



Lindsay Unified School District Considers
How to support
LEARNER-CENTERED LEADERS

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If you're interested in building capacity and sustainability throughout your organization so that no matter who the leader is in the years to come, everyone is committed to the learners of that system, then the Local Learner-Centered Leadership Lab will set up that sustainability.

TOM ROONEY, LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

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Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) Superintendent Tom Rooney and his Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Brian Griffin have invested thousands of hours in professional development for their district leadership. The eight-school district located in Lindsay, California—which lies southwest of Fresno and near the Sequoia National Forest—has long prioritized a learner-centered approach, which places learners (of all ages) at the center of systems.

LUSD's education vision began taking shape over a decade ago with a sobering look at what post-graduation life held for many of its learners. "Our graduates are our gift to the world. These are our learners, adults, and future community members. And we should be proud of this gift," shares Rooney. But too many learners were leaving without the skills to be successful in life after LUSD.

LUSD leaders brought together educators, families, and community members to craft vision statements for everything from "why do we exist?" to "what is our ideal future?" to "what is the description of our graduate?" The clarity created from the exercise helped LUSD settle on performance-based learning principles that puts learners first:

- ▶ Developing skills toward mastery
- ▶ Learning takes place anytime, anywhere
- ▶ Driven by needs of learners
- ▶ Learner-centered decision making
- ▶ Focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills across content areas
- ▶ Self, peers, teachers, administrators, other stakeholders judge learners' work
- ▶ Prepares learners for 21st -century jobs

"The performance-based system is one that truly empowers and motivates everyone in the system to engage in the transformation," explains Rooney. "The work that's being done in Lindsay Unified is not educational reform. Reform comes and goes. This is about educational transformation. It's a system-wide transformation that affects every learning community, every learner, every stakeholder in our system. We are **dismantling and replacing industrial-age structures** designed for the administrative convenience of the adults, not for the needs of learners."



Today, LUSD's radically learner-centered design serves as an exemplar for education leaders across the country. But Rooney and Griffin know that maintaining an excellent and equitable culture throughout the district requires constant investment. As administrators, they also understand how simultaneously impactful and isolating jobs.

"The cabinet and the principals set the conditions for the success of many people and many systems within Lindsay because we have to be the models of the core values," explains Rooney. "We have to be the people who create the conditions for others in the system to thrive and to grow and to come to their own understanding of being learner-centered and advancing all that is good for Lindsay learners."

To create a peer network among these top positions, and strengthen the learner-centered mindset across the district, Rooney and Griffin partnered with [Transcend](#) to co-found the first Local Learner-Centered Leadership Lab (Local LCLL). Through this experience, LUSD's administrative cabinet and principals worked alongside their peers to explore real-life problems that tested who they are as learner-centered leaders and how their district is moving in its transformation towards learner-centeredness.

In designing the Local LCLL, Rooney and Griffin looked to Transcend’s [National LCLL program](#), which brings superintendents from across the country together to deepen their commitment to learners by creating conditions that foster a learner-centered environment. The LCLL program accomplishes this, in part, by helping participants make six shifts in leadership concepts from the industrial era to leadership that advances equitable, 21st-century learning:

LEADERSHIP CONCEPTS

INDUSTRIAL ERA	LEARNER-CENTERED ERA
Represent learner’s interests with very little learner input	Listen to learners (of all ages)
Make decisions to serve the system	Make decisions to serve all learners
Be the Chief Director	Be the Chief Learner
Further a culture of performance and compliance	Cultivate a culture of learning and growth
Control a systems of roles, rules, and hierarchies	Empower and inspire others to become learner-centered leaders
Manage discrete, fragmented systems	Engage with leaders in the ecosystem to create and support integrated experiences for learner

When adapting the National LCLL for LUSD’s unique context, Rooney, Griffin, and Transcend design partner Nikolaus Namba emphasized four main outcomes:

- ▶ Exploring participants’ roles in creating learner-centered conditions and creating these conditions while building competence in others
- ▶ Strengthening participants’ competence with the LCLL framework
- ▶ Deepening participants’ competence with the school site conditions at LUSD
- ▶ Bolstering the strong bond between Principals and Cabinet

By exploring who they are as leaders and bringing in their local context, LUSD participants were able to build deep levels of trust among its cabinet and principal teams and build adaptive approaches to creating conditions that would lead to positive outcomes for learners. Because of the extensive benefits of the Local LCLL, they asked Transcend to facilitate two more cohorts to further bolster the learner-centered system.

Transcend and LUSD leaders realized another strength of the local model at the outset. Whereas national LCLL participants are working toward their own goals for their separate districts, operating within the same district enables local LCLL participants to level their personal development up to a shared vision.

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As a school system, a main goal is that every day, Lindsay learners come to school and are met at their developmental learning level. They are challenged, they are successful, and they leave school wanting to return tomorrow. The LCLL helped our system leaders reflect deeply upon their work—as individuals and as team members—and advance their knowledge and skills.

**BRIAN GRIFFIN, LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES**

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FROM NATIONAL TO LOCAL: LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT EXPANDS THE LEARNER-CENTERED LEADERSHIP LAB

Now in its fifth year, Transcend’s national, nine-month Learner-Centered Leadership Lab has supported almost 40 school system leaders in strengthening their personal leadership to help their community of staff, students, and families achieve their unique potential. The lab is a diverse, close-knit community alongside an ever-growing network of like-minded peers on similar journeys to lead transformational change.

For Rooney, Griffin, Namba, and Transcend co-facilitator Alison Guglielmo Kerr, adapting the national model for LUSD’s local context meant re-examining everything from who participates to how these participants work together. Working together in the same district means local participants bring distinct strengths to the LCLL: they have a shared understanding of their landscape, deep historical knowledge of their work and community, and can directly problem-solve with one another. But such closeness also brings drawbacks: for example, one participant could be sharing a leadership challenge that involves a conflict with another leader who is participating in the lab.



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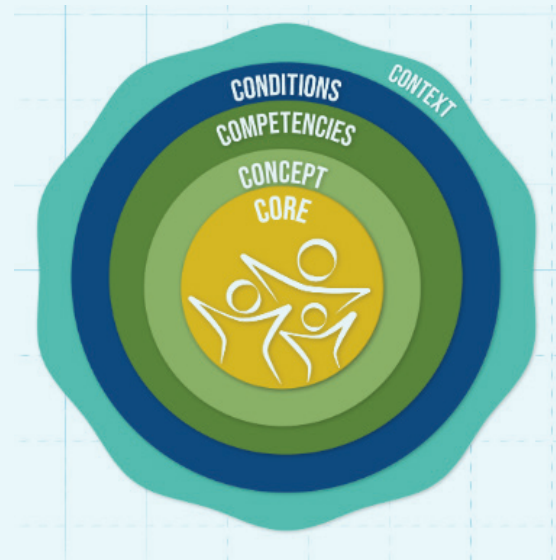
We knew we had to be sensitive about the realities and challenges that our Lindsay participants were bringing to the lab. To address this, we created consistent processes to ensure the challenges (or problems of practice) brought to the session were centrally focused on an adaptive leadership challenge they were experiencing. The challenge could not be about the judgment of others, but only about how their leadership could resolve a challenge if given a push and support from the group while working through the framework.

TOM ROONEY, LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

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With a fine-tuned approach to both running the LCLL program and achieving shared goals in a local context, Rooney, Griffin, Namba, and Kerr then turned to the LCLL framework, which supports participants with their leadership evolution.

- ▶ Understanding their **core**: values, motivations, identities, dispositions
- ▶ How this is expressed in their **concept**: personal beliefs and assumptions of what it means to be a learner-centered leader
- ▶ How this is enacted through their **competencies**: skills at taking the most important actions of learner-centered leadership
- ▶ How all of this enables a leader to influence their system's **conditions**
- ▶ How this all fits into a leader's greater **context**: historical realities, demographics, politics, local-level pressures, and more



"If we want to get rid of crime, if we want to stamp out poverty, we're the ones who have to fix it. We had those kids for 13 years or more. We're the ones who can make the bigger difference," shares Rooney. "This starts with strengthening our leaders. We're building a system where the adults are able to let learners know where they really are and what their next step in learning should be. This is instilling a greater sense of hope and belief on the part of the learners and the adults who work with them."

After numerous planning sessions, Transcend and LUSD were ready to put their plans into action to help district leaders develop the skills and mindsets to:

- ▶ Explore their own values, identity, and deepest motivations in order to lead in more authentic and learner-centered ways
- ▶ Guide their own leadership actions, especially when faced with dilemmas or in the "heat of the fire"
- ▶ Develop others around them to be stronger learner-centered leaders
- ▶ Cultivate the conditions for learner-centered transformation across their systems

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FIRST LOCAL LEARNER-CENTERED LEADERSHIP LAB

By creating a space to share openly, the LCLL supports leaders in forming a deep trust with one another—encouraging them to bring not only who they are as a leader, but who they are as a multifaceted person, to the process.

In Lindsay Unified School District, Superintendent Tom Rooney saw creating a trusting and vulnerable space as crucial to advancing LUSD’s learner-centered mission and vision.

“It’s been transformative for our principals and our cabinet,” says Rooney. “Our team was already relatively strong, but it’s brought us closer together.”



To further create the space to be open, LUSD conducted all of its monthly sessions in-person. Being physically present with their colleagues allowed each individual to connect, especially during campfire connection that tackled challenging questions like: “How has failure shaped your life?” Participants also engaged in small- and large-group discussions, and time was offered for self-reflection and journaling.

Vulnerability played a key role in creating ideal conditions for sharing and learning among LUSD leaders. Rooney and Griffin knew that for trust and confidentiality to be established, they would have to model the kind of vulnerability they sought from others.

They did this at the outset by presenting a **“problem of practice.”** More than a simple technical challenge they’re facing, the LCLL’s problem of practice is deeply rooted in who they are as a person and who they want to become as a learner-centered leader. At the local level, there is inherent risk when presenting colleagues with a problem of practice. The problem may involve someone that everyone knows, such as a board member, or even someone in the cohort. Both in spite of and because of this trickiness, Rooney and Griffin presented first.

“We were very vulnerable, which set the conditions for everyone else,” explains Griffin. “Everybody was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t believe you guys talked about that.’ The level of confidentiality that was kept and maintained increased trust tremendously for all of us.”

Griffin’s problem of practice stemmed from the trepidation he felt when stepping into his position as assistant superintendent of human resources. In this role, Griffin deals with high-stakes, high-stress problems within the district. Through the framework, Griffin identified his problem of practice by discovering his core as an empathetic person and how that shows up in his leadership. When approaching personnel challenges, Griffin wants to ensure he’s thinking about it from the person’s perspective.

“As I enter into this position, I am concerned that I will look up in five years and not be the person that I am today and have a more jaded, less-compassionate, less-empathetic view,” Griffin shared with his 11 other cohort members.

Sharing gave Griffin a sense of liberation. According to Griffin, naming his problem of practice came with a feeling of shared accountability. Griffin's colleagues continue to check in on him to ensure he's staying in line with his leadership stance, which he keeps a hardcopy version of. He even uses his quarterly self-reflection time to ensure he remains aligned with who he is as a leader.

"It was just an opportunity for us to be humanized a little bit and for us to show all the things that we ask them to do," Griffin continues. "We asked them to be vulnerable. We asked them to be empathetic. It was an opportunity for us to model that. And the benefit is an increase in meaningful relationships."

Following Griffin's lead, LUSD participants then engaged in a thought-catching exercise that asked them to summarize their problem of practice. Participants then met with a Transcend facilitator to review the problem of practice. In that one-on-one session, participants were asked to think about:

- ▶ What contexts contribute to their problem of practice. This can include relationships, politics, power, and other dynamics within the system
- ▶ How they would address the situation and how that relates to their core or concept as a leader
- ▶ The actions they've taken to address the problem so far
- ▶ How the cohort can help them with their problem of practice

During the problems of practice, the cohort would ask probing questions and discuss the problem as the participant listened. This helped the sharing participant consider new ways of approaching their problem, and helped them unpack the leadership edge that was at the heart of the adaptive problem. Throughout all of it, every leader led with empathy.

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As a female executive cabinet member, vulnerability could be seen as a weakness. The LCLL shows that vulnerability isn't a weakness. If we're going to be there for the learners, we need to be there for each other as well.

CINNAMON SCHEUFELE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION AT LUSD

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“Many people look to us and think we have the answers all the time,” shared Cinnamon Scheufele, executive director of curriculum and instruction at LUSD. “Not having that pressure to have all the answers really went a long way with me.”

As a result of the LCLL, Scheufele says she sees a major change in how she shows up for her colleagues. Usually when a new administrator comes on, it would take years to get to know them and understand how she can most effectively impact their work. Now, that relationship-building comes much quicker because she gets to know who they are at their core.



INTO THE FUTURE WITH A LEARNER-CENTERED MINDSET

Griffin also sees direct changes in how he creates the conditions for LUSD staff and, by extension, LUSD learners. In fulfilling his role of hiring for the district, Griffin now runs interview questions through the LCLL framework to understand who people are at their core, how that leads to their concept, and the contexts in which they've worked. This helps Griffin better evaluate whether someone would be a good fit for LUSD.

Griffin is also looking to revamp the way the district gives feedback and hone in on where people can improve. If it has something to do with their competencies, the district can offer various training sessions. If it has more to do with their concept, they can work with the person to identify who they are at their core and how that translates to their work.

"I find that the framework lends itself to many different domains, not just learner-centeredness," says Griffin. "I've applied that in multiple realms."

Meanwhile, Rooney has gained a sense of clarity from the local LCLL. In addition to reaffirming why he is learner-centered, the lab has increased the capacity of its participants to lead in more learner-centered ways, with ripple effects within LUSD for young people. Which is why he thinks other districts should adopt the Local LCLL.

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As participants become strengthened as learner-centered leaders, it only strengthens the system. Learners rely so much on adults to create the conditions for their success. Adults can be the barriers to a learner's success. They can also be the ones who provide inspiration, empowerment, guidance, and facilitation to help a learner reach or sometimes dream up new dreams. We want to make sure it's the latter.

**TOM ROONEY, LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
SUPERINTENDENT**

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Rooney will add more learner-centered leaders to his roster as LUSD engages new cohorts in the 2023-24 school year and again in the 2024-25 school year. New participants will consist of learning facilitators (educators), cabinet members, learning directors, assistant principals, deans, and other department heads. Rooney envisions getting as proximate to the learner as possible through the lab so that decision-makers at every level of the district become more learner-centered.

“Adults across the district have an incredible responsibility to create the conditions for learners to thrive, to become empowered, and to become deep agents of their own learning,” says Rooney. “When the adults do that, then the learners really take off.”

According to Rooney, creating a system in which all leaders are learner-centered not only generates capacity, it builds the necessary conditions for leaders to bring their best selves for the sake of the learners.



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For a long time as superintendent, I was always the one beating that drum: ‘What’s in it for the learners? What’s in it for the learners?’ And now I have a team of more than a dozen learner-centered leaders who do that every day.

**TOM ROONEY, LINDSAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
SUPERINTENDENT**

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For those interested in bringing the Learner-Centered Leadership Lab to their district leaders, contact Transcend at LCLL@transcendeducation.org.