



**The  
Broad  
Center**

Education leaders  
Community partners  
Lasting results for students

# K-12 SENIOR TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

Improving Organizational Leadership  
in School Systems

**DECEMBER 2020**



## Background

The Broad Center (TBC) launched the Partner Strategy team in November 2018 with a mission to increase TBC's impact by strategically focusing supports to school systems – broadening our historical focus on supporting individual school system leaders – to increase their effectiveness and improve their outcomes for students. This mission required the consolidation of existing workstreams from across the organization and the creation of new workstreams, particularly in the areas of research (from academic literature and from practitioners in the field) and knowledge sharing.

The Partner Strategy team's approach included:

- **Engaging with specific school systems** to better understand their context and provide additional support;
- **Collaborating across TBC teams** to expand the number of leaders supported in these school systems;
- Identifying and **aligning with school system leaders on the most critical key improvement strategies** and
- **Leveraging our network and strategic alliances** to support these system leaders in addressing these key improvement areas.

We believed that these activities would enable leaders (including but not limited to our network members) to increase their individual impact and enable systems to address key areas for improvement, be more efficient and effective and ultimately improve student outcomes.

## The Work

To achieve our ambitious goals, the Partner Strategy team set out to work with about 20 school systems. Our point of entry was the superintendent. We met with these leaders to better understand their goals and challenges

with an emphasis on leadership, management and talent. Our primary offer of supports included 360-degree feedback assessments (see our publication, [Connecting the Dots: Linking K-12 Systems Leadership Development to Organizational Outcomes](#)), executive coaching, talent match (identifying roles for incoming Broad Residents, helping identify and recruit alumni to take on open roles in the system) and support match (knowledge sharing, referring content experts and making connections across systems).

The talent match work, which TBC had been engaged in for years, had always created opportunities to engage with cabinet-level leaders. However, we became more focused on fully understanding their specific contexts and talent strategies so we could make better matches with incoming Residents and better identify opportunities for alumni.

The support match work was a new opportunity to build on our understanding of strategies that we believed would drive improvement. We created the School System Excellence and Framework (see Appendix) that was informed by research, practitioners and data on essential measures to drive positive outcomes for all students.

Through these strands, we were able to work with senior teams in a more comprehensive way. We knew that many of our partner school systems were led by high performers, yet we soon learned that the siloed nature and inherent issues of working as a team can stifle progress and sometimes even cause systems to regress. With the work we already had in progress, we felt we were well positioned to support these leaders and teams. We sought to understand how to increase the effectiveness of K-12 senior teams.

As part of our work, we created a series of toolkits to help clarify the shift in existing and new chief roles with the understanding that individual effectiveness and clarity of role are crucial to any team's effectiveness, including:

- the [Strategic Chief Financial Officer](#) publication

done in partnership with the Education Resource Strategies (ERS);

- the [Chief Innovation Officer Toolkit](#) completed in partnership with NewSchools Venture Fund and Education First and
- the [Strategic Chief Human Resource Officer Toolkit](#) developed in collaboration with the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy.

These are critical resources to inform superintendents in hiring decisions for new, existing and aspiring chiefs.

This brief serves as an overview of the work we pursued to increase senior team effectiveness. We hope that sharing our early efforts and learnings will inform and inspire others to continue this mission critical work.



# A LITERATURE REVIEW

## The Role of Senior Teams and Key Competencies for Effectiveness

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### Abstract

*This literature review examines consistent themes in research on the role and competencies of highly effective senior leadership teams inside and outside of K-12 education. Additionally, this literature review identifies competencies not found in existing research but identified by practitioners. Note that not all resources outlined in this review were created specifically for the use of senior leadership teams (often referred to as executive and management teams) in the K-12 space. Any time a referenced resource was created specifically for senior teams in education contexts, it is noted.*

### Introduction

How do we support senior teams if we have yet to define their role and effectiveness? This is a question faced by The Broad Center, which operates leadership programs for mid-level leaders to superintendents/CEOs in public school systems. The TBC theory of action includes developing and supporting these individual leaders and supporting our partner school systems' senior team effectiveness. Our TBC School System Excellence and Equity Framework (see Appendix A) outlines critical strategies for achieving excellence and equity that includes committing to a culture of inclusivity, continuous growth, and results. Each school system's senior team member plays a critical leadership role in owning this strategy along with many others that cut across departments. Senior teams are established to manage specific functional areas and set the strategic and

operational planning of the organization. There are key areas that drive the management of senior teams: 1) responding to the complex and often changing external environment, 2) managing a diverse set of independent units within the organization, and 3) shaping the leadership succession process at all levels of the organization (Ancona, 1989).

Many senior leaders are experts in their functional areas and high performers, yet as a senior team they are more than likely underperforming (Cahill, 2017). Underperformance impacts overall organizational outcomes and ranges from a variety of issues but stems from a lack of clarity in role and understanding of what is required for their collective effectiveness (Landles-Cobb, 2018). In addition, senior leaders often struggle to balance the priority of running their departments with the need to work with their peers as a leadership team focusing on the success of the entire organization (Cahill, 2017). This literature review summarizes the role of the senior team and the key competencies for its effectiveness.

### The Role of Senior Teams

Superintendents and CEOs hire leaders to direct and manage strategic priorities, implementation of the departments' core functional work and department staff. Typically, these individuals have been hired because of their strong performance in a functional area. Yet, their roles also require them to work collectively to drive overall organization performance. This often presents a conflict

between leading their individual department and working together to drive the success of the entire organization. 97% of CEOs participating in a Center for Creative Leadership study reported that the effectiveness of their senior teams impacts the overall effectiveness of the organization (Cahill, 2017). High performing senior teams tackle complex challenges, using their combined expertise and experience to manage crises, explore multiple options and build commitment to new strategic initiatives across the organization (Korn Ferry, 2018).

### **Organizational Culture**

The importance of creating an intentional culture in senior leadership teams cannot be overstated. This theme emerged consistently across many resources, both academic and non-academic. A senior team in any type of organization is charged with providing the organizational and cultural DNA for the organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2019).

Creating the right organizational culture, one that allows employees and teams to thrive, is crucial to the success of the organization and of the senior team itself. Many effective executives choose to create a culture based on collaboration, informal socialization and diversity of skills and talents. A 2007 study showed that another key role for executives is ensuring that mentoring, coaching and networking become enshrined in their own behavior and throughout the organization (Gratton and Erickson, 2007). The study showed that both informal and formal mentoring cultures played a role in the success of an organization and that informal mentoring had even larger positive effects. This research could suggest that senior leadership teams should be intentional about establishing a “gift culture” that emphasizes informal coaching and deemphasizes transactional behaviors.

The senior leadership team is not only responsible for the informal interactions that govern everyday life, but also for the formal culture that exists within an organization (rule, processes, systems, etc.). It is the responsibility of executive teams to establish a culture of accountability and goal

setting for the entire organization, as well as a culture that emphasizes opportunities over problems (McGuinness, 2018; Drucker, 2004).

### **Strategic Focus**

Among a leader’s most important responsibilities is the task of creating strategic focus within their organization. This can be effectively done through clearly defining the operating model on which their organization will rely (McGuinness, 2018). Operating models drive strategic behavior and strategic decision making. How will information be exchanged? How will members of the organization communicate about challenges and opportunities? How will the leader provide their teams with advice and counsel? These questions are foundational to establishing an organization’s strategy and must be asked and evaluated consistently as an organization develops new strategic needs (Appelbaum and Pease, 2015).

Creating a strategic focus can manifest in several ways: creating a vision for the organization, spending time and energy discussing organizational and team strategy, balancing risk, and innovation, anticipating future needs and opportunities and ensuring the future sustainability of the organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2017).

### **Collective Approach**

Various pieces of literature show that high-performing teams use a collaborative approach and an organization-wide view of their individual and team functions to break silos and create a vision for their organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2019). It is the responsibility of the senior leader to take an enterprise view, foster a strong sense of community and create shared values across their organization (Erickson, 2007). Creating a sense of shared priorities and ensuring that those priorities are communicated across all functional areas is key to organizational health and executive team effectiveness (Bush and Glover, 2014). In addition, an effective senior team collectively drives organizational outcomes for success.

## Role Clarity

An individual member of a team is only able to thrive if they have a clear understanding of their role, responsibilities and the consequences of their performance (Google, 2018). It is important for senior leadership teams to ensure that every member of their team has a full understanding of what is expected of them. It is also crucial that senior leadership teams have clarity about the role of the senior leadership team itself and the roles that the individual members of the team fulfill (Goodall, 2013).

## Vision

Successful leaders develop strong visions for their school systems and organizations. They gear their systems toward the achievement of the shared vision and ensure that their team is aligned on what that vision is (Bush and Glover, 2003). Patricia Thompson, Ph.D., suggests that “vision provides a rallying cry that energizes everyone to accomplish big things.” Effective senior leaders will be clear about where they are headed. They will use bold ideas to inspire their organizations to fulfill their own potential. (Thompson, 2017). An effective vision and purpose will not only focus on the organizational benefits of fulfilling potential, but the positive impact accomplishing the vision will have on the individual and on society (Cranston and Keller, 2013). Successful leaders build a consistent narrative across all stakeholders on the system's north star that helps to articulate the why behind the decisions that are made.

## Senior Team Competencies and Traits

TBC has identified necessary individual leadership competencies based on research and analysis from our 360-degree feedback assessments. TBC's key competencies are strategy, vision, communication, management, navigation and sustained impact. In addition, the following traits have been identified as necessary for senior leaders to be successful in leading transformation: empathy, flexibility, courage, humility, resilience, self-awareness and development orientation. While we believe

every leader should have strengths in these competencies and traits, we recognize these competencies and traits do not capture what is needed for a leadership team to collectively lead a high performing organization. Given the number of competencies that are mentioned in literature, this review is focused on reoccurring themes and alignment with TBC leadership competencies.

## COMPETENCIES

These are the reoccurring competencies identified in the senior team effectiveness literature review:

### Communication

Effective executives ensure that their plans and needs are being understood, and that the opinions of others in the organization are integrated into those plans (Drucker, 2004). It is the responsibility of the senior executive to oversee the flow of information and to ensure that their information needs are being understood clearly. Overseeing intra-organizational and intra-team communication is one of the primary roles of the effective executive.

### Continuous Improvement

Senior teams must be willing to work together on improving as a team and as an organization (Korn Ferry, 2018). The nature of running a K-12 school system requires leaders to examine regularly and identify opportunities to improve both academics and operations.

### Constructive Conflict

Senior leaders must have comfort with active support for diverse perspectives and productive disagreement as necessary ingredients to innovation and good decisions (Landles-Cobb, 2017). It is critical that any senior team is focused on cognitive conflict which allows disagreement on ideas, processes and procedures versus affective conflict when conflicts are mistaken by personality clashes, frictions or frustration (Jehn, 1997).

### Decision Making

Executive teams can only be effective when their

decisions and thinking spread quickly across large organizations (Center for Creative Leadership, 2019). Establishing a solid plan for the diffusion of information regarding what and how decisions have been made ensures that the norms, values and behaviors of the executive team are modeled by other teams and individuals. Effective executives are also careful to take responsibility for decisions made and communicate who is accountable for carrying those decisions out (Drucker, 2004). Senior leaders review decisions periodically to assess if the correct choice was made.

### **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)**

Senior team leaders must have a shared understanding of the value of DEI, in addition to a commitment to elevate underrepresented voices, disrupt bias and privilege in the team and its work and in the organization's culture (Landles-Cobb, 2017). Diverse teams are better equipped to problem solve and handle complex decision making. While homogeneous groups feel more confident in their performance and group interactions, diverse groups are more successful in completing their tasks (Phillips, Liljenquist, and Neale, 2008). Diversity on senior teams comes with increased cognitive processing and more exchanging of information (Phillips, Liljenquist, and Neale, 2008). When diverse teams make and execute decisions, they deliver 60% better results (Larson, 2017). Diverse and inclusive teams perform better. Inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87% of the time and they make decisions twice as fast with half the meetings (Cloverpop, 2017).

### **Influence**

High performing senior teams know that influence is more impactful than authority. While both are related aspects of leadership, influence is informal and intentional (Bush and Glover, 2014). Influence is exerted knowingly to achieve a goal or specific outcome. In exercising their influence, effective senior leaders consider their words and actions (Sierra Leadership, 2019). Senior leaders use their actions to influence others by modeling positive behaviors, like collaboration (Erickson, 2007). Senior leaders model productive dialogue and

use their influence to impact the way that other team members relate to one another (McGuinness, 2018). Executive leaders leverage their influence to increase organizational cohesiveness and productivity.

### **Management**

Effective senior executives are protective of their time and encourage others in their organization to be as well. They consistently dedicate time to thinking deeply about big problems in their organization and they do this by protecting their schedules (Kaufman and Gregoire, 2015). While connection and collaboration play a role in advancing new ideas, insights are often gained and crystallized during quiet reflection. Cultivating a schedule that prioritizes the needs of the individual helps foster self-compassion, increased energy and productivity, and personal empowerment (Sierra Leadership, 2019).

### **Mutual Accountability**

Each member of the team must be committed to the team processes, the decisions of the team and holding each other accountable for expected performance (Landles-Cobb, 2017).

## **TRAITS**

These are the reoccurring traits identified in the senior team effectiveness literature review:

### **Flexibility**

Literature pertaining directly to senior leadership teams in K-12 contexts shows that flexibility is a key element that contributes to the success of schools (Goodall, 2013). The key is maintaining a balance of flexibility and experience on senior leadership teams. Experience can lead to stagnation, but teams that remained flexible in their roles, work styles and approach to problem solving saw outstanding results. They focused on meeting the needs of their school system, not on blindly applying old conventions to new challenges.

### **Self-awareness**

Effective leaders possess self-awareness which

creates the conditions for strong leadership (Goodall, 2013). A 2009 study found that leadership teams in secondary schools benefitted from a consistent drive toward self-improvement on the part of senior leadership team members and that self-improvement behaviors resulted in high levels of integrity and communication. Executives model internal and external self-awareness for others at their organization and remain honest about their blind spots and their strengths (McGuinness, 2018).

### **Trust**

Researchers identified psychological safety and dependability as two of the most crucial ingredients for getting a team to work together effectively (Google, 2018). Dependability refers to the feeling of safety that comes when individuals reliably complete work on time and psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk. Senior leaders also must employ trust when decision-making and must trust their instincts when they are making choices in an area where they have substantial experience (Sierra Leadership, 2019). Psychological safety allows risk-taking and confidence that leaders will not embarrass or retaliate for speaking up (Landles-Cobb, 2017).



## **Discussion**

This literature review lays out the big themes that cut across related competencies and traits for senior team effectiveness. Our definition of effective is tied to improving student outcomes. Going forward, we know there is much to identify around what strategies best support senior teams and will lead to results. We recognize that we have over 850 individual leaders in our network working in nearly 180 school systems. TBC extends support to senior teams in a subset of organizations and seeks to maximize the impact of our support.

The literature included a variety of ways senior teams should behave collectively to be most effective. We did not include behaviors which showed up in operations, policies, and procedures for the team. One that was consistently named was team interaction and norms. These practices are defined by each senior team to guide decision-making, communication, trust and other competencies outlined in this review. The existence of team norms without these competencies and traits would be ineffective (Landles-Cobb, 2018).

The superintendent/CEO is responsible for developing and managing the senior team. The effectiveness of a senior team is dependent on the mix of professional skills and ability to align and work together on organizational success. The team composition was not considered as a competency or trait, since ultimately this is the responsibility of the superintendent/CEO and should be included in their separate assessment (Korn Ferry, 2018).

We reviewed a variety of models outlining the role and requirements for senior team effectiveness. The Center for Creative Leadership had the most comprehensive and aligned model (see Figure 1) to the overall findings in the literature review. In addition, the organization has two assessment tools: Executive Team Scan and Direction Alignment and Commitment. However, none of these are tailored to the school system context.



## THE EXECUTIVE TEAM'S THREE CRUCIAL IMPERATIVES VIA CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

For an organization to be successful, the executive team must intentionally attend to these areas of collective effort:

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### Strategic Focus

- Establishing vision,
- Spending time and energy at the strategic level,
- Balancing risk and innovation
- Anticipating future needs and opportunities

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### Collective Approach

- Taking an enterprise view
- Working together as a collective enterprise asset
- Putting the good of the enterprise over individual or personal gain
- Modeling breaking down silos and cocreating solutions

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### Team Interaction

- Valuing differences among team members
  - Listening and communicating effectively
  - Asking each other for inputs
  - Trusting and respecting each other
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TBC believes there is a role for the many organizations supporting senior leaders to align on effective competencies and traits and to create a new assessment designed specifically for K-12 senior teams. This could accelerate our collective efforts to support these leaders to deliver on their school systems' goals to prepare all students for college, careers and life.

## Conclusion

Senior team effectiveness is critical to the health of any organization. The senior leaders set the vision, priorities and expectations and enable the team to accomplish organizational goals. An assessment tool based on input from practitioners on this review would be a substantial contribution to the K-12 leadership arena. Our goal is to work with our partners to identify opportunities to support senior teams in increasing their overall effectiveness, and ultimately see this translate into improved outcomes for all students.

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# SENIOR TEAM EFFECTIVENESS: COMPETENCIES AND TRAITS

## Overview

Based on our experience at TBC, the literature review and input from practitioners, we know that the superintendent is critical in the success and effectiveness of the senior team. They are responsible for deciding who is on their senior leadership team, managing these leaders and setting the expectations for how they work together.

It is clear that for a senior team to be effective, there must be clarity from the superintendent on their role in managing the team. There are a variety of ways that this can be done well, whether it is the superintendent directly or chief of staff or deputy superintendent in partnership with the superintendent. Regardless of the structure, there must be clarity on who is managing the senior team and the expectations on how they work together to lead and equitable and excellent system.

In addition, the superintendent must develop a senior team that is diverse by design. The composition of the team should be reflective of the student population in some ways. Diversity encompasses gender, identity, ethnicity, experience, background and more.

This list of competencies and traits is informed by the literature review and conversations held with the following practitioners and TBC team members on October 22, 2019 at the Aspen Institute in Washington, DC:

- Suzanne Anderson, Executive Coach, The Collaborations Group
- Elizabeth “Betsy” Arons, CEO, Urban Schools Human Capital Academy
- Tequilla Brownie, Executive Vice President, TNTP
- Ann Clark (Broad Academy 2010), Superintendent in Residence, The Leadership Academy
- Ed Dieterle, Executive Director, Center for External Research and Strategic Alliances, Educational Testing Service (ETS)
- Andrea Foggy-Paxton, Managing Director, Partner Strategy, The Broad Center
- Barbara Jenkins (Broad Academy 2006), Superintendent, Orange County Public Schools (FL)
- Tyra Mariani (Broad Residency 2003-05), Facilitator
- Derek Mitchell, CEO, Partners for School Innovation
- Rakhee Patel, Senior Director of Data, Research and Evaluation, The Broad Center
- Gene Pinkard, Director, Practice & Leadership, Education and Society Program, Aspen Institute
- Rachael Shrout, Director, Partner Strategy, The Broad Center
- Jonathan Travers, Partner, Education Resource Strategies (ERS)
- Bi Vuong, Managing Director, Project Evident

We acknowledge this list is not meant to be exhaustive but focused on the most important qualities senior teams need to be effective in running systems that provide equity and excellence to all students.

## COMPETENCIES

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### Shared Vision and Values

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- Clear vision/north star
- Equity focus – both for schools/students and in building internal teams
- Alignment of departmental vision with organizational vision
- Belief in the work and that they can do it
- Value for the work
- Student/school-focused/service orientation
- Shared ownership for results

### Communication

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- Aligned, coherent message
- Clarity of processes
- Knowledge and understanding of vision across the organization
- Creation of a consistent narrative across all stakeholders on the system's north star that helps to articulate the why behind the decisions that are made
- Regular communication on the status of the organization on an on-going basis
- Clear communication of decisions/decision-making process to entire organization (and desired outcome or implications)

### Organization Culture

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- Intentional building and communication of organizational culture and values
- Care for each other and teams
- Understanding of the impact of your department on the whole of the organization and other departments
- Professional trust
- Assumption of best of intent
- Discipline
- Agility
- Shared accountability
- No rewarding of bad behavior
- Transparency
- Strong ethics/morals - willing to take risks and speak up to matters that are ethically sensitive
- Respect for diversity on team
- Learning orientation – failure is acceptable
- Development of a bench of people to take your place

### Solutions-oriented at Senior Team and System-Level

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- System-level thinking (vs. department-level) and alignment on tactics and strategy
- Engagement in root cause analysis
- Ability to work through conflict to identify evidence-based solutions and agree to solutions that put system goals above personal issues
- Synthesis of data and use of data for action
- Collaboration – cross-functional alignment, prioritization of organizational goals over departmental goals
- Progress monitoring
- Continuous-improvement - ability to revise strategy based on evidence
- Clear and effective decision-making process

### Navigation

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- Understanding of the micro political of governance structure
- Active involvement of a range of stakeholders in creating new initiatives and strategies to fill gaps in your perspective and build buy-in
- Understanding and anticipation of the responses of various stakeholders to changes, initiatives and actions by the system; knowledge of which messages and data speak best to each stakeholder group
- Demonstration of empathy and trust building with internal (teachers, administrators and staff) and external (board, community leaders and parents) stakeholders

### Strategic Management

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- Strategic resource management – talent and money
- Understanding of individual and team purpose and roles
- Cross functional orientation and engagement
- Reprioritization of department on behalf of system including giving up resources when needed and aligning on tactics and strategy
- Decision-making and clear communication to rest of the organization (including desired outcome or implications)
- Capacity building of others
- Synthesis of data and use of data for action
- Incorporation of sustainability as part of the strategies

## TRAITS

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### Trust/Relentless Reliability

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- Capabilities
- Integrity
- Results
- Intent
- Personal consistency/dependability
- Personal accountability when things go wrong
- Efficacy

### Self-Awareness

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- Non-toxic interactions
- Emotional intelligence
- Humility

# APPENDIX

## SCHOOL SYSTEM EXCELLENCE & EQUITY FRAMEWORK

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Excellence</b> | We believe every child deserves a future of limitless possibilities. To get there, we need high-performing school systems to open the doors of opportunity so every school, every classroom and every student gets what they need to be successful. In service of that mission, The Broad Center focuses on research-based strategies we believe to be integral in successfully transforming an organization or system to produce radically different and significantly better results for all students.  |
| <b>Equity</b>     | Equity is essential to ensure the needs of every student are met. It is therefore integrated in all aspects of our program and this framework. To help every child reach their full potential, school systems: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge the history behind the systems and structures that drive inequities and how they manifest in education today, and actively work to dismantle them</li><li>• Hold themselves accountable to ensure that the students and communities who need the most get the resources they need to succeed and thrive</li><li>• Commit to equity-focused decision making throughout the school system and communities served</li></ul> |

## SYSTEM-LEVEL PRIORITY AREAS

To achieve excellence and equity for all students, we believe school systems should work toward goals in these priority areas:



### DELIVER HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Provide every student with a learning environment that empowers them to reach their full potential.



### ATTRACT, DEVELOP AND RETAIN EXCEPTIONAL TALENT

Develop and implement a comprehensive talent strategy with focus on performance and diversity, equity and inclusion.



### COMMIT TO A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVITY, CONTINUOUS GROWTH AND RESULTS

Execute a strategy centered on a shared vision and values.



### EXECUTE STRONG OPERATIONS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS AND STAFF

Ensure all system-level operations work in service of the academic mission.



### EMPOWER AND ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY

Partner with families and the community to make the best decisions for students.



**The  
Broad  
Center**

Education leaders  
Community partners  
Lasting results for students

[broadcenter.org](http://broadcenter.org)