

UNCATEGORIZED

Why now is the time for a workforce step back

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore March 24, 2025



Imagine your district as a reality TV series. In one episode, the finance chief is frantically crunching numbers while the HR director is filling vacancies like they're playing Whack-a-Mole. Meanwhile, principals scramble to fill staff gaps while teachers quietly burn out like candles on a forgotten birthday cake.

Sound familiar? It's time to press pause and take a workforce step back

As budgets are being finalized and HR teams crank up their staffing work, this is the perfect time for a formal, system-wide step back to answer those questions. We've written about how to measure "[learning on investment](#)" and [current workforce trends](#). Here, we will focus on doing three step backs, away from day-to-day work:

- Improve the performance of your district teams and departments
- Improve the placement and development of school leaders
- Ensure that your decentralized teacher hiring process is putting the most effective teachers in front of the highest need students.

Without this deliberate reflection, districts risk making workforce decisions habitually and reactively rather than strategically.

Districts and schools will never outperform their workforce. Taking a disciplined approach to evaluating talent ensures alignment with strategic goals, student achievement and operational efficiency.



Think of this article like a tool to help you:

- Align your org chart with strategic goals. Stop directors from doing manager work and chiefs from being glorified to-do list checkers.
- Ensure principals understand expectations and deliver measurable results. Don't be afraid to move, develop or transition leaders to maximize impact.
- Right-size your staff and track retention like it's gold. Retaining a great teacher beats scrambling to replace one later.
- Use performance data, retention trends and HR metrics to make informed decisions. Don't let gut feelings guide your hiring.
- Make this reflection a yearly habit to keep your district proactive, not reactive.

Framing the step back—the 4-1-1

Each year, districts roll forward without pausing to assess their workforce's effectiveness against current performance and future needs. This is exacerbated by the sheer busyness at this time of year.

Before beginning an annual talent step back, district leaders should ask themselves:

- Can everyone name the right priorities?
- Do we have the right people in the right roles?
- Are our teams structured to build the right relationships and collaborations?

This is not just about personnel—it's about cultivating a culture of continuous improvement at every level of the organization.

Using data to drive decisions

Strategic workforce assessments are data driven. Begin by collecting and discussing:

- **Performance data:** Formal evaluations, less formal goal-setting processes, departmental outputs, student outcome measures, satisfaction survey data from “customers” such as students, families, and internal end users such as principals who interact with the human resource team.
- **Retention trends:** Are there patterns in who stays and who leaves? Are there divisions, schools or teams with persistent turnover? Are there teams that could use some fresh faces? Are teams with little cross-training leading to challenges when someone is absent?
- **HR and human capital metrics:** There are two types of HR/HC metrics—those that measure output (e.g., total number of teachers hired, current vacancies) and those that measure performance (e.g., average time to fill a vacancy, steps in the onboarding process). It's worth looking at both.
- **Scenario planning:** Are we prepared for different staffing realities due to funding shifts, declining enrollment or policy changes?

With these measures in mind, district leaders can proactively address challenges instead of reacting to crises later in the new fiscal year.

Senior leadership: Start the step back at the top



For senior leaders—directors and above—the step back should focus organizational alignment, leadership effectiveness and supervisory structures.

- Does the 'org chart' align with strategic goals or does it reflect outdated roles and priorities?
- Even if the structure is correct, do we have the right people in the right roles?
- Are leadership teams collaborating effectively across functions?

Common problem areas include:

- **Finance vs. HR:** Is budget planning disconnected from staffing realities? Is there a smooth workflow between departments for transactional work such as payroll and onboarding?
- **Curriculum & instruction vs. Principal supervisors:** Are instructional priorities being executed effectively?
- **Operations leadership:** Are logistical and operational teams functioning cohesively?

Too often, senior leaders spend time handling work that should be done one or two levels below them. Chiefs end up doing director-level work and directors take on manager tasks. This prevents them from focusing on strategy, system improvement and high-impact leadership.

Consider your supervisory structures and the clarity of roles & responsibilities.

- Are directors meeting regularly with their teams for goal-setting and performance monitoring?
- Do team members get clear expectations and feedback about their performance?
- Are we holding chiefs and department heads accountable for their own workforce planning and alignment?

When gaps in workforce capacity emerge, districts often fall into three dysfunctional responses:

1. Senior leaders taking on junior work that pulls them away from their strategic responsibilities.
2. Process bloat, where timelines are extended, there are steps or people added to a weak process, and unnecessary paperwork is added instead of solving the core issue.
3. Over-reliance on top performers, which leads to burnout and inequitable distribution of workload.

The strategic alternative to these behaviors is to focus on more explicit roles and responsibilities, clarity about cross-functional processes, and better tracking of performance measures.

Strong middle management is essential

How do principals understand what they are expected to achieve and how is this communicated across the district? Any principal in their second year or beyond should be showing measurable student outcome improvements. If not, serious developmental conversations—or reassignments—should be considered without delay.



Are there opportunities to use mobility and developmental assignments to deepen school leaders' understanding of and commitment to the district goals and expectations?

- Can experienced leaders be reassigned to struggling campuses?
- Do part-time assignments offer viable short-term solutions for urgent issues such as a sudden medical leave, school safety issues, a drop in enrollment or master scheduling?
- How do APs receive structured opportunities to develop principal-level competencies?
- In districts where principals or APs don't have full-year contracts, are there district-level projects that need to be done over the summer by a school leader on "special assignment" to deepen their understanding of district leadership?

And, most importantly, for the school leader step back:

- Who needs to be moved, developed or transitioned out?
- Which principals are high-potential future leaders for larger or more complex schools?
- How rigorous and fair is your selection process? Are candidates expected to provide actual evidence of their leadership rather than just answering philosophical questions?
- What is the timeline for ensuring all principal placements are finalized before July 1?
- What are the plans for new principal onboarding and summer leadership development?

Right-Sizing and retaining the teacher workforce

Over the last decade, public school enrollment has declined while the size of the educator workforce has continued to increase. This increase in the workforce is primarily due to the rise in non-classroom positions (e.g., coaches, interventionists), but also to an unwillingness at the governance level to enforce class size policies as enrollment falls.

Begin the teacher workforce stepback with questions:

1. Does the size of your teacher workforce match current student enrollment?
2. Is staffing right-sized at the classroom, school and district levels?
3. Are class sizes and student-teacher ratios strategically aligned to budget realities and educational outcomes?
4. What "learning on investment" evidence do you have that supports keeping interventionists, instructional coaches and other non-classroom positions?

Because every effective educator you retain is a vacancy you don't have to fill:

- How is school-level educator retention being tracked, and what strategies are working?
- Are there targeted retention efforts for high-attrition campuses?
- Are principals receiving the right support for re-hiring decisions?

Because teacher hiring is traditionally decentralized and led by each principal:

- What is the process for strategically staffing each school rather than just posting individual vacancies?
- How are principals calibrated on selection standards?
- What staffing shortfalls at a specific school or in a hard-to-fill area would trigger a district-wide cabinet-level discussion?
- Are there contingency plans in place for late-stage hiring difficulties?



Making the step back an annual process

A district’s workforce determines its success. Taking an intentional, data-driven and strategic approach to workforce evaluation will prevent unnecessary crises and set the district up for long-term success.

Without this step, decisions get made reactively rather than proactively. So the final question remains: How will you lead your team through this process?

← PREVIOUS

How to better guide budget discussions at board meetings

NEXT →

Diplomacy without compromise: A strategic framework for K12 advocacy

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



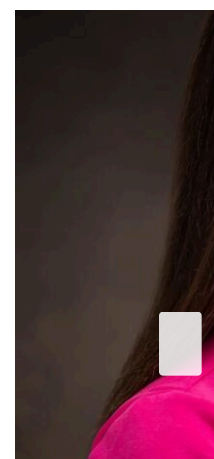
Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Prize in Education announced

2022



From ‘me’ to ‘we’: The importance of solid board-superintendent relationships

By Quintin Shepherd | May 12, 2023



How this sup high-dosage

By Micah Ward | M



District Administration Leadership Institution

is a Premier K-12

Membership

organization with a vibrant community of educational leaders committed to driving change in education and enhancing the lives

LINKS

LEARN ABOUT MEMBERSHIP

PARTNER WITH US

ATTEND A DALI EVENT

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION





222 Lakeview Ave Suite 800 West Palm Beach FL
© 2025 DA Leadership Institute *Part of the Arc Network*

