

ADMIN & MANAGEMENT | LEADERSHIP

Why execution wins the district leadership race

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore June 16, 2025



There's no shortage of good ideas. Districts don't fail for lack of ideas, they fail at the junctions: between central office and schools, strategy and execution, and ambition and alignment.

In this article, we examine what school districts can learn from the 4×100 relay and why success hinges not on individual brilliance but on seamless execution. We argue that handoffs, between departments, leaders and phases of work, are where successes and failures happen.

This was supposed to be their moment

All eyes were on them. The U.S. Men's 4×100 relay team was poised to break a two-decade medal drought. They had stunned the world the day before, blazing through their qualifying heat in just 37.47 seconds.

This squad had the firepower to win. Anchoring them was Noah Lyles, "the fastest man in the world," fresh off a gold in the 100M and a bronze in the 200M, despite a recent bout with COVID.

But it was not their moment. The U.S. finished a disappointing seventh. Not because they lacked speed, but because they botched the baton passes. Twice.



The second leg left early, forcing a desperate handoff outside the exchange zone. The final pass lacked momentum entirely. It didn't matter in the end: the team was disqualified. The medals would wait.

Success in the relay is not about speed. All the runners are fast. Knowing that the three hand-offs are the moments that count, teams spend endless hours focused on skill, trust, communication, and teamwork.

Relay teams have better records than school districts

Change initiatives fail more than half the time in school systems, even though discipline is a staple of leadership. Sure, school districts have more than four stakeholders and implementing the reading curricula is more complex than passing an aluminum baton.

So are standing up an MTSS framework, implementing high dosage tutoring or improving student attendance. But lately we've noticed a single point of failure that may account for this lack of success: how the baton gets passed during these initiatives.

Amazon lists thousands of titles about change management. Some of the most popular national training institutes for district leaders focus on implementing change.

We use a variety of proven models in our work and often recommend Kotter's Leading Change as an all-purpose approach. But what if failure is built into most initiatives, especially instructional initiatives, before the change process is even launched?

We started to notice that the leaders focus on the speed of the runners and not the trust, communication and teamwork that ensures a successful hand-off.

Change management models typically approach change like it's a marathon: an endurance test. Vision. Stamina. Grit. The marathon metaphor is romantic. One leader sets the pace. Pushes through the pain. Crosses the finish line.

But that mindset creates bottlenecks and burnout. Superintendents end up trying to carry too much. Principals lose clarity amid competing demands. Teachers inherit half-baked initiatives and blurry directions.

Meanwhile, political timelines and bureaucratic constraints reward urgency over clarity. Soon district leaders start talking about "fidelity," "walkthroughs," and "resistance."

Change doesn't break down from lack of will. It breaks down in the handoffs.

And like any good relay, success doesn't depend only on how fast anyone runs. It depends on how well the baton is passed from district leaders to principals, from principals to teacher leaders, and from teams to classrooms.

What great relays teach us about leading change

A 4x100 relay has no room for improvisation. It thrives on rhythm, roles and trust. Five lessons apply directly to schools:



1. Each runner has a job

No one runs the entire race. Each runner owns their leg and only their leg.

In practice: Principals shouldn't micromanage teacher leaders. Superintendents shouldn't carry school-based change. Clarity about who runs what—strategy, messaging, logistics, feedback—is non-negotiable.

2. Baton pass beats raw speed

The fastest sprinters can still lose if the baton is fumbled. Timing is everything.

In practice: The baton is the plan, the priority, the expectation. It needs to be passed with clarity. Who owns the next step? When? With what support? Most fumbles come from assumptions and silence, not sabotage.

In real relays, runners rehearse handoffs relentlessly. They practice the exchange: when to reach, where to look, how to move. In schools, we rarely rehearse our change transitions.

That's a mistake. Leaders need to practice giving and receiving responsibility, not just talking strategy.

Leaders in Rush-Henrietta Public Schools elevate their "handoffs" by rehearsing cross-team responsibilities during leadership team meetings.

3. The zones matter most

The exchange zone is where the race is won or lost. It's where everything can go wrong and things can go right.

In practice: Our zones include: the rollout of a new strategy, the principal-to-coach transition, the back-to-school PD window and the shift from vision to execution. Leaders must intentionally plan these zones, not rush through them.

Everett (Wash.) Public Schools works intentionally to articulate strategic priorities and student achievement outcomes, stemming all the way from board and superintendent goals, through central office and school-based leaders' goals, into school and department improvement plans.

4. Trust is the real currency

Good runners trust each other to be there, moving at the right speed and ready. There is no second-guessing.

In practice: Micromanaging kills momentum. So does disengagement. Leaders must build trust vertically and laterally, enough to release control but not abandon accountability.

Adams County School District #14 has faced many challenges and tests to trust. Trust-building and preservation are heavily guarded there, between cabinet leaders and, more importantly, the community.



5. Know what your team has left in the tank

Even the strongest runners have limits. Passing a baton to a team member who's depleted—physically, emotionally or politically—risks a dropped initiative.

In practice: You may be handing your baton off to someone who is already juggling multiple batons or has run two heats earlier. Make informed judgments about capacity, timing and energy before holding that baton out.

We just finished "re-org season." Districts like New York City Schools have spent focused time in offboarding and onboarding personnel changes so schools experience seamlessness.

6. It's the team that wins

There are no medals for great solo legs. Everyone gets the prize, or no one does.

In practice: Reward collective execution. Recognize the transfer moments. Shine a light on teams that move the baton, not just individuals who run hard.

Oakwood City Schools rewards flawless batoning through highly visible moments of celebration that explicitly name the completion of successful initiatives.

Execution before innovation, and after

We love to celebrate innovation: Visionary ideas, bold moves, breakthrough strategies. But innovation doesn't lead, it follows.

The foundation of every successful innovation is consistent execution. A team without the discipline to deliver the basics will never have the credibility or the stability to take smart risks.

Before the baton can be passed, each runner must master their leg. The same goes for leadership. You can't innovate your way out of poor follow-through. Teams that leap to innovation without a track record of reliable execution usually end up spinning, not sprinting.

And even when you do pass the baton—when your big idea catches momentum and shifts to the next phase—execution remains the difference between a win and a stumble.

Innovation isn't a one-person sprint. It's a team relay. It rises or falls not just on brilliance but on how well we hand off, how clearly we communicate and how reliably we carry the work through to the finish.

Execution comes first. Execution carries us through. Without it, even the best ideas never cross the finish line.

Call to Action: Build the team that finishes the race

Too often, we focus on assembling star performers and forget that winning depends on the handoffs.



The U.S. Men's 4x100 Relay team had the fastest individual runners but their baton passes failed. Your leadership team is no different. Execution falters not because of weak talent, but because responsibilities are unclear, timing is off and trust is thin.

This week, take three concrete actions:

1. **Clarify the hand-offs:** Identify one initiative where confusion exists between team members or departments. **Ask:** Who hands off to whom? When? With what standard of readiness?
2. **Time the exchange zone:** Look at your calendar and pinpoint the moment when one person or team finishes and another begins. Schedule a joint checkpoint right before that moment, not after.
3. **Practice the pass:** Pick one high-stakes project and role-play a key handoff. What does "ready" look like? What makes a clean pass? Use this conversation to tighten your systems and build mutual accountability.

Why now? Because momentum isn't magic, it's designed. If your team is dropping the baton, it's not a talent issue. It's a leadership issue. And it's fixable.

Forward this to your cabinet or leadership team and ask: Where are our baton passes most vulnerable right now and how will we fix them?

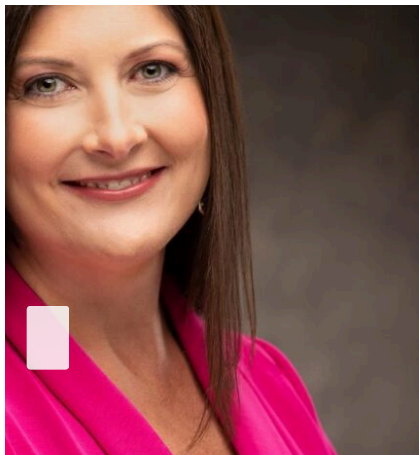
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