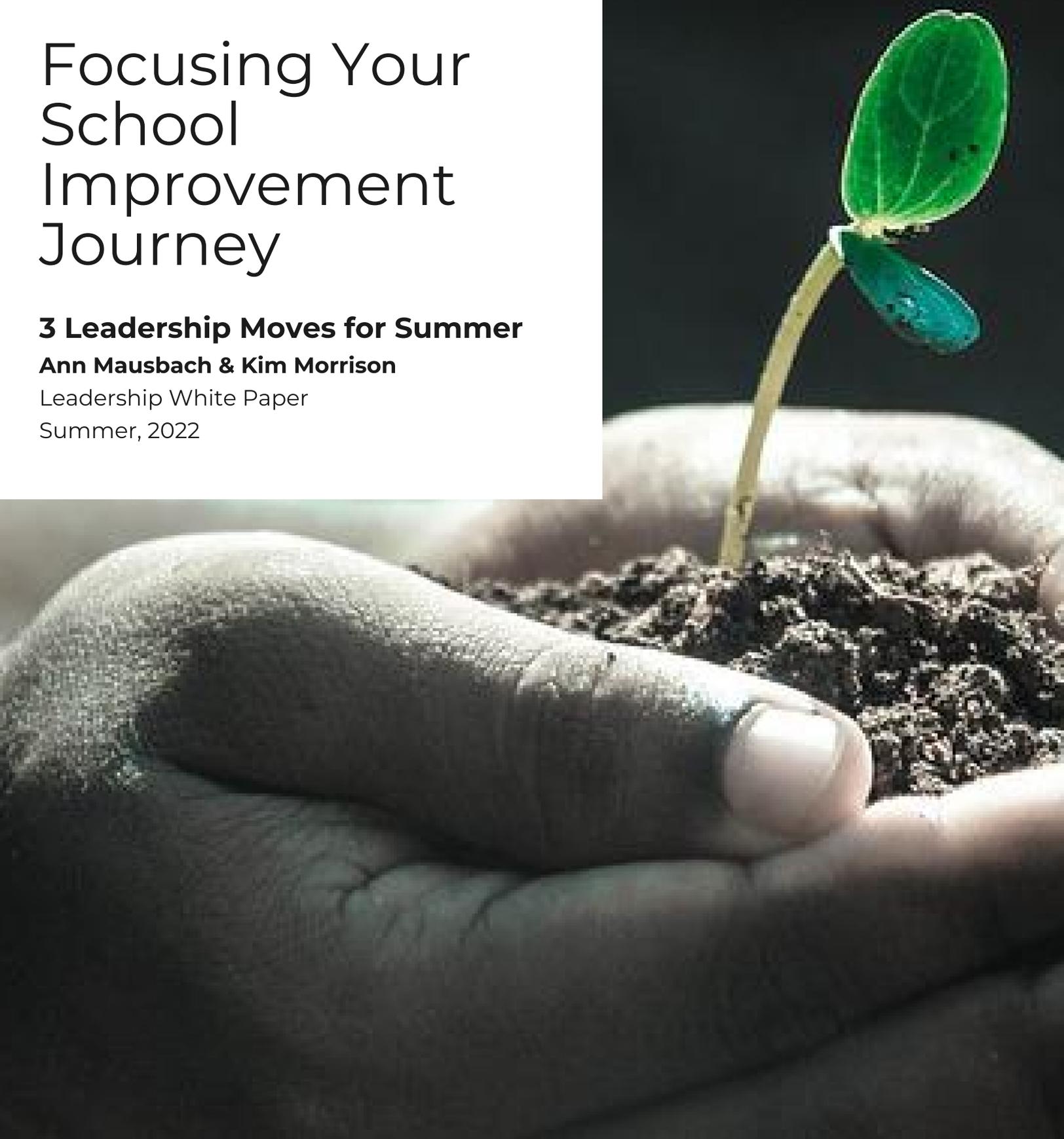
Focusing Your School Improvement Journey

3 Leadership Moves for Summer

Ann Mausbach & Kim Morrison

Leadership White Paper

Summer, 2022



A garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them.

-Liberty Hyde Bailey

When we talk about school improvement we liken it to the work of gardening. We do this because schools, like gardens, are complex systems. Gardeners understand that each season of the year is a distinct period of time marked by specific weather conditions, temperatures, and length of day. These variables define the growing season. Although each season represents a unique period that requires specific behaviors and actions, the cycles are recursive and interdependent. For example, the harvest in the fall is a result of the planting in the spring and the weather conditions in the summer. Skilled gardeners also understand the interconnectedness between soil, seeds, and maintenance. The garden can be well designed with straight rows that have seeds planted at exact distances but there will be little harvest if it isn't watered, weeded, and fertilized.

And so it goes for school leaders. Leaders must understand the seasons of the school year and engage in specific behaviors at critical points in the year, using the right tools at the right time. For schools summer marks the season for reflection and planning. During these months leaders are busy making sure they have the right infrastructure in place, both in terms of schedules and human resources, to do the work. The fall is when the planting begins. Leaders prepare the field by making sure they have school improvement and professional development plans that align with a strong mission and vision. Finally, during the winter/spring schools focus on making sure that they are getting the right results with an ongoing focus on implementation. School leaders need to understand the symbiotic relationship between improving instruction and the culture and climate of the school. Effective leadership is about simultaneously addressing relationships and instruction. The job of the leader, like that of the gardener, is to develop supports and structures that help everyone in the system grow and develop.

This paper will share three critical commitments leaders must make in order to improve outcomes for students and then dig into leadership moves for the summer season. Additional white papers will be made available for fall, winter, and spring seasons.





Commitments

Fullan's (2011) research informs us that behaviors change before shifts in beliefs occur. It's a bit like the Nike ads, "Just do it". Do the work and the belief and dedication to the change will follow. Leaders wanting to have an impact on an entire school or system need to understand that this finding is a call to action not only for how to approach work with staff, but how to approach their daily work. Commit to the work by engaging in behaviors that will transform beliefs and ultimately the system. Committing to the work requires a high degree of persistence. A dedicated gardener sticks with it even when the plants don't sprout up right away, or the rabbits eat their lettuce. Leadership is also a practice that requires a high degree of commitment in order to get results.

But what should school leaders be committing to? Commitments stem from knowing what is valued. Value defines purpose. The purpose of a garden is growth so gardeners value the land and the weather. The purpose of schooling is student learning so school leaders need to value the people and processes that make this happen. School leaders need to commit to:

- Implementation of school improvement processes at high levels
- Development of a school culture that promotes learning
- Use of a growth mindset to develop and enhance professional capital

The Professional Capital Equation

The 3 commitments stem from the facets of professional capital. According to Hargreaves & Fullan (2014), professional capital is made up of:

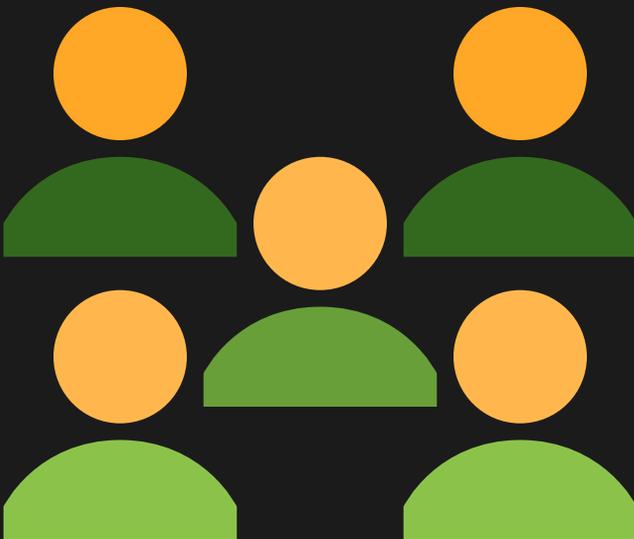
Human capital = individual talent

Social capital = quality and quantity of social interactions

Decisional capital = how decisions are made when answers aren't clear.

The interaction of these three capitals are what help improve an entire organization. Groups work together in such a way that it improves the performance of both the individual and the group. Decisions are made based on professional judgements that have been honed through working together in a variety of settings.

Improving, using, and connecting all three capitals creates a balanced system and promotes positive outcomes.



Upholding the Commitments: Summer Leadership Moves

Watching and tending to a seed from planting to harvest is rewarding. Gardeners recognize this and take stock of their garden so they can replicate these efforts during the next planting season. The summer months provide leaders with this same opportunity.

Leaders need to identify practices that resulted in student achievement. Taking the time to understand the conditions that enabled growth for both staff and students is essential during this time period. Three moves make this happen:

- **Conducting a summative analysis of the data** (school improvement commitment)
- **Tending to the environment** (school culture commitment)
- **Reflecting and responding** (growth mindset commitment)

Move #1: Conduct a Summative Analysis of the Data



During the summer months principals need to take a deep dive into the multiple data points collected throughout the year. This can be a daunting task as lots of information can be generated within a school year. Leaders begin this process by identifying what questions they want answered and then collecting demographic, perceptual, school process, and student learning data. Once data is collected and organized into meaningful chunks a three step process is used to facilitate data interpretation.

- 1 Just the Facts
- 2 Big Ideas
- 3 Action Steps

✓ Just the Facts

The first step in analyzing data is to stick to the facts. Essential questions such as, "How effective was the school improvement plan?" or "What environmental factors influenced achievement?" guide the process and help to filter the important data.

In order to avoid generating a long list of facts that may prohibit analysis consider the following:

- Summarize information from data sources into bullet points.
- Combing and summarize facts to show a trend or pattern
- Restate facts by using other statistical measures to simplify and clarify the data

💡 -Big Ideas

Big ideas are summary statements derived from "just the facts" to provide insight into what the data means. Big ideas answer the "so what" question. So what does all the data mean? Big ideas should be similar to the findings in a professional research study as they serve as the conclusion based on the facts. Many times big ideas can lead to the conclusion that more data is needed to confirm or test a hypothesis.

➔ Action Steps

The last step is to identify actions that address issues that surfaced during the analysis. When developing action steps keep the following factors in mind:

1. Target individual students. Use data to identify action for those students who are not making expected growth.
2. Align curriculum to standards. If assessments are aligned to standards use data to pinpoint deficits in specific curriculum strands.
3. Ensure full implementation of best practices. Use data to consider the level of implementation before adding or abandoning new practices.
4. Align classroom instruction to assessment. Use data to pinpoint specific assessment methods that need to be addressed in the classroom.
5. Identify personnel concerns. Use data to identify teachers who consistently help students to excel in order to encourage them to share knowledge and expertise.

Move #2:

Tend to the Environment

A hospitable to learning environment is one that that is friendly toward new ideas and welcoming to those who struggle to question themselves and their learning (Toll, 2010). In this type of environment teachers do not have to hide what they know and don't know.

This means more than providing treats at meetings and having lamps and plants in the office. In essence a hospitable school provides comfortable spaces in which to do uncomfortable work. When difficult examinations of past-held beliefs or current failed efforts take place these struggles must occur within a culture that can honor that work and move on to new learning.

For this to happen the principal must conscientiously create spaces in the school both in and outside of classrooms that welcome learning. During the summer months leaders need to take stock of their surroundings and ask themselves, "Is this space conducive to learning?"



Invitational Settings

Create Welcoming Spaces

The environment in schools speaks volumes about the values in a school. Chapter six discussed the message that is being sent when the walls of a school are bare versus walls that display student learning. In an open to learning environments principals understand that the climate of the school is shaped by the decisions they make large and small about environment. For example, Kim changed from using bells to signal class changes to using music. This simple but subtle changed helped to create an entirely different mood during passing periods.

During the summer months principals must make sure to create or update the spaces that invite learning. These spaces are found in the common areas of the school as well as in classrooms. First impressions are powerful and lasting. Tending to the aesthetics of the front entrance and foyer of the school is imperative. When the principal tends to the physical environment in the summer teachers return in the fall and are inspired to do the same in their classroom.



Move #3: Reflect and Respond

Decision making is enhanced when we reflect on our experiences. This requires the ability to solve a problem while in the middle of it (in action) and to reflect when the practice is finished (on action). Reflection about the action is thinking about things in the environment that stand in the way of doing the important work. These types of reflection help leaders think about not only what they did, but how they did it (Schon, 1987; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2010) .

Reflecting on the behaviors that keep the focus on the important aspects of the work provides the context and conditions for success. Once a leader identifies the factors in the environment that distract them from leading teaching and learning they can make positive changes. Summer is the optimal time to engage in reflection on and about action.

The months or weeks when students are not in school provide a golden opportunity for leaders to take a deep breath and think deeply about successes and misses without the ongoing distractions that are inherent when school is in session. This time for reflection helps to shape future actions and promotes the likelihood that these actions will be successful in moving the system forward.

Read

During the summer principals need to identify areas where further study is needed and read books, blogs, and articles that help deepen knowledge. Seek out those areas where you feel you need to grow and do a deep dive. For example, if you are an elementary principal and only taught in the upper grades use the summer to study effective early childhood practices.

During these months target an area where more background knowledge is needed and spend time delving into learning. Don't be afraid to set summer reading goals for yourself and your team!

Think

Reflection during the summer must focus on how to build professional capital so teachers can continue to work together in meaningful ways. The leader needs to wrestle with the explicit actions teachers will take to impact achievement. The key to generating widespread impact on learning and culture lies in mobilizing the group to work in specific ways (Fullan, 2014).

Principals need to ask questions of themselves such as:

- How am I going to make processes better?
- How do I make teachers more efficient?
- How do I develop ownership for learning?
- How do I continue to empower teachers?

References

Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.